

Aesthetic and Scientific Natural History

George Spencer Morris

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the third article by George Spencer Morris, a DVOC founder and the third President of the Club (1893-1894). Previous articles are in Cassinia 67 (1996-7), 9 and Cassinia 68 (1998-9), 42. This article was one of sixteen hand-written scripts of which nine original manuscripts are now housed in the archives of the Library of the Academy of Natural Sciences (this one being Academy Archival Collection 42 #8). These papers were presented to the Club during the years 1891 to 1896, this one being read on 15 November 1894. Those interested in learning more of Morris' writings are referred to the excellent summary by the late Ed Fingerhood in Cassinia 65 (1992-3), 12.

To feel oneself identified with a good movement is always a satisfaction to the individual. Although my part in the organization and growth of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club has been a humble one, I nevertheless plead guilty to a slight feeling of pride and a strong feeling of pleasure when I look back over the brief and prosperous story of its life.

It seems but a very short time since four or five of us used to meet in Mr. Baily's bedroom to discuss the ornithological situation. Some mild form of refreshment was generally deemed a necessary bait to lure us to the meetings.

Tonight it is my privilege to preside over one of the most active and important ornithological organizations in the country. It is the same old Delaware Valley Club, but it has grown to heroic proportions; it has left the cake and candy period far behind it.

In glancing back over the Club's history, I find myself looking at it in two ways. First, at the actual work accomplished by the organization, second, at the organization itself. It is interesting to look at all achievements in this double light - viewing first the results of an individual's efforts in his work and secondly the effects of that work upon the individual. Unquestionably, our Club has added its little share to the World's great store of scientific knowledge, yet to my mind the most important results of our labors have been of a reflex nature. In our attempts to enlighten others, we have learned far more ourselves than we could ever hope to teach them.

The influence of our efforts is doubtless of a varied character upon us as individuals. Nature rarely effects two people in precisely the same way. No two

individuals make love to her after the same manner, and certain casts of mind are incapable of ever gaining even her friendship. We may divide students of nature into two classes - those to whom she appeals as a great puzzle to be studied, solved and picked to pieces, and those who love her in a more spiritual way and find in her a source of gratification for the refined senses and the aesthetic and poetic elements in their mental make up. The ideal naturalist is doubtless a happy meeting of these two extremes: he is unquestionably a naturalist because he cannot help himself - it is born in him and is part of his nature. I never feel any great bond of sympathy with the man who begins to study nature in his mature years; he can never study her rightly if he has not begun when a boy; he cannot love her sincerely unless this has been the case - he is only prying into her secrets from a sort of cheap curiosity and a thirst for facts just as he would investigate the machinery of a mill or the problems of the political situation. I have known several such - and they all lacked the true ring.

I think that we who call ourselves naturalists all have a touch of poetry in us - we can feel it if we cannot write it. I do not wish to exaggerate the importance of the aesthetic side of our favorite study - yet if I am writing about anything at all - in particular this evening - it is I believe to urge upon the members of the DVOC and especially the younger members the importance of this side of the study of ornithology or of any other branch of natural history. I think that we should allow the study of nature to enter into the heart side - the emotional side of our being - as well as into the brain side. When we look along the gun barrel at a skipping warbler among the fresh spring leaves we should observe not only the little animated bunch of feathers that is soon to be converted into a dry stiff skin with a label on its legs - we should look with the brain at the future specimen but with the heart

Aesthetic and Scientific Natural History

at the whole picture with its frame of honeysuckle, the blue sky beyond, the trembling of the little leaves and the glitter of the insects. We draw in the breath with a thrill of pleasure when the bird darts into view. That thrill is the naturalists own peculiar possession and it is worth much - don't allow yourselves to become hardened to the sudden rush of happy feelings which the beauty of nature sends through us when boys. These are our right by inheritance and I believe can be retained through life, though I think there is a frequent tendency in students to forget the heart in the head. Many a good, hearty, whole souled worker in the field in youth, deteriorates in later life into a poor old closet naturalist, head triumphing over heart, the aesthetic senses led captain by the mind. To me, a sensation is worth as much as an idea, an impression as much as an actual thought.

I hope that my words will not be so construed as to lead anyone to believe that I do not thoroughly appreciate and believe in hard practical work in the field of ornithology. Of course a thirst for a knowledge of facts is the backbone of any study - we want to know the truth about things - we wish to feed our mental appetites with fresh food for thought. But these are wholesome dainties for the mental dish as well as strong coarse provender and we who study nature closely should not close eyes and hearts to her beauties - her refining influences, her powers for cultivating in us a taste for things inspiring, charming, delicate and aesthetic.

