

JOHN TREADWELL NICHOLS AND A FEW GOOD FRIENDS

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Tall, lanky, gentle and scientifically minded, John Treadwell Nichols was one of the greatest all around naturalists that America ever had, and he worked during the heyday of modern scientific field naturalists. Born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts in 1883, his family moved to New York City by the time he was two. He grew up exploring Central Park and the Rockaways, where the family went to escape the summertime city heat. Always loving the out of doors, he became particularly interested in birds at an early age and always loved sailing the seas and exploring its environs. He took a trip around Cape Horn to Hawaii with his older brother in an old sailing bark, the *Nuanu* in 1900-01, when he was just 17 years old. He had taken a year off before college to make this memorable trip, then attended Harvard earning a degree in Vertebrate Zoology in 1906. In many of his later publications Nichols would refer to that memorable but long, hard voyage, discussing the seabirds he encountered as well as the difficulties in navigating a sailing ship around Cape Horn. By 1907 John T. Nichols had joined the staff of the New York City's American Museum of Natural History, working first in the Mammalogy department. He had asked his friend, the well known ornithologist Frank Chapman, if there was a job opening in the Ornithology department, as birds and everything associated with them was his keenest interest. There was no opening at that time; however, there was an opening in the Mammalogy department, which he gladly took. When an opening in the Ichthyology-Herpetology department came about for an assistant curator, he switched into that field in 1910, and stayed there until "retirement" in 1952. He worked his way up quickly to become the Curator of Recent Fishes and was considered a world expert on fish. As Curator Emeritus, after 1952, he still assisted at the Museum until just before his death in 1958.

He married Cornelia D. Floyd of Old Mastic, Suffolk County, Long Island, at her family's ancient manse by the sea in 1910 and they lovingly raised four children there as well as at their other house in Garden City, in Nassau County. Cornelia's great-great-grandfather was none other than William Floyd, one of four New Yorkers who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The Garden City home was purchased because it was closer to John's work at the Museum since the Mastic commute was too long for everyday travel. Mastic, however, remained the family's treasured home, and, amid the "pathless woods," old fields, the vast fresh and salt marshes along Moriches Bay, plus the barrier beach beyond, the great JTN observed and annotated natural history and penned many of his publications. To this day his original nature journals survive in the archives of the old home, known now as the National Park Service's William Floyd Estate, as do many other of his writings, including his beautifully

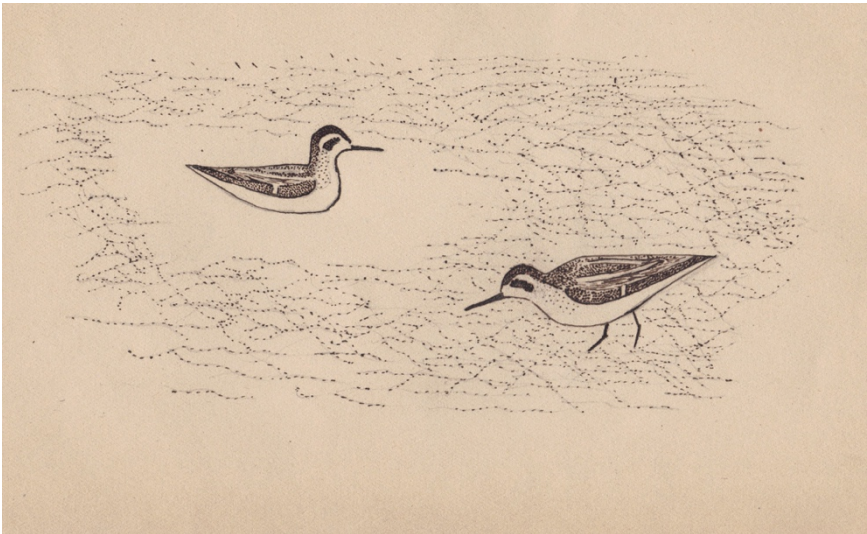
written but little known poetry books. His poetry dealt with tides, the sea and shores, winds and sailing ships. He authored about 1000 publications in his lifetime and while totally engaged scientifically in numerous disciplines (herpetology, ichthyology, ornithology, mammalogy) he found the time to write poetry and natural history articles, band birds, study eastern box turtles and edit dozens of publications, as well as establish long-running scientific organizations! He was widely considered an excellent ornithologist, not just the Museum's well respected ichthyologist. He published hundreds of articles on birds throughout his time. Several examples from his journals are presented here, unmodified so punctuation and spellings are as they originally appeared.

