

Bird Notes

KEY NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS

CONTAINING A CONCISE ACCOUNT OF EVERY SPECIES OF LIVING AND FOSSIL
BIRDS AT PRESENT FROM THE CONTINENT NORTH OF THE
MEXICAN AND UNITED STATES BOUNDARY, INCLUSIVE
OF GREENLAND AND LOWER CALIFORNIA

WITH WHICH ARE INCLUDED

GENERAL ORNITHOLOGY:
AN OUTLINE OF THE STRUCTURE AND CLASSIFICATION OF BIRDS
AND
FIELD ORNITHOLOGY
A MANUAL OF COLLECTING, PREPARING, AND PRESERVING BIRDS.

The above is a recreation of the title page of Elliott Coues's monumental work published in 1872.

Born in New Hampshire 1842

Died in Baltimore on Christmas day 1899.

Served as an army physician from 1864—1881

Naturalist for the US northern boundary commission 1873—1876

US geological and geographical survey of the territories 1876---80

Coues's family moved to Washington DC while Elliott was still young. His interest and ability in field ornithology was noticed by Spencer Fullerton Baird, associate director of the Smithsonian Institute. Baird sent the young man to Labrador on a birding trip when he was seventeen. Coues repaid Baird's kindness and interest by providing him with the results of his field research and many study skins and eggs for the Smithsonian's collection. He obtained a medical degree in 1864 and became one of Baird's many army/naturalists who helped explore the West. His major complaint during this time was that the Apaches made his bird observations quite hazardous and was upset that he, at times, had to shoot at Indians instead of birds. His major accomplishments during this time were completion of his Checklist of North American Birds and his seminal work Key to North American Birds in 1872. The purpose of his Key was to enable "anyone without the slightest knowledge of ornithology to identify any specimen in a few seconds." It succeeded admirably in this capacity. Many of his colleagues considered Coues's Key one of the greatest scientific works of ornithology. Frank Chapman stated in the 1930's that "there has never been a bird manual comparable to Coues' Key.....inexhaustible store of information.....technicalities made intelligible even to a novice." The Key was very successful quickly selling out the first run of 2000 copies.

An important word in the statement of purpose is "specimen." One still needed a dead bird in their hand to use the Key. His work included a major section devoted to collecting, preparing

and preserving birds. The time of field guides had not yet arrived. The quote “What is shot is history, what is missed is mystery” described the birding activity of that time. It took a little over twenty more years before what some consider the first bird field guide was produced. Florence Merriam, whose early career in ornithology was encouraged by Coues, produced the field guide, Birds through an Opera Glass, followed by Handbook of Birds of the Western United States, in 1890.

Coues supported and encouraged many of his colleagues throughout his life, including the great bird artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and three women, Mabel Osgood Wright, Olive Thorne Miller, and Florence Merriam (who was the first woman elected to the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU)). The founding members of the AOU were Coues, William Brewster and J.L. Allen, Coues serving as its third president. Coues, however, had a mercurial personality and his colleagues were quite puzzled by his outbursts as stated in one of his obituaries: “He will be missed especially by those who were so unfortunate as to displease the Dr. and receive a vigorous shower of sarcasm from his ever-ready vocabulary of stinging words.”

The sight of one bird, the Scarlet Tanager, started Elliott Coues on an incredibly productive ornithological journey. For John Burroughs (perhaps our first and best nature writer) it was the sight of a Black-throated Blue Warbler. For Walt Whitman (who John Burroughs introduced to birding) it was a Hermit Thrush. For Roger Tory Peterson it was a Yellow-shafted Flicker.

Addendum: Spencer Baird named a western flycatcher Coues’ Flycatcher, *Contopus pertinax*, after his colleague. Its name has been changed and it’s now known as the Greater Pewee. Baird, also, named Grace’s Warbler, *Dendroica graciae*, in honor of Elliott Coues’ sister, Grace.