

BIRD NOTES

by Rick Pyeritz

“Swainson’s Warbler is a strange, rare, southern bird. It is so strange that one hardly expects to call such a plain brown and white bird gliding so gracefully along under the bushes a Warbler.”

---Birds of America

“.... a performance so remarkable that it can scarcely fail to attract the dullest ear, while it is not likely to be soon forgotten..... It is very loud, very rich, very beautiful, while it has an indescribably tender quality that thrill the senses after the sound has ceased. “

---William Brewster’s [b.1851—d.1919] description of Swainson’s Warbler’s song

In the spring of 1832, Audubon received from his good friend, John Bachman, a bird skin collected near Charleston, South Carolina along the banks of the Edisto River. Audubon determined that this was the first specimen of this species ever collected and named it Swainson’s Swamp-Warbler, after a friend he met in England in the late 1820’s, William John Swainson. Audubon was in England at the time to work on the publication details of his folio edition of Birds of America.

Swainson was born in London 1789. His father and cousin were original members of the Linnean society. William followed in their footsteps becoming a member in 1815. He became a well-known ornithologist, malacologist, conchologist, entomologist and artist. He accompanied an expedition to Brazil in 1805, where he lived for several years and produced a famous book, Travels in Brazil, in 1816. He became well-respected as a zoologic illustrator, writing against those who produced exact reproductions of museum specimens and added,

“that, in birds, particularly, every family has a decided peculiarity of form and habit, and that all originally possessed the gracefulness of life and action, which does not remain with the preserved skin....”

Swainson produced many publications which increased his fame as a first rate producer of illustrations on seashells, birds, and quadrupeds. Some of his books included Exotic Conchology, Birds of Western Africa, A Treatise of Malacology, The Geography and Classification of Animals, Taxidermy, Animals in Menageries, and Fauna Boreali-Americana. This last book assured his excellent reputation in America and, as a result, Thomas Nuttall named his new thrush *Catharus ustulatus*, Swainson’s Thrush, and Charles Lucien Bonaparte named his new hawk *Buteo swainsonii*, Swainson’s Hawk. Audubon was so impressed with his ability that he wondered whether Swainson would help him with his Ornithological Biography. Swainson was miffed when he found that Audubon would not have Swainson’s name on the title page. Their relationship soured over this perceived snub.

Despite his artistic success, Swainson was not able to make his family financially secure. His first wife died in 1835 leaving him with 4 children without a mother. He tried to get hired to an academic or museum post, but was unsuccessful in these endeavors. He remarried in 1840 and emigrated to New Zealand a year later. It was a rough journey to New Zealand and Swainson lost most of his valuable collection during the sail.

Although he had no training as a botanist, he took a post as a botanical surveyor in 1852. He was commissioned to do a survey of trees in areas of Tasmania, New South Wales and Victoria. His work was harshly judged most likely due to the lack of formal botanical training. William Jackson Hooke wrote,

“In my life I think I never read such a series of trash and nonsense. There is a man who left this country with the character of a first rate naturalist (though with many eccentricities) and of a very first rate natural history artist and goes to Australia and takes up the subject of botany, of which he is as ignorant as a goose.”

Joseph Maiden continued with the negative review of Swainson’s work as,

“an exhibition or reckless species making that, as far as I know stands unparalleled in the annals of botanical literature.”

William John Swainson died at his home in New Zealand in 1855.

Species named after William John Swainson

- Swainson’s Warbler (by Audubon)
- Swainson’s Hawk (by Charles Lucien Bonaparte)
- Swainson’s Thrush (by Thomas Nuttall)
- Swainson’s Francolin
- Swainson’s Sparrow
- Swainson’s Flycatcher
- Swainson’s Antcatcher
- Swainson’s Fire-eye
- Swainson’s Toucan

For comments, questions, or suggestion, email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com