From the summer of 1881 until the early spring of 1883, Charles Leslie McKay sent natural history collections from Alaska to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. His base was Fort Alexander, now Nushagak, on the north side of Bristol Bay, where he served in the United States Signal Corps. Since the keeping of meteorological records was only a part-time occupation, signal officers of the more remote stations were selected by Professor Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823–1887) the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who chose young men with a good knowledge of natural history and the ability to collect and prepare specimens. From McKay, Baird received 340 bird specimens, 23 species of mammals and 125 species of plants, as well as fishes, minerals and native artefacts. Among the birds were the skins of an undescribed bunting from Nushagak: an adult female shot on 16 November and an adult male taken on 10 December 1882.

In 1884, in the Proceedings of the U.S. National Museum, Robert Ridgway published the original description of this new species, calling it *Plectrophenax hyperboreus*, McKay’s Snow Bunting—now McKay’s Bunting. Ridgway concluded his paper by noting that “The vernacular name of this new species is bestowed in memory of Mr. Charles L. McKay, who sacrificed his life in the prosecution of natural history investigations in Alaska, and in whose collections the new species was first noticed.” McKay had drowned on 19th April 1883 while crossing Nushagak Bay in a native one-man canoe during a storm.

Until recently, McKay remained an obscure collector, associated only with Alaska and the Smithsonian Institution; his date and place of birth and his activities prior to his service with the Signal Corps, were unknown to biologists. While researching *Audubon to Xantus, The Lives of Those Commemorated in North American Bird Names* (Mearns and Mearns 1992) we endeavoured to learn something about McKay’s origins. Our first attempts proved to be frustrating; the National Archives reported that they could not trace McKay’s service record and Alas-
kan sources only provided information about his travels there. However, after a second enquiry to the National Archives we received a photocopy of McKay’s entry in the Descriptive Book of the Signal Corps 1860–1889 which gave the following details: age 25 years 11 months; height 5 feet 11½ inches; complexion fair; eyes grey; hair brown; enlistment 28 March 1881, Washington D.C.; term 5 years; place of birth Appleton, Wisconsin.

Now armed with McKay’s place of birth, and hoping to obtain an obituary, we wrote to Milwaukee Public Library who were unable to help us, but they kindly sent our letter on to Appleton Public Library. Barbara J. Kelly, Reference Services Supervisor, searched the Appleton Post but did not find an obituary. Nor could she find any mention of McKay in the local histories in their collection. However, she found mention of McKay in an article entitled “David Starr Jordan in Wisconsin” in the Wisconsin Magazine of History (Kellogg 1933–34). During 1873–1874 Jordan (1851–1931) was Principal of the Appleton Collegiate Institute, where he taught science and modern languages. Kellogg mentioned that McKay was one of Jordan’s students and was the son of Scottish emigrants who came to America around 1850 and settled in the country near Appleton.

Jordan proved to be the key we needed to unlock the story of McKay’s early life. In his autobiography, The Days of a Man (Jordan 1922) Jordan mentioned that his pupil had developed “real scientific ability” and had followed him to Indiana University. Enquiries at the university produced a photograph of McKay and a four-page obituary from the Indiana Student, written by Jordan. It began:

Ten years ago, the writer had charge of the “Appleton Collegiate Institute,” in the city of Appleton, Wisconsin. Among my pupils were three brothers, in whom I took much interest. They were sons of a Scotch farmer, living three miles from the city, in a farmhouse near the beautiful Lake Butte des Morts. They used to rise very early in the morning, feed the horses, cattle and sheep, milk the cows and attend to the thousand little duties known to farmboys as “the chores,” and after this, they used to walk three miles through the snows of the North Wisconsin winter to take their places in classes with the city boys, who had no other duties than to eat, sleep
and dress themselves, before going to school.

One of these three boys in particular, Charles McKay, showed a remarkable aptitude in his studies, especially in German and in Zoology.

Before the end of the year, he had risen to the front rank in literary studies, and had moreover learned the names and ways of all the birds and most of the fishes along the Fox River. His life, hitherto, had been confined entirely to the range of the farm and the fireside, not a bad range however for a boy of eighteen, if the fireside is presided over by a wise mother. He had never been out of the county and had never seen any other city than Appleton.

I remember well his first trip on the cars, when I took him with me on an excursion in search of birds and fishes to the Suamico River in the north pine woods of Wisconsin. We found our first "new species" on that occasion, and otherwise had a most enjoyable time.

His natural woodcraft and his liking for all out-door things, seemed to him, as to me, to point out for him the career of a naturalist, and now a naturalist he resolved to be.

McKay left the Appleton Collegiate Institute in June 1874 when the school closed down, just three years after its foundation. He carried on with farm work for a couple of years, then entered the Natural History Department at Cornell University, at Ithaca. He continued his studies at Butler University, Indianapolis, and at Indiana University (at both of which he was again taught by Jordan), graduating from the latter as a Bachelor of Science. During the early months of 1881 he worked as an assistant with the U.S. Fish Commission in Washington D.C., before signing up with the Signal Corps in March; in June he left for San Francisco and from there embarked immediately for Alaska, presumably arriving at Nushagak some time during the summer. McKay's obituary gives 21 April 1855 as his date of birth and so we now know that he died just two days before his twenty-eighth birthday.

It may be that descendants of McKay's brothers still live in Wisconsin and that letters from Alaska are still in the family's possession. We would be delighted to hear from anyone who can tell us more about C. L. McKay; it would be particularly interesting, for us, to know which part of Scotland his parents came from.

**LITERATURE CITED**


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