At the Museum early on in his career he met and became friends with many other field naturalists this country was producing. Naturalists and birders today on Long Island and elsewhere will recognize the names of these pioneering field people. Ludlow Griscom, Robert Cushman Murphy, Francis Harper, Charles H. Rogers, and Lynn Bogue Hunt all tramped the marshes, fields and woods with Nichols. They were men who were to make big names for themselves in various fields, just as the young Nichols was doing. When they came to visit JTN and Cornelia at their beloved Old Mastic home, it was tradition, and required by the homeowners, to sign names into the Floyd/Nichols guest books. It is awe inspiring for today's birders and naturalists to find Murphy's name or Harper's name on the same guest book page with Griscom's and Rogers'. Who among us today wouldn't "give our eye teeth" to go birding with these greats? Occasionally these natural history excursions produced excellent scientific publications. Whole articles, or books, can be or have been written about these men but a few facts will be mentioned here regarding these "field and marsh tramping" friends of John T. Nichols.

Ludlow Griscom worked first in the American Museum's Ichthyology department, leaving that by switching to ornithology and working for Frank Chapman. He eventually left there to work in ornithology at Harvard, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He advocated for the identification of birds by using field marks, instead of shooting them to identify them, as was the practice at that time. Nichols and Griscom published papers together, for example: "Freshwater Fishes of the Congo Basin" in the *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History* (1917); and "Notes on Long Island Birds" in *The Auk* (1917, with Murphy also as a co-author). In 1915 Griscom and Nichols, while out canoeing in Home Creek in Mastic, found two Northern Phalaropes (now known as Red-necked Phalarope). Excerpts from Nichols' personal journal about the encounter are included (Figures 1 and 2). By 1923, Griscom authored the classic book, *Birds of the New York City Region*, and his friend JTN reviewed and edited the entire manuscript. Griscom pioneered the way for a new generation of influential birders, including Roger Tory Peterson, who stated that Griscom influenced his now-famous field guides.

Mastic, Saturday August 28, 1915.

In the afternoon with an easterly coming on we found two Northern Phalarope on the weed in Beach Point Cove. In the early morning of the 30 after the storm presumably the same two birds were still there. They were very tame and when flushed flew only a short distance before alighting again. L.G. tried unsuccessfully to "harpoon" one with a paddle of the canoe.



Figures 1 & 2. Excerpts from J. T. Nichol's journal, concerning the discovery of two Northern (now Red-necked) Phalaropes on 28 Aug 1915.

Robert Cushman Murphy worked as an ornithologist at the Brooklyn Museum before joining the staff of the American Museum, where he eventually became the Curator of Oceanic Birds. Murphy and his family became lifelong friends with the Nichols family. Every July 4th was spent together celebrating at the Old Mastic House. Murphy and Nichols published articles together, and then, like Nichols, Murphy published his own classics, such as *Fish Shape Paumanok* in 1962, and *Logbook for Grace: Whaling Brig Daisy 1912- 1913* (1947), dedicated to his wife and about his trip on the last American whale ship, *Daisy*, in 1912. Murphy was also one of the leading environmental advocates of his day. As time went on he called for the creation of a park to protect the rare Sunken Forest on Fire Island, and Fire Island National Seashore was established by 1965. He also called for the preservation of his friend's old home and lands in Mastic when it was offered to the National Park Service in 1965 by Cornelia Floyd Nichols and her children.

Lynn Bogue Hunt, the famous American wildlife artist, came to Old Mastic multiple times to hunt and sketch shorebirds and ducks. He worked as an illustrator for the magazine *Field and Stream*, as well as many other publications. His game-bird artwork is considered among the best ever produced in America. He illustrated hundreds of articles, posters, calendars and books as well. In 1944 Hunt wrote and illustrated *Game Birds of America*. Fortunately, when he penned his name into the Mastic guestbook, he left wonderful sketches of shorebirds or ducks he saw in the marshes with Nichols (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Greater Yellowlegs, by Lynn Bogue Hunt in the Nichols/Floyd guestbook.

