

Rollo Beck——Old-school collector, member of an endangered species

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Whatever the scholarly and scientific merits of Robert Cushman Murphy's *Oceanic Birds of South America*, and they were and still are outstanding, the data base was primarily the result of "the field worker" (italics mine). This pivotal figure for that great work was Rollo Howard Beck (1870-1950). Murphy, summarizing his South American field program, made Beck's role perfectly clear: "... The treasure obtained by Mr. Beck and his courageous helpmeet is a monument to rare skill and indomitable persistence." "Up to date [1936], it is safe to say, no other ornithological collector has carried through a similar campaign..." And again, "He stands today as the most successful worker in this branch of ornithology that the world has known." The specimens obtained for the American Museum of Natural History in New York, over five years (1912-1917) totalled 7853, plus a "great body of associated data, such as nests, eggs, notes, and photographs..." If this opening statement seems to mimic an overture to an early Verdi opera, one has merely to read more of Murphy's introductory chapter, and Beck's five-page autobiography (as of 1929) therein, to recognize the justice of the plaudits Murphy gave Beck.

After the South American years, Beck went on to field work abroad for some ten more years, primarily in the western tropical Pacific, also for the American Museum of Natural History. By 1930, he and Mrs. Beck settled on rural property in Planada, in the southern part of the central California Valley, where they grew orchards of apricots, figs, and almonds.

But Beck's drive to collect birds and to chase down questions of distribu-



Rollo Beck (4th from left) with other members of his last Galapagos Expedition which was one and one-half years in duration and was sponsored by the California Academy of Sciences. Here they are aboard the yacht *Academy*, bought especially for the expedition, which set sail on June 28, 1905. Photo/Archives. California Academy of Sciences.

tion and identification hardly relaxed. In his remaining years, he kept in touch with Joseph Grinnell and later Alden H. Miller, successive directors of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1931, Beck sought Grinnell's help in obtaining collecting permits, and this sponsorship continued through 1949. Beck kept up an intermittent correspondence with Grinnell and other Museum of Vertebrate Zoology personnel, sending shipments totalling over 1500 specimens, mainly from the San Joaquin Valley. The last letter to Beck in the Museum's files, dated August 14, 1950, acknowledges the arrival of two boxes with 155 bird skins, three months short of his death.

Beck's life as an ornithological collector passed through three phases. The affiliation with the American Museum of Natural History was the second phase, spanning the years 1912-

1929. The first phase began in the 1890s when he collected birds in various parts of California. In 1894, he joined the American Ornithologists' Union and the Cooper Ornithological Club and developed friendships with local collectors as well as notables such as Robert Ridgway, Charles Bendire and Wilfred Osgood. His reputation as a hard-working, efficient collector spread eastward, and in 1897 came a "bolt-out-of-the-blue" opportunity to be a member of a Rothschild Expedition to the Galapagos Islands. This was his introduction to oceanic birds. He made three more trips to the Galapagos. The last of these, in the early 1900s, was sponsored by the California Academy of Sciences, whose director, L. M. Loomis, was interested in marine birds, especially the "Tubinares" or procellariiforms. This relationship with the Academy continued, with Beck collecting marine birds off California, the



Beck with his wife, Ida, picnicking and photographing among adult and immature Rockhopper Penguins on one of the Falkland Islands. This picture was taken between October 13, 1915 and February 2, 1916, during which time the Becks were on the Falklands on the Brewster-Sanford Expedition for the American Museum of Natural History. Photo/Archives. California Academy of Sciences.

west coast of Mexico, and Costa Rica. A Hawaiian trip was proposed by Loomis, but was never launched. Beck, following his marriage in 1907, asked Loomis for a raise but was denied because of financial constraints in the Academy's budget. At a higher rate of pay, he began, in 1908, to collect for the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and continued so for three years. In 1911, L. C. Sanford, a benefactor of the American Museum, hired him away from the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology with a "considerably better" salary, and Beck went to Alaska with A. C. Bent and a recent college graduate named Alexander Wetmore, collecting in the Aleutians and on the mainland near Nome. Then, from 1912, followed the second phase of travel and collecting in South American waters and on the islands of the western Pacific.

