

Elon Howard Eaton

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This paper was read on 6 October 2007 at the annual meeting of the New York State Ornithological Association in Batavia, New York. Its publication here was made possible through the assistance of Gerry Rising.

Elon Howard Eaton, or Howard Eaton, as he liked to be called by his friends, was born 8 October 1866, in a farmhouse on the Zoar Valley Road about a mile west of the village of Springville in Erie County, New York. He began school in a nearby schoolhouse but he fainted in school one day and his father and mother, who had both graduated from Griffith Institute in Springville, decided to home-school their son. After his lessons he was allowed to roam the fields and woods and he soon taught himself most of the native birds. He also went to Buffalo and enrolled in a course in taxidermy at about this time. Five hummingbirds were brought to him on 31 May 1881 when he was 15 years old and he noticed that the Purple Finch appeared as a common breeding species in Springville at the same time as the growth of numerous spruce and cedar trees, which were planted by the residents in their dooryards.

He graduated from Griffith Institute in 1885 and his senior speech at graduation, as reported by the *Springville Journal and Herald*, was titled, "Erect Your Own Monuments." The article continued, "This young man, whose examinations prove him to be entitled to a regents college entrance diploma, made a most admirable appearance with fine physique, splendid gifts of oratory and masterly acquaintance with the rules of action and address. He displayed talents on the stage which will eminently qualify him for the noble calling he is seeking."

Eaton's 'noble calling' was probably to become a Baptist minister. He entered the University of Rochester in the fall of 1885, which at that time was associated with the Baptist Church. After his junior year he left to teach at Canandaigua Union School, probably to help support his mother and father on the farm and to raise money for himself.

He returned to the University of Rochester in the fall of 1889 to complete his classical education. He also played tackle on the first Rochester football team and was in a college play. His favorite teacher was Herman Fairchild who was a famous glaciologist working out glacial evidence in western New York. It was probably this man who directed him into the natural sciences and away from becoming a Baptist minister. His niece told me he did have a license to preach in the Baptist Church. Later I found out he had become a Mason.

In 1890 Eaton graduated from the University of Rochester with a Phi Beta Kappa key and returned to Canandaigua Union School where he was appointed vice principle and science instructor. He established at this time The Eaton and Wilber Taxidermy Studio which mounted birds and mammals for the general

public as well as institutions. They even mounted the skeleton of a mastodon for Vassar College. In 1895 he left the Canandaigua Union School to teach at the Bradstreet School, located in the Cutler Building in downtown Rochester. There he taught chemistry, physics and natural science, including ornithology and botany. The students were prepared in these subjects to enter the best colleges in the United States. In the afternoons they went on field trips to study geology, flora and fauna at Pinnacle Hill, Irondequoit Bay, the Genesee River Gorge, the Upper Genesee and Allen's Creek. Records were kept on nesting birds and the blossoming of flowers.

Eaton had written to several people inquiring about opportunities to study for the Ph.D. degree in 1899. One of these letters was to Elliott Coues, the leading ornithologist at the time, who replied on 30 May 1899:

"I hardly like to take the responsibility of advising you on as important a matter, knowing nothing of your pecuniary means and present proficiency; but I should suppose that the Johns Hopkins in the east and Leland Stanford in California would be good places for you in this country; while abroad I should say either London or Paris. Very truly yours, Elliott Coues."

He also wrote to the University of Rochester asking if such a degree could be offered. Herman Fairchild replied, asking him to stop in at his office where he would tell him his thoughts on the subject. The result was that eventually the University of Rochester did present him with an Honorary Doctor of Science degree.

In 1899-1900 he took a leave of absence from Bradstreet School to attend Columbia University, taking courses in paleontology from Henry Fairfield Osborn, who also did much to establish the acceptance of Darwinian evolution; Bashford Dean, the famous ichthyologist; and E. L. Thorndike, who helped to establish modern animal psychology.

He returned to Bradstreet School in the fall of 1900 and the next year his *Birds of Western New York* was published by the Rochester Academy of Science. He was then chairman of the bird division there, which consisted of 40 members. Not only was he taking his students at Bradstreet School on field trips, but he also led adults on field trips for birds and other natural history topics such as flowers and mushrooms. A point of departure would be designated and the group might head out by bicycle or streetcar to a favorite designation—Cobb's Hill, Greenleaf Woods, Charlotte, the Erie Canal Wide Waters, Pinnacle Hill, Bay Farm, Float Bridge, Mendon Ponds, or Zargus Mills.

