

JOHN S. MAIN

BY ALDO LEOPOLD AND F. N. HAMERSTROM, JR.

JOHN S. MAIN died at his home in Madison, Wisconsin, on November 14, 1940.

His passing leads one to speculate on the criteria one uses to distinguish an outstanding ornithologist.

National figures like Audubon and Wilson are, of course, distinguished by their writings and paintings, for we of the rank and file have no other cognizance of them. Yet one finds, in some ornithological groups, individuals whose writings or paintings are limited, who hold no high office, who bequeath no considerable collections, but who are nevertheless recognized by all who know them as outstanding. Their earmark cannot be enthusiasm alone, for enthusiasm is common to our tribe. It cannot be skill and knowledge alone, for there are varieties of skill and knowledge of small import to anyone but their owner. It must be some as yet undefined combination of these ingredients which marks the outstanding naturalist.

Most vocations and avocations employ physical standards for measuring worth, but in ornithology, as in art or letters, the measure of a career is clearly some impalpable quality far removed from ordinary success. How else can we account for the pervasive influence of a man like John Main, who bequeaths to us only the memory of an intense and vivid personality, and the realization that a part of our own zest in birding and living is a gift from him?

John Main discovered birds at the age of thirty-five, and by himself. His youthful interest was mild and casual. Not until about 1914 did he become aware of the affinity between the world of field and fence-row, the world of natural history books, and the proclivities of his own scholarly mind. Within a decade he became an authority on birds of Wisconsin, the owner of a compact but fertile library, the leader of a growing ornithological group, and an eager student of the world literature of ornithology. By 1936 he had become a founder and president of the Kumlien Ornithological Club, and had specialized along two lines: the shorebirds as a group, and the study of bird behavior patterns, particularly the phenomena of migration and of mating displays.

It was hard for John Main, by nature a poet, to accept in toto the strongly mechanistic theories of bird behavior which now hold the center of the stage. He was an ardent (but not uncritical) disciple of the great bird-watcher, Selous. Hudson and Howard likewise held his allegiance, the first for his poetic prose, the latter for the nicety of his interpretations of field observations. No writer, however, was outside the reach of John Main's interest; he, as an amateur, knew the literature of birds as well as does many a professional ornithologist.

Despite the paucity of his published work, John Main was himself a writer of more than ordinary powers. His "Dance of the Prairie Chicken" is, in our opinion, the most accurate and colorful description of a booming ground so far published. His style combines a kind of victorian fluency with the reserve and the terse accuracy of the best "scientific" writing. Had he been spared for another decade, more papers of like quality would doubtless have followed.

To John Main, ornithology was a cause as well as a scientific field sport. Such problems as the protection of raptors and the preservation of rare species lay close to his heart. Every farmer who nailed a Redtail to his barn door drove a thorn into John Main's social conscience. He was the self-appointed custodian and trustee of every Sandhill Crane marsh and every Duck Hawk eyrie in the Madison region. Of such stuff, and of such only, can true conservation be built.

Living in a university town and in a state capital, John Main was in contact with many individuals occupying official positions in the natural history field, and also with many university students. It can, we believe, be fairly asserted that man for man, he contributed as much to the development of Wisconsin natural history and Wisconsin naturalists as those officially charged with this function. His influence is a monument to the spreading-power of that generosity of spirit which feeds on its own lack of material rewards.

PUBLICATIONS BY JOHN MAIN

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Some 1930 notes from Madison, Wis. *Auk*, 47, 1930: 578.
Some notes on the fall migration of shore birds. *Wilson Bulletin*, 43, 1931: 150-1.
The influence of temperature on migration. *Wilson Bulletin*, 44, 1932: 10-12.
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The dance of the Prairie Chicken. *Wilson Bulletin*, 49, 1937: 37-42.
Lapland Longspurs in Wisconsin in summer. *Auk*, 54, 1937: 546.
Relation of temperature to early migrants. *Wilson Bulletin*, 50, 1938: 190-193.
White-fronted Goose at Madison, Wisconsin. *Auk*, 56, 1939: 471.
Notes from Wisconsin. [Including Alberta Dowitcher, collected July 16, 1939; Cinnamon Teal, collected May 7, 1939; and nesting of the Wilson's Phalarope]. *Auk*, 57, 1940: 424-5.

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