

A Case for Field Notes and Their Preservation

George A Jobanek

In 1941, in a letter to Alden H. Miller, Overton Dowell, Jr. described his collecting grounds. For over 25 years he had been gathering bird specimens in "a small valley or creek bottom about 1/4 mile across with open meadow land" at Mercer Lake, a few miles north of Florence, Lane County. "My collecting activities have been confined mostly within an area of 1/4 x 1-1/2 mile," he informed Miller, "so you can understand if there were other collectors located in several of these small creek bottoms our knowledge on ... various species would be more complete. As it is I am the only collector from the west-central Oregon —south, and only one collector north to the north state line, in the coast section" [sic].

But alas, where are Dowell's field notes? Such a close, personal examination by a competent worker over a period of 25 years would, as Dowell suggested, be a valuable record of distribution and abundance, particularly as those change over time, but this written documentation is missing. Nor did Dowell publish his records. His only published work that I can find was a short note, and that unsigned, on game conditions in western Lane County which appeared in *Oregon Sportsman* ([Dowell] 1914).

Fortunately for us, Dowell's specimens, or at least many of them, are extant. Stanley Jewett (1930, 1942) reported some of the noteworthy records of transients in Dowell's collection. Through Range Bayer's (1989) wonderful compendium of Oregon coast collectors, we can derive some idea of the bird life at Mercer Lake for the years Dowell collected there, as well as gain some insight into Dowell's routine of activities.

Dowell's specimens, however, tell us only the barest details of occurrence for each species represented; we learn nothing in depth or anything about who Overton Dowell, Jr. really was. The field notes would reveal both the circumstances behind the specimen and the personal experience of the collector, illuminating one particular moment as it reflects upon personality and life history. We learn much more about A.C. Shelton, an associate of Dowell's, when we read Shelton's field notes, which remark not only upon the birds encountered, but upon the weather, land forms, vegetation, and personal experiences of field work, albeit briefly.

Sometimes field notes, if extant, can answer questions we might have about an author. In the 1890s, Albert G. Prill was a prolific writer of short notes to natural history journals, principally the *Oologist*. Prill revealed himself as an active collector and an observant naturalist, if a sometimes untrustworthy one. From 1901 until 1922, however, he did not publish any notes at all. He resumed again in 1922, in the *Oologist* and also the *Wilson Bulletin*, but without explanation of why he was silent for over 20 years. Is his palsied handwriting, evident on his manuscripts, an indication that he had been incapacitated by illness, or was he preoccupied with his career, as a private doctor and district surgeon for the Southern Pacific Railroad Company? Presuming Prill had continued his interest in ornithology during those missing 20 years, his field notes would perhaps explain why he stopped and then resumed writing for publication.

With the absence of his field notes, we can only wish for information that would reveal more about Prill's Yellow Rail specimen, for years the only state record, than he reveals in his 2 published accounts of the specimen. How did Prill encounter the bird; in what habitat did he find it? What had been the weather conditions prior to the bird's appearance? In the notes (Prill 1928, 1937), telegraphic in their brevity, we learn only that Prill collected the Yellow Rail in Scio, Linn Co., on 1 February 1900 and that he regarded it as the only state record. The first note described the bird as a male, the second as a female, leaving us forever unsure of the correct identification (presumably the first reference was a typographical error, for the specimen is labeled as a female, and Prill

reported it as female in Woodcock 1902).

Newly discovered field notes of the Yellow Rail nesting in Klamath County, Oregon, add detail to what was published by Griffiee (1944), as well as material not included in Griffiee's note. These field notes by John E. Patterson (an entomologist then working in the Klamath area), and his corresponding photographs, permit us to judge the records more accurately and objectively than if we needed to rely on Griffiee's note alone.

All of this serves to point out the usefulness of field notes as historical documents, and argues for their preservation. Specimens are the ultimate evidences of occurrence (and photographs a near second), but unless the collector was especially diligent about including pertinent details on the specimen label. and most early collectors were not, much information is lost without corresponding field notes. Articles often flesh out an observation but the author often excludes interesting and historically significant information considered not germane to the subject of the paper. Without field notes we view the record in a narrower context, and lose the illuminating perspective of the observer's immediate impressions.

Literature Cited

Bayer, R.D. 1989. Records of bird skins collected along the Oregon coast. *Studies in Oregon Ornithology*, no. 7.

[Dowell, O., Jr.]. 1914. Game notes from western Lane County. *Oregon Sportsman* 2(12):4.

Griffiee W.E. 1944. First Oregon nest of the Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops norveboracensis*). *Murrelet* 25:29.

Jewett, S.G. 1930. Notes on the Dowell bird collection. *Condor* 32:123-124.

_____. 1942. Some new bird records from Oregon. *Condor* 44:36-37.

Prill, A.G. 1925, . Some Oregon records. *Wilson Bulletin* 35:112.

_____. 1937. Bird records for Oregon. *Wilson Bulletin* 49:119.

Woodcock, A.R. 1902. Annotated list of the birds of Oregon. *Oregon Agr. Exp. Sta. Bulletin* 68:1-118.

Oregon Birds 19(2): 46, Summer 1993