In 1901 Eaton and Howard Bradstreet, the founder of Bradstreet School, built a slab-sided cabin on the west shore of Canandaigua Lake just north of present Bristol Harbor. It was the only real estate Eaton ever even partially owned until he later married and Bradstreet deeded his share to him. This was the place where much of the *Birds of New York* was written. In the 1950s I found two rolls of plates from the *Birds of New York* without captions which had been given to Eaton by the printer as proofs to be reviewed. These we donated later to the Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca.

On 13 September 1902, Eaton saw his last Passenger Pigeon flying over the village of Canandaigua. As a teenager and later he had shot them around

Springville. One immature he had shot was used as the model for the immature illustrated in Fuertes' plate for the male, female and immature Passenger Pigeons. Fuertes had kept the mounted specimen in Ithaca that Eaton had prepared. He returned it to our home in Geneva in 1926. I remember the incident well. My brother—four years older and bolder—asked Fuertes if he would draw him a Ring-necked Pheasant. Paper was provided and in five minutes a beautiful sketch materialized. My brother, now deceased, donated the sketch to the Laboratory of Ornithology not long ago.

In 1904, John M. Clark was the newly appointed Director of the New York State Museum and shortly after his appointment he authorized Eaton to edit a new *Birds of New York* to replace the earlier version written by James E. Dekay in 1844. In the Krock Archives at Cornell University is a letter written 20 February 1905 by Eaton to Louis Fuertes from 259 Park Avenue in Rochester.

"My dear Mr. Fuertes, The book on The Birds of New York State is progressing again and we are looking for good drawings and mounted specimens for reproduction in colors to illustrate the work. I understand that you have a large number of watercolors of our native birds and I have no doubt that many of them would be just what we want. Dr. Clarke, the Director of the Museum, has authorized me to communicate with you and make arrangements, if possible, to look over your drawings and come to some mutual agreement regarding their use in the work. It has occurred to me also that you might be willing to make some drawings of subjects which we might select according to the needs of the book. If you will make an appointment with me for some Saturday or Sunday in March, I would be glad to meet you and examine your drawings, and hope that we can have many of your drawings in the New Book. Very truly yours, E. Howard Eaton."

So L. A. Fuertes was brought on board as the illustrator of the *Birds of New York*. After a couple of months of correspondence between Dr. Clark of the State Museum and the State Printer, the J. B. Lyon Company, they were awarded the printing contract with Charles M. Winchester as representative. Four of the major personalities were established: Eaton as editor, Fuertes as illustrator, Clark as manager and Winchester as publisher. On 18 April 1907, Winchester wrote Fuertes to tell him that the publisher had awarded the reproduction of the bird plates to Zeese-Wilkinson Co. of New York City, who would do the engraving. The printer had found they could not go to the expense of lithography and accepted the four-color process of the engraver.

In the summer of 1905 from 15 June to the first week in August, Eaton and seven members of the Rochester Academy of Science (including Tom Taylor, father of Joe Taylor) explored the High Peaks around Mt. Marcy in the Adirondacks. This expedition was written up in Volume 1 of the *Birds of New York*. This same year Eaton's father died and in 1906 his mother died as well. Their farm, which had often been referred to in the write-ups of bird species in the *Birds of New York*, was foreclosed to the village of Springville. Eaton had sent money to his parents to keep the mortgage alive during their lifetime, which was probably the reason he was still a bachelor at 40 years. The red brick farm

house on the old Buffalo Road north of Springville next to the trout pond is still in good condition.

By 5 March 1908 Eaton had finished text for *Birds of New York* Volume 1 and had written the preface. It was published by the State Museum in 1910. A circular sent out by the museum announced Volume 1 Water Birds with 42 colored plates, \$3.00. Volume 2 Land Birds with 60 colored plates was later sold for \$4.00. Today on the internet they sell for up to \$100 a volume.

In the fall of 1908 Eaton was hired to develop the Biology Department at Hobart and William Smith College, which had just been established. He was also given the title of Curator of the Museum of Natural History. He became a very charismatic teacher of biology at Hobart. He was one of the first to offer an ornithology course, but hygiene was a favorite. He was famous too for one-liners. A student asked one day in class if it is possible to contract a venereal disease from a toilet seat. Eaton responded, "That's a hell of a place to take a lady."