In 1929, when Nichols published “At the Edge of the Antarctic Ice” in *Natural History Magazine* (Vol. XXIX, No. 2), Lynn B. Hunt painted the scene of killer whales, and R. C. Murphy’s photographs of seabirds and penguins were published within the story. In Nichols’ journals are recorded sightings of birds that Hunt passed on to Nichols that the latter deemed noteworthy. For example, on 11 June 1922, “Mr. L. B. Hunt reports 1 adult Laughing Gull and also an immature bird off Dosoris Landing, north of Glen Cove.”

Francis Harper, another life-long friend of the Nichols family, knew the woods and marshes of Mastic even before JTN married Cornelia, as he was hiking, hunting and exploring there. He was a naturalist whose degree from Cornell was in the same subject as Nichols’ was—vertebrate zoology. Like Nichols, he dabbled in everything natural but also was a skilled photographer. His early 20th century photos of the Unkechaug-Poospatuck Native Americans on the Forge River, Mastic, today are in the Smithsonian archives in Washington, D.C. Harper also captured photos of a Bald Eagle in flight (they used to nest on the Forge) which were used as a model in making the Standing Liberty quarter of 1919 by the US Mint. This little known piece of history fortunately was written down by Cornelia. Had she not done this no one would know of this Long Island origin. Locals all called it the “Mastic Eagle” quarter.

Harper is most well known for his publications on the 18th century American naturalists, the Bartrams. Harper also co-authored early papers with Nichols on fish and birds. “Some Notes on Long Island Shorebirds” came out in *The Auk* in 1916, complete with their own photographs from Mastic marshes and other south shore locations. Like Griscom, Harper is referred to by his initials in numerous of Nichols’ recorded journal notes: “June 13, 1915 Mastic— with F.H. marked 4 young flickers with bands; Sept. 11, 1915 Mastic—out with F.H. and L.G., Harper shot a Silvery Hair Bat on New Made Island. Later a Ring billed gull was observed carrying something in its bill, a larger Herring Gull pursuing. As they swooped and turned the Ring-bill seemed to be trying without success to swallow its booty. Presently it dropped it into the water and I at once put out into the water in the canoe and found a dead bedraggled Prairie Warbler! Later we saw a Red headed Woodpecker flying over the Beach Point Meadow.” On 12 September at Mastic, Nichols recorded “out in the afternoon with F.H. and L.G. a flock of 3 American Widgeon and 1 European* Widgeon on the water between Beach Pt. and New Made Island. The European Widgeon had a chestnut head and cinnamon side of breast.” The asterisk indicated a life bird for Nichols, and perhaps for the other men as well.

Charles H. Rogers became the Curator of the ornithological collection at Princeton by 1920, after starting at the American Museum in 1913. His first bird walk, when he was 11 years old in 1900, was in Central Park, with none other than Frank Chapman when he conducted the very first Christmas Bird Count! He, like the others, roamed the marshes and beaches with Nichols, and his name is recorded several times in the old guest books, typically with a short statement of the wonderful time he had at Mastic. He is also credited with contributing

birding data in the Nichols and Harper publication on shorebirds, noted above. Nichols has Rogers recorded in his nature journals as C.H.R. "August 14, 1920 Mastic— With C.H.R. had snipe stool set in a pool on the meadow nw of the bay. It was sunny and hot with fresh southwest breeze. At about 10:15 am a Marbled Godwit was seen coming in from the north with steady curlew-like flight. It dropped in nicely and remained for about 10 minutes, chiefly standing and preening itself. Finally, when a single greenleg (*Micropalama*) [now Stilt Sandpiper] swung low over it, it took wing and continued into the south." In New Jersey today there is a wildlife refuge named in honor of the ornithologist Rogers.

These early scientific naturalist/birders all had a few things in common—their love of the natural environment and John Treadwell Nichols as a friend. And they all came to Mastic which was at that time quite the undeveloped natural paradise, still teeming with birds, wildlife and baylife. It was a great place to observe, learn, share stories, write, collect, and forget the cares of the new "stressful" modern age.