The third phase spanned the 21 years 1930–1950, when Beck was a resident Californian and pursued collecting as a sideline, but still with enterprise and gusto. Beck read the literature and repeatedly sent specimens to Grinnell, collected because of some cue he had picked up from his recent readings. Here he was, in the heyday of trinomialism (the concept and practice of subspecies naming), untrained as a taxonomist, but alert to complexities of racial variation in Californian birds, both resident and wintering, the latter often in populations of mixed races. Thus, Song Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, White-crowned Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds, towhees, juncoes, Horned Larks and others were targets

of comments between Beck and Grinnell. In February 1938, Beck wrote to Grinnell, "The intriguing possibilities of Planada as a collecting ground, now that the Seven Seas are behind me, loom larger and larger before me as your identifications give rise to conjecture after conjecture!" Beck was a spirited, good-humored man, and did not hesitate to tease (as I was to learn firsthand later). By this time bird skinning was a form of knitting for him, and he became notorious as a whiz in specimen preparation, leading to sometimes greasy products and curators' complaints, probably because in his enthusiasm he was loaded down with too many birds to process. His enthusiasm as a sea-faring collector surfaced briefly in 1946, a sign late in life of longing for the old days of South America and the western Pacific. In August 1946, Beck acquired a cabin in Pacific Grove, on Monterey Bay, and sought to collect marine birds as he had some 40 years earlier. A special collecting permit was arranged. Right away, he collected terns that presented identification problems he called to Alden Miller's attention. In his later years, with his orchard maintenance routines more or less settled in an annual cycle, Beck's active mind seemed constantly to seek exercise in the bird world.

There was a marvelous spinoff for the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology from those Planada days. Beck's shipments to the Museum included, almost annually until 1949, boxes of fresh fruit from his ranch, usually apricots, sometimes figs. These occasions gave Beck

vent for some sharp comments on the damage to fruit caused by song birds. He was feisty, as well as generous. For staff and students at MVZ, the traditional box of fruit was a special occasion. Grinnell to Beck, June 27, 1932: "We, members of MVZ staff, do hereby transmit to you herewith our stomach-felt appreciation of that box of cots. Remember, please, that such fruits ripen sour in the Bay region. We get nothing locally produced to compare with such fruit as yours, in which the sugars are brought out under the hot sun!" With this annual gift of fruit and in other ways, Beck quietly expressed his appreciation to Grinnell and his successors for responding to and sustaining his passion for collecting specimens and discussing the findings.

I must have met Beck first some time in the early 1940s, as he visited the Museum occasionally and attended annual meetings and also, now and then, the Northern Division meetings of the Cooper Ornithological Society. But we began to get better acquainted in 1945 when, prompted by a paper published in 1940 by R. T. Orr on subspecific status of dowitchers in California, he collected specimens mainly in the San Joaquin Valley, but also near San Jose, at the south end of San Francisco Bay. Orr reported the Short-billed form to be five times more common than the Long-billed form. Beck viewed this as another possible case of "conjecture," as his own collecting did not agree with Orr. He began accumulating specimens of dowitchers slowly in the early 1940s, exchanging comment about them with Alden Miller. But by early 1946, his passion for dowitchers hit a peak, and one day I was called down to the file room of the Museum, where there still is a long table for incoming and outgoing specimen shipments, to meet someone who had brought in two large boxes of specimens. It was Rollö Beck. When I approached him, as we greeted each other, he was spilling, helter skelter, onto the table the contents of one, then the other box, heap after heap of well-made dowitcher specimens—311 in all, and all of them of the Long-billed form. That moment really got our friendship on the road, and in the next five years, we were often in touch regarding dowitchers and other bird matters. The result was my immersion in the distribution, taxonomy, and nomenclatural chaos of American dow-

itchers, ending with the publication of a monograph in 1950* which tells the technical story after that dramatic visit of Beck's.