In 1909, after a whirlwind courtship of Gertrude Yeames, a sister of the Greek Professor at Hobart, Eaton became engaged in June and a wedding was set for 4 September 1909. During the engagement they visited Taughannock Falls near Cayuga Lake and according to the *Birds of New York* the same Gertrude Yeams discovered the Duck Hawk (today Peregrine Falcon) eyrie on the ledge above the falls.

Volume 2 of the *Birds of New York* did not appear until 1914. The pressure of teaching full time, his work for Birge and Juday (who were studying the limnology of the Finger Lakes, taking all their temperatures from the surface to 50 meters) from 1911 to 1918, his marriage in 1909, and the start of his family and a major heart attack in 1913, all slowed production of the text for the second volume. This frustrated the Director of the State Museum who continuously pressured Eaton to complete the text. The cost of producing the plates for Volumes 1 and 2 was considerable and holding up completion produced problems for the printer and the engraver.

While Eaton was struggling to finish the text for Volume 2, Fuertes accompanied Frank M. Chapman of the American Museum on a five month expedition to South America. This must have been hard to swallow for Eaton who would have loved to have gone on the trip.

With the completion of the two volumes he was released from the pressure of producing the text and could spend more time with his family. Elizabeth was born in 1911 and Elon Howard Jr., who was known as Pat because he was born on St. Patrick's Day, was born in 1915.

A few days after Pat's birth Gertrude Eaton died and Dad's sensitivities, strength and philosophy of life must have been terribly shaken. But Gertrude had left him two children and he had finished his Magnum Opus. It had been well received even by such critics as William Brewster, who wrote him on 24 Nov 1914: "It is, as now completed, a truly monumental work, alike to him who wrote it and to the broadminded generosity of the state authorities who have sanctioned what must have been the very heavy expense of publishing and distributing so sumptuous and handsomely illustrated a book."

On 1 September 1915. Eaton married Esther Woodman in Randolph, New Hampshire. A daughter Mary arrived on 4 June 1916, and, two and a half years later, on 22 December 1918, a son, Stephen Woodman Eaton, was born.

After *Birds of New York* was published Eaton received almost countless letters from birders about the state; one that stands out came from 16 Bowen Street, Jamestown, New York:

Dear Mr. Eaton; I have found a Pileated Woodpecker's nest in the swampy woods bordering the Outlet of Chautauqua Lake, about a mile from town. I would like to know if this is very unusual, for I always thought that it never nested in this section. I found the hole about May 10th as the woodpecker was going to bed for the night. I know at least that it was where the bird slept at night, so I resolved to keep tabs. The hole was placed near the top of a tall dead elm stub, about 50 feet from the ground. The other day I returned and the female was at the mouth of the hole. On Friday afternoon when I again visited the place, the female was again at the hole with her head out. I watched her for two hours from a neighboring tree but she did not leave; in fact, she didn't seem to mind my presence. Occasionally she would call to her mate from the hole, and the male came to the nest twice, to see if things were going all right. I took one picture of the male at the hole as I stood below the stub. The picture was extremely sharp but the image of the bird was only about 3/16" long, so I am going to try to get a good enlargement of it. I will send you a copy. There is a second pair of these birds down farther in this woods, because sometimes when this pair would call to each other, a third bird would chime in in the distance.

During the past two years I have seen nine different Pileated Woodpeckers, but this pair on the outlet seems to be the only resident pair. This locality is very thickly settled and only a few small woodlots remain, so the presence of Pileated Woodpeckers is unusual. The outlet woods is the most extensive of any of those close about town, but steamboats go daily through the creek, while streetcar lines close it in on both sides. If it were not for these, wild life would be much more abundant there.

At least 50 pairs of Yellow Warblers nest there, together with about the same number of Redstarts, a few Mourning Warblers and Maryland Yellowthroats; about 25 pairs of Northern Waterthrushes, and about 15 pairs of Canada Warblers. This year there are at least 2 pairs of Brown Creepers nesting there, 1 pair of Woodcocks, 1 pair of Wood Ducks, several pair of Virginia Rails, and 1 pair of Wilson's Snipe (in the marshy meadow near the outlet. Young were found there last year; birds still there this year.)