Nichols and Griscom did the Mastic Christmas Bird Count together in 1916 and published results in *Bird Lore*. Nichols and Murphy did the Orient Christmas Count in 1917 with none other than the famous self-taught naturalist Roy Latham of Orient! Roy was finding and documenting so many good birds at Orient (he established the Orient Christmas Bird Count in 1904) and elsewhere that the icons from the museums decided to go with Latham to see for themselves all the good birds he had found on eastern Long Island. Nichols, Murphy, George P. Englehardt and Latham published in *Copeia* in 1915 the article "Snakes of Long Island."

In 1939, The Bird Club of Long Island started to publish a series of large booklets dealing with bird life entitled *Birds of Long Island*. It was done to foster the science of bird study on this island of ours, and Nichols was the editor of the publications from the beginning until 1954. LeRoy Wilcox, Allan Cruickshank and Nichols published four separate articles on Piping Plovers and all were contained within the Volume 1 edition. "A Picture of Bird Migration, With Particular Reference to Long Island" came out in 1948. Nichols' "Shorebird Memories," authored in 1953, was wonderfully written. The 1954 (Vol. 8) issue contained the article entitled "The Hurricane of 38, In Retrospect," by the eminent Dr. William Helmuth of East Hampton, N.Y., another of Nichols' acquaintances. Nichols wrote about Helmuth at the end of that article that they met in 1915 in New Jersey and had remained friends through the years. This is what JTN had to say about the doctor: "He was an outstanding field naturalist.... it is safe to say none who knew the bird-life of the island more intimately than did Dr. Helmuth." This could be said about all of Nichols' friends as well as himself! Nichols recalled, as Helmuth had, a local doctor who had influenced them both as young birders. Nichols said "Thus it appears first that the medical profession is a fertile soil for the ornithological

spark and secondly, who knows how far the spark may travel from person to person before flowering into something for the many to steer by?"

Famous Teddy Roosevelt told Nichols in 1918 "I always greatly enjoy seeing you! I am yours to command at any time!" referring to the next time Nichols was about in Central Park looking for birds. Imagine this former titanic president of international fame telling the humble, quiet, scientific Nichols "I am yours to command!" How wild! Roosevelt kept sightings of birds through the years which eventually Nichols used in publications. In 1922 Nichols and Griscom with two other acquaintances visited Aldo Leopold in Chicago where he took them birding to look at gulls and terns along the lake shoreline. Today we can only imagine what these early times with all these giants must have been like. History was being made in the natural modern age of men. And they were all bird watchers and they all loved it, just like we do today.

Nichols' writings are timeless, poignant and beautifully written. Some excerpts from his 1953 "Shorebird Memories": "Mastic, July 6, 1912.....I remember it as clearly as if it had been yesterday, I saw an unknown bird approaching from the east....Now it was passing my rig in fair range, a big brown bird with a long, decurved bill, a Jack or Hudsonian Curlew! But it did not pause or swerve, held to its course into the distant west. And I had forgotten my camera and lost this chance of having a curlew picture in the collection of Shorebird photographs I made in the years before the First War. That was a good day! In the afternoon C. [Cornelia] and I tramped the meadows bordering the mainland side of the bay, where there was as nice a view of a Henslow's Sparrow singing atop a tuft of grass as I can remember." Nichols documented Henslow's Sparrow as nesting on their land in Mastic, and noted in his journal that a sparrow hawk got into the Henslow's nest one year and took the chicks! Who of us today can even find a Henslow's Sparrow on Long Island?

In 1913 Nichols established the journal *Copeia*, and in 1915 he founded the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, which continues to publish that famous journal to this day. Not many people know this fact—Nichols was the ichthyologist who was sent to the New Jersey shore in the summer of 1916 to investigate several fatal shark attacks on swimmers. He correctly theorized it had to be a great white shark; others disagreed with him but he was eventually proved correct. This true story of the attacks by a rogue shark became the basis of the popular book and movie, *Jaws*.

In 1914 John started marking box turtles on the Mastic lands and from his studies we know today that the humble box turtle can live for over 100 years. I was honored to find a marked Nichols turtle at the Floyd estate on 21 June 1997, right outside the house door. Upon turning it over I discovered JTN marked it exactly 50 years prior—on 21 June 1947! Remarkably, he also found it right outside the same door, proving how territorial these little terrapins are through their long lives!

