

OBITUARY

S. Leroy Wilcox
October 9, 1899 – August 13, 1978

GILBERT S. RAYNOR

With the death of Roy Wilcox, New York State and particularly Long Island have lost a most experienced, dedicated and productive naturalist, a man admired and respected by his colleagues, an example and teacher to those younger or less experienced, and an effective interpreter of nature to the public. Fortunately, he went painlessly, victim of a sudden final heart attack following several lesser ones in the previous few years. He remained active and enthusiastic to the end, working on numerous projects and serving in many capacities. He is survived by his wife, the former Georgianna Robinson, whom he married in 1922, by two daughters, Janice (Mrs. Robert) Penney and Jean (Mrs. Emory) Tuttle, by a son, David, and by twelve grandchildren.

My association with him began over forty years ago. When he learned, in 1936, that a young fellow living some fifteen miles away was interested in birds, he immediately came to make my acquaintance, and shortly thereafter took me on the first of numerous field trips, a visit to the then unspoiled Hempstead Plains. The purpose of the trip was to determine if the Upland Sandpiper still bred there and, indeed, it did. We observed five or six adults, admired their flight maneuvers, listened to their mellow call notes and found a pair of downy young which were soon caught and banded. The Plains was full of breeding Bobolinks and Grasshopper Sparrows as well as more familiar species. The memories of that trip have not faded yet.

In the year or two that followed, Wilcox introduced me to various aspects of bird-banding such as how to make and use traps and how to weigh and measure captures, to the Christmas Count, to the journals, and to other phases of field ornithology. Although a very busy man, operating a large duck farm with little assistance, he always found time to help and encourage younger naturalists, as he himself had been helped by such men as Roy Latham, J. T. Nichols and Frank Overton.

Facts and figures cannot begin to describe Roy Wilcox's personality and accomplishments but they do serve as a framework in any account of his career. He spent over fifty years in active field work and

bird-banding. He took his first Christmas Count in 1926, and continued through this past winter. He became a bird-bander in 1927 and banded over 132,000 birds in his lifetime, mostly alone, but occasionally with an assistant. He joined the American Ornithologist's Union in 1927 and the Linnaean Society of New York in 1928. He later became a member of numerous other ornithological and natural history organizations, including the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs and both the Eastern and Northeastern Bird-Banding Associations.

He was a charter member of the Moriches Bay Audubon Society and guided the chapter from a small group of novices to the large and effective society it is today. Until his last year, he served continuously as field trip leader and, in this position, instructed, entertained and motivated hundreds of people who followed him on the monthly trips. He was also an active member of the Nature Conservancy and a steadfast supporter of conservation.

His early interests centered on the Osprey and the Common Tern and for many years he banded in the formerly magnificent Osprey colonies on Gardiner's Island and Orient Point. Many years were devoted to a study of the breeding biology of the Piping Plover, during which he banded 1723 individual birds between 1937 and 1957, all on the south shore of Long Island. He captured 1172 adults on their nests and obtained 425 returns of banded birds. The results of this study were published in *The Auk* in 1959. When the American Oystercatcher and later the Willet extended their breeding ranges to Long Island, he shifted his emphasis to these species. The extensive data he gathered have not been published, but one of his outstanding experiences in 1978 was retrapping, for the tenth year, a nesting oystercatcher he had banded as a chick in 1962.

Although a complete bibliography of his writings has not yet been compiled, they were numerous and appeared in many journals including *The Auk*, *The Kingbird*, *Bird-Banding*, *EBBA News*, the publications of the Linnaean Society and others. However, Roy's interests in nature were not confined to birds but extended to all aspects of the environment. He delved deeply into botany and studied insects, fish, mammals and other forms of life with the same intensity he displayed in his ornithological studies. He was an excellent photographer and his numerous slides were often shown to instill an appreciation of nature into diverse audiences.

But Roy was just as active in human affairs as in the world of na-

ture. He was a lifelong member of the Eastport Gospel Church and served as its Treasurer for much of his life. His historical and genealogical studies were pursued with great expenditure of time and effort and culminated with his publication on the history of Eastport and the genealogies contained therein. He was one of the most progressive and successful of the many duck farmers operating on Long Island, his success partially due to the advantages gained from studies of ornithology and game-breeding at Cornell under the late Arthur A. Allen and others. Last, but not least, Roy was a devoted husband and father.

Some of Roy's most evident qualities were his enthusiasm, his persistence, his integrity and his helpfulness to others. No one who came into contact with him could fail to notice his excitement and pleasure at some new discovery. Those who knew him best marvelled at his determination, his commitment to whatever task or goal he had set for himself. Examples are his lifelong studies of shorebirds, his desire to band as many birds as possible, his long years of historical and genealogical research and his unfortunately unfinished study of the natural history of Southampton Town. No one who knew Roy well ever doubted his word. When he made a statement, it was accepted as fact by the skeptical museum scientist as readily as by the beginning birdwatcher. He was, at all times, both a student and a teacher, always striving to learn more about the world around him, never concealing the fact that there were many things he had not yet learned but always eager to pass on the things he had learned to others.

As the final service was being held at the Eastport Cemetery, a Song Sparrow sang its lovely song several times, leaving those assembled there with the feeling that the world of nature was expressing its appreciation of his life even as we were. Although we all mourn his passing and miss his presence, we prefer to be thankful for his long and useful life with its many accomplishments and to remember, with appreciation, the many years he spent among us.