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are common nesters. Two or three pairs of Alder Flycatchers, 1 pair of Barred Owls, and 2 pairs of Red-shouldered Hawks stay here each year. Yesterday as I was visiting the Pileated Woodpecker's nest, I made my best bird record for this year. I saw my first Carolina Wren. I had, however, heard its ringing, 'Che-whor-tel – Che-whor-tel – Che-whor-tel' several times before in this place, but I could never discover the author of the song until yesterday. I hope that I will find its nest one of these days. This I believe is the first record for the county for the Carolina Wren.

Yours truly, Roger T. Peterson

In 1927, while he was still chairman of the Biology Department at Hobart and William Smith, the New York State Conservation Department hired Eaton for \$1000.00 from 15 Jun to 15 September to head the Lake Unit of the 2nd New York State Biological Survey of the Oswego River System which included the Finger Lakes. He was 60 years old and his crew consisted of T. T. Odell of the Hobart Biology Department, Hobart students Francis J. Trembly and R. A. Vingea, and Genevans George Springstead and Wallace Bishop. They surveyed the Finger Lakes for the kinds of fishes present and where they occurred, and they examined their stomachs for food they had eaten. After completing the survey he wrote the second chapter in the report on the Oswego River System titled, "The Finger Lakes Fish Problem." In the introduction of the chapter he said, "Our problem was to discover some means of conserving the fish supply of the Finger Lakes and increasing it, if possible. A hundred and fifty years ago there was a plentiful supply of fish for the 20,000 Senecas and Cayugas who inhabited the region but now there are more than half a million inhabitants of the counties which border the lakes...."

Potter Swamp was one of Eaton's favorite places along with Montezuma Swamp and Canandaigua Lake. A description of Potter Swamp appears in the *Birds of New York* Volume 2 as it was in 1908. It is located between Seneca and Canandaigua Lakes. In a description he wrote in 1931, "The swamp has the richest bird fauna in any like area known to us in New York in the number of breeding birds." From the early 1920s to the early 1930s many people from Buffalo, Rochester, Ithaca, Canandaigua, Branchport, Penn Yan, Syracuse and Geneva would look for birds in their local areas and then head for the swamp. They would usually meet for lunch at the upper road crossing the swamp to compare notes and to plan the afternoon search. The total list of birds seen in the localities and the swamp was collated by Eaton and the list was printed by Ezra Hale of Rochester. The printed lists start in 1926 and extend through 1931, but there are earlier lists of birds in Eaton's file. Verdi Burtch and Clarence Stone had collected eggs in the swamp in the 1880s, when egg collecting was in vogue.

After World War II developers had the Tully Limestone at the north end of the swamp blown out and this allowed the water in the swamp area to be drawn down by about 20 feet. Much of the area is now in muck farms. Many conservationists from Geneva, Rochester and Buffalo and other localities tried to stop the development of the swamp into muck farms but to no avail. It would be a good project, with today's sensitivity to the environment, to place a lock where the Tully Limestone was blown apart and return this bird haven to its original state. Many wetlands of similar nature are being restored to their former glory. This might be an objective for the New York State Ornithological Association and its Conservation Committee to tackle.

In 1932, Eaton was suffering from very high blood pressure and his doctor said he should take the fall and winter off and go south for the winter. He and Mother spent the winter in South Carolina. In the spring they returned and took the whole family on the North Cape Cruise on the Swedish American Line. It was the last time we were all together. On our return Eaton tried to teach but

soon he became bedridden and on 27 Mar 1934, he died. One of his colleagues wrote in a college publication entitled, "As we were"—

Professor Eaton, who was particularly my friend, possessed more varied knowledge than any man whom I have ever known. Not only did he appear to know everything in his own domain of living things but all the natural objects of the universe seemed to talk to him. He was well acquainted with everything in the outside world from the atom to the galaxy, while his tolerant and humorous comprehension of human nature was as profound as it was delightful. To his training in the sciences, he added the culture of a classical education; to his wide knowledge of the liberal arts, he added those of the vintner and the chef. He was an enthusiastic sportsman and an excellent shot; and those who have enjoyed the game he killed, the wine he made, and the excellent meals he cooked have something to look back upon.