Beck's characteristic alertness about interesting taxonomic problems, in the case of the dowitchers, goes back to 1932, when William Rowan first published an analysis of dowitcher taxonomy departing radically from the then standard view of one species with an eastern and western race. In 1933, Beck collected "a couple of dozen" and asked Grinnell about Rowan's conclusions, meaning specific status for the Long-billed form as well as the question of a new, interior Canadian race of the Short-billed form. Grinnell commented only on the new race, about which he was skeptical (probably chiefly because the breeding grounds of the east coast, nominate race had yet to be established). Rowan was, my studies showed, the most perceptive and correct of those devoting any attention to dowitcher taxonomy. Orr was correct also, regarding relative abundance in California, as far as his evidence went: The high ratio of Short-billed Dowitchers in his sample was the result of heavy representation of saltwater localities, typically inhabited by Short-billeds, whereas Beck was collecting mainly in freshwater localities, inhabited by Long-billeds. My monograph provides details, but Beck already sensed the habitat separation. On August 19, 1946, he wrote me that from Merced County in the central valley, he had examined a good many dozen more dowitchers than the "300 or so" he brought to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, and that he "failed to find specimens of *griseus* [Short-billed] type." Just recently, he had collected six specimens on San Francisco Bay, at Alviso, all Short-billeds. At that stage, he wanted to get a large series of saltwater dowitchers to test his thinking on the problem, but the California Division of Fish and Game decided he had collected enough dowitchers and denied him a permit.

My later studies helped fill this gap, and by the time I was writing the monograph, I had examined over 2900 specimens, including those of all major North American collections. The first sentence of my acknowledgments there says it all: "This study owes its origin

**Geographic variation and the species problem in the shore-bird genus Limnodromus*. Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool., 50: 1-108, 1950.

to the perspicacity and efforts of the veteran bird collector Rollo H. Beck, of Planada, California."

He was clearly a man of exceptional enterprise and resourcefulness in the field, a good manager on expeditions, and, in his own way, a remarkably productive and successful man. His survival through the incredible sequence of demanding field trips in the tropics, on distant islands, and on the open sea over 17 years says a lot about his stamina and his intelligence. As a young man, he was certainly capable of going on to advanced training, but we have no knowledge of what hindered him from pursuing loftier goals. One hint is that he was a lively, independent cuss, descended from early California pioneer stock. He did not graduate



Beck photographing a frigatebird on Christmas Island in the western Pacific on February 14, 1921. Beck was on expedition for the American Museum of Natural History. Photo/Archives. California Academy of Sciences.

from grammar school, probably in part because of demands of the family farm, but also in part because, I strongly suspect, of impatience with anything slow-paced and threatening his independence. His leaning toward professionalism was not only evident in his contacts with all of those recognized ornithologists already named, but also in his "networking" with others, especially those maintaining active collections, such as the artist Allan Brooks of British Columbia, the physician Max M. Peet of Ann Arbor, and the businessman O. P. Silliman of Salinas, California. In 1948, the Cooper Ornithological Society elected Beck to honorary membership. Beck to Miller, February 15, 1948: "An astonishing letter from Doctor Hildegarde Howard advises me that by unanimous vote . . . It has been joyous pleasure . . . I deeply appreciate the actions of the

members . . ."

I come finally to the phrase in the title of this article—"member of an endangered species." It now should be clear that Beck was not a collector who enjoyed merely acquiring and accumulating; as a self-taught ornithologist without professional status, he was more than ordinarily selective and scientifically goal-oriented in his collecting. He was an outstanding example, in this respect, among those dozens of men born in the Victorian period who grew up enjoying the outdoors, hunting and collecting, learning to prepare display specimens, then turning to standard scientific specimens and becoming serious collectors finally enriching the research assets of museums all over the country. Curiously, this phenomenon, as such, in its American form has yet to be the subject of a proper historical write-up.

But I digress. Today, members of the younger generation active in field ornithology are often opposed to collecting, even in the face of legitimate scientific goals and even when they are themselves formally trained in avian biology. Beck would have been dismayed by all this, if it cast any doubt on his motives or ethics or integrity, and the more so if he knew that some young ornithologists vocal in their opposition to collecting nevertheless furtively visit museums and creep about exploiting specimens for critical data on worthy questions of identification and distribution. This is a curious play of double standards. I expect Beck would have agreed. Specimens remain, no less now than at the turn of the century, critical to the growth of ornithological knowledge, and on the American scene, Beck contributed to that growth more than is ordinarily recognized.

All I have said here may provide some new details, but overall really only echoes what Robert Cushman Murphy had to say in 1936 in appreciation of Beck the man and Beck the collector. I wish I had known him better.

Dorothy Riggs Pitelka, my wife, kindly read the first draft of this paper, significantly improving its syntax and grammar and helping to clarify several points. I greatly enjoyed this writing and thank Susan Drennan for inviting me to do it.

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