

## Wisconsin's Forgotten Ornithologist:

### Leon J. Cole

By Robert A. McCabe

To claim that an ornithologist has been forgotten requires that he be established as an ornithologist and that it be shown that he was and is forgotten. I will try to do both.

Leon J. Cole was born in Allegany, New York on June 1, 1877, and died in Madison, Wisconsin, on February 17, 1948. He entered the Michigan Agricultural College and then the University of Michigan from which he graduated in 1901. He earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1906. From 1906 to 1910 he headed the Division of Animal Breeding and Pathology at the Rhode Island Experiment Station and was an instructor in Zoology at Yale University. In 1910, he came to the University of Wisconsin to initiate a Department of Experimental



Breeding for plant and animal improvement, the forerunner of our current Department of Genetics. He and his students cut a wide swath in the fields of plant and animal genetics in the years that followed. Those students who survived him became the teachers of many of this generation's geneticists.

In spite of his considerable accomplishments in the field of genetics, Cole harbored an early love of birds. A scientist at heart and by training, he saw the potential in the use of leg bands in birds in studying what was then regarded as the "mysteries" of bird migration, movement and behavior. In 1901, he wrote his classic article, "Suggestions for a Method of Studying the Migration of Birds" (*Mich. Acad. Sci.* 1901, pp 67-70). In that paper he said, "As I say, it is possible such a plan (to tag birds individually) might be used in following the movement of individual birds, if some way could be devised of numbering them which would not interfere with the bird in any way and would still be conspicuous enough to attract attention of any person who might chance to shoot or capture it."

These were the first words to be written (or spoken) for a comprehensive bird banding program. It was the leg band that provided the "way" to tag birds.

Dr. Fredrich C. Lincoln, in writing an historical account of bird banding to 1928 (*Smithsonian Rpt.* 1928, pp. 331-354), wrote, "To Dr. Leon J. Cole

must go the credit however for bringing the advantages of the method (i.e., bird banding) to attention of American ornithologists....”

Dr. Cole's own assessment in a paper published in 1922, (*Wilson Bull.* 34 (2): 108-115) was, “My own interest in bird banding grew independently out of my lifelong interest in birds and in the problems of migration.” And further, “In 1902, in connection with a study of the German carp which I was making for the United States Fish Commission, I tagged a small number of these fish in order to determine their movements and distribution, but the work was not continued and was on too small a scale to produce results. I became determined, however, to try the method out on birds at the first opportunity.

Between 1902 and 1922, he wrote seven papers on bird banding alone. When bird banding gained stature in the field of scientific ornithology and its adherents formed an organization of devotees, Leon J. Cole became the president of the American Bird Banding Association.

Thus, Dr. Cole is rightly regarded as the father of American bird banding. His academic life at Wisconsin forced him away from serious bird banding but not from his interest in birds. Through penetrating research he and his students produced an unparalleled insight into the genetics of the **Columbidae**. Hybridization of pigeons and ring doves was of particular importance.

Dr. Cole was never parochial in his research interests and these interests led him far afield. He was a member of the Harriman Alaskan Expedition in 1899 (at age 23), during which time he cultivated the friendship of Louis Agassiz Fuertes, America's premier bird artist. He often displayed with pride a hand-painted deck of playing cards created by Fuertes and used by the members of the party in the absence of a commercial deck. Fuertes also painted two of Dr. Cole's experimental ring doves. The reason for painting these particular birds cannot be detected from the research paper (*American Nat.*, 1950, 84: 275-308) in which they are listed. The paintings were made, I suspect, between 1945 and 1955, about 51 years after Cole met Fuertes. To my knowledge, these paintings were never used in a publication nor were they framed or displayed.

He also participated in an expedition to Yucatan in 1904, and aided in compiling a list of 128 species of birds for Yucatan as reported in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*, Harvard University (1906).

The Woods Hole Marine Laboratory in Massachusetts claimed several summers in his young professional career during which he studied fish and aquatic hatibats. His intellectual appetite was omnivorous.

On two occasions our professional paths crossed lightly. During a research program I carried out on Ring-necked Pheasants at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in the early 1940's, I had this experience: One evening one of my traps in the center of the Aboretum caught four birds. All were previously banded. In a routine recording of numbers prior to releasing the captives, I checked a band number that was not one I had used. On closer inspection, I found beside the strange number an inscription on the band that read: “Notify A.M. (American Museum) N.Y.” In the cold darkness of that January evening a very puzzled biologist read and reread the inscription: surely a pheasant could not have walked or flown in from

the east. In the weeks that followed I tried to learn by correspondence where the band had come from. The museum staff in New York said that such a band had not been issued in the past 25 years. Did I have an ancient and a well-traveled hen pheasant? The museum reported further that the records were in an archive somewhere in Washington, D.C., but that they would investigate. In due course, a second letter arrived to say that the band in question was issued to none other than Leon J. Cole about 1910. With great haste, I confronted Dr. Cole with my story. His reply: Yes, he banded the bird last spring in his apartment backyard adjacent to the University Arboretum. It had forced its way into a government sparrow trap that was set for White-throated Sparrows.

In an old desk drawer he had found this aged leg band and put it on the very young hen pheasant. He could not resist the urge to band even this one local hen pheasant with an exotic band where the likelihood of recapture was very slim. The slim chance however, paid off in excitement from Aboretum to the American Museum in New York and back again to its perpetrator, Dr. Cole, in Madison, Wisconsin.

On another occasion, I consulted him concerning what I regarded naively as a discovery. During a research program with House Wrens, I noticed that the last egg of a clutch was always much lighter in its speckley brown molting. When that egg was laid it was the clue that the clutch was complete. I had taken notes on this character and explained my results in great detail. I waited on his reply, although his face registered no response. He was aware of the phenomenon and had also taken notes. In fact he had turned these data over to Frances Hamerstrom who was later to coauthor a paper on the subject (AUK, 1956, 173(1): 42-65). His manner of letting me know that others were aware of my "discovery" was skillfully managed. I did not feel put down or made a fool of. He made me feel I was one of a group of ornithologists who were privy to special information, thus setting aside any embarrassment or disappointment. I was grateful and it gave me a measure of the man.

To say that few in WSO remember him would be an understatement. As mentioned earlier, to be forgotten also implies that one be generally recognized in the first instance. L.J. Cole had become an Associate Member of the American Ornithologists Union in 1908, and a member in 1934. At one point, in the years we knew each other, he told me that he hoped some day to be elected a Fellow of the A.O.U. So fervent and deep-seated was this desire of a dear friend that, as an Associate Member of that organization, I put together the necessary documents in 1946, and turned them over to other ornithologists who were members and fellows and who could better follow through. What happened, I never knew, but the A.O.U. turned him down--forgotten even by the enlightened and those who should have remembered. The disappointment was obvious, but never discussed between us.

Fate and forgetfulness denied Dr. Cole the recognition as an ornithologist that was his due. My brief statement in no way compensates, but I hope it lets some of today's young ornithologists know that the exciting work coming from computer analysis of banded birds currently had its origin in 1901 by the father of American Bird Banding, Leon J. Cole.

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