Some of JTN's books include *Fishes in the Vicinity of New York* (1918), *The Marine Fishes of New York and Southern New England* (1927, with Charles

M. Breder as co-author), *North American Fresh Water Fishes* (1942), *Freshwater Fishes of China* (1943), and *Fishes and Shells of the Pacific World* (1945, with co-author Paul Bartsch). Then there are his hundreds of articles and other publications. One of his last came out just a few months before his death, in 1958, in *Marine Life, Occasional Papers* (Vol. 1, No. 10), entitled “Reminiscences, Thoughts and Records From Observations At Sea.” It is mostly about seabirds, with some notes on fish. A few excerpts from this publication are: “The Kittiwake is perhaps my favorite gull. Aside from the beauty of its plumage, there is a subtle quality in its flight, which is particularly free, graceful and controlled, and often enables the practiced eye to pick it out in a mixed assemblage of other species.” Within the same article the poetic Nichols wrote, “Looking down into North Atlantic water off soundings, it is blue, a paler blue where somewhat less deep in mid-ocean. It is green over the banks which stretch far east from Newfoundland, somewhat bluer in channels which traverse them. I have no proven knowledge of why this is the case.” “The Cory’s shearwaters...occurs commonly along the American coast in summer. I have identified it as well as the Greater within binocular range off Long island’s South Shore beaches, also another large species, the all around dark Sooty Shearwater which nests in the Southern Hemisphere.”

JTN was a lifelong bird bander, and he banded birds from several localities, including Mastic and Garden City. Family members told me that their grandfather John used to band birds from the old desk (still there) in the library in the Old Mastic house. He would rig up a box contraption outside the window with strings and write profusely at the desk until a bird was trapped in the rigging. He would then wheel the strings in with pulleys, band the bird on the desk, release the bird out the big window, then send the rigging back out, record the species, dates and band numbers and continue with his writing! In the nature journals are recorded all the birds he banded there. His last few journal entries, just before his death, he recorded as “Mastic, Sept. 1, 1958—2 or more robins in the tall old barberry bush in the Garden at Mastic, eating its berries” and his very last recording before his death, “Garden City, Nov 1, 1958—2 male house sparrows trapped at front of house, banded and released.” He always sent in interesting sightings for *The Kingbird* and his article on “Sparrow Associations” appeared in *The Kingbird* in early 1958, several months before he passed on. For multiple years he was the editor of the field notes section of *Bird Lore*, the predecessor of the National Audubon magazine and *North American Birds*.

In a letter from Robert C. Murphy to JTN dated November 1948 (Nichols’ son David had found an interesting primary feather on the ocean at Jones Beach), Murphy wrote, “The wing quill from the Long Island shore is beyond any shadow of doubt that of an albatross. While it is very worn, it appears to be not long moulted... it most closely resembles *Diomedea chlororhynchos* which is the smallest species of this group of albatrosses ever to be recorded from the Atlantic Ocean..... It seems to me that the quill is worth a record in *The Auk*

because it positively indicates the presence of a mollymauk off the eastern coast of the United States.”

It is recorded in family writings that the great John T. Nichols used to delight in showing family and guests the old eagle’s nest that was on the property historically. Bald Eagles were frequently recorded in Mastic journals, until they disappeared by the 1940s. Eventually the owners of the land, John and Cornelia, passed away and were buried in the old homestead cemetery. What could be a more fitting tribute to them both than today having Bald Eagles finally return from the brink of extinction to once again nest on their ancient lands, as they do now?

The stories go on and on. How can one wrap up a story about such an outstanding personality, a giant among his peers who did so much to foster the understanding of the natural world, particularly birds? A quote from his friend Ludlow Griscom says it all in the 1923 book *Birds of the New York City Region*: “Above all I must thank Mr. J. T. Nichols who knew more about Long Island birds than anyone living.”

Editor’s Note: John Treadwell Nichols’ obituary was published in *The Kingbird*, Volume 12: pages 3-6. The present piece’s scope and perspective are engaging and distinct, warranting a reintroduction to this great New York naturalist, for readers six decades after his death.