There are comparatively few of us who are able to give sufficient time to our favorite study to attain in it more than a modicum of fame and name. I feel that for myself I can do little more than act as a signpost pointing down the road of nature and saying that it is a pleasant road to travel on. I can merely be a voice in the wilderness to prepare the way for men like Stone and others more learned than myself. I should like to have devoted my life to the study of nature. I should like it to have been my business instead of my plaything. Yet I feel that I can at least demonstrate to some extent what an ordinary businessman can do in the fields of natural history and still remain tolerably faithful to his work.

The reason that I would especially point to the importance of the aesthetic, emotional side of our study is because that is the side left most open to us who can give but little time to ornithology. When we go out for

a ten minutes walk before catching our train in the morning it is not likely that we can make any discoveries or learn anything that we did not know before, but that is nothing to feel distressed about. Have we not heard the songs of the early morning, seen the fluttering of little wings, the flashing of bright colors, the trembling of the leaves against a sky of blue, and breathed in the fragrance of fresh flowers and all green things? A part of all this - the essence of it in fact - we may carry away with us in our minds and hearts though there may be no specimens in our hands.

I think that we should draw a pretty straight line between a mere collector and a true naturalist. I have known a good many people who have been the means of a great destruction of life and the collections of birds, butterflies etc. thus gained were after all nothing more than their collections of stamps and coins and postmarks. A collector of birds needs a strong excuse to justify him in taking the great number of lives which he does. This excuse should be a deep rooted love of nature and an eager desire [to know] her more thoroughly - not merely as a specialist in the machinery of one branch - but in the broader sense of a great consistent plan working with constant progress towards some far distant end not yet in view.

It seems to me that the real naturalist must recognize in nature that which corresponds to something within himself. It matters not what his religion may be - I do not know that I am particularly orthodox myself - but I do believe that there is a pervading spirit or soul in all nature and that the affinity of our souls with this soul of nature is what makes true naturalists of us. In studying nature's details we want to look through them and path them into the immensity beyond - of which they are but parts.

I hope, and in fact believe, that every member of the Delaware Valley Club is thoroughly tinctured with the spirit of true naturalists - that we are not mere collectors and grabbers of dead specimens - body snatchers so to speak - but close students also of the living types which they represent.

The live bird is, after all, worth more than the dead one - the lifeless specimen is merely to teach us more fully of its living representatives. To most of us who are not close students of anatomy, habits are of more interest than dry skins. The migrations - the effect

Aesthetic and Scientific Natural History

of movements on physical development etc are questions of deep interest. But I hope that no-one will for one moment think me opposed to judicious collecting. I sincerely believe that it is utter folly to hope to study ornithology intelligently without collecting. I only want to impress on all young naturalists that it is not a thing to be trifled with or entered upon as a temporary fad. If you start a collection at all, make a good one that will be of use not only to yourself but to contemporary students and those that are to come after you and don't be stingy with it. One collection can be made to go a long way by a generous sharing of it and a judicious willing of it.

Probably there are some here who are inwardly smiling at my outspoken tenderness and slightly sentimental ramblings and who will be inclined to attribute them to my recently acquired knowledge in matters of the heart and will think that they date from the time not far back when I told them that there was a girl in the case. But it is just possible that such may be mistaken. There has always been for me a strong touch [of] sentiment and romance in the study of nature. I know that I felt it as a child. I rather think that my wonder at and love for the beautiful in nature were stronger than they are now. The wire edge of our perceptions and susceptibilities wear off as we grow older. There are certain powers of insight - appreciation and observation - that are never stronger than in childhood and boyhood. That is one reason why you ought to be students of nature when boys if you are ever going to be at all. And there is not much use in thinking you can ever be a naturalist if you have not begun at quite an early age. When I look back over my 27 years I would unhesitatingly say that my love of nature has been the strongest influence in my life - and I would as certainly say that the influence has been altogether good. I doubt if it has ever been otherwise in any case. A man cannot be wholly bad and possess a sincere love for the wonders and beauties of nature. One cannot read the lives of the World's great naturalists without being impressed with their grand simplicity; their self-sacrificing devotion to one great object - their bravery - their gentleness - their purity.

I doubt if the great naturalist ever forgets the vastness of nature back of the details of his specialty. I am anxious that we as ornithologists should not do so. We only take a specialty because we have not time

or ability to plunge into all branches. So far as is possible, birds should be viewed with an eye to their relationships with the other branches of the animal kingdom. In certain directions this relationship becomes quite close as we approach the mammalian or reptilian kingdom and we all know how very faint and indistinct is the line which separates the animal and vegetable worlds. Let us not forget the effects of the progressive forces of the universe in the working of the smallest details of nature's great plan. Note the processes of evolution as exemplified in the bird history thus far. Observe the effects of use and disuse on bodily organs and general physical development; remember that the general principles of natural selection and survival of the fittest may be studied in connection with ornithology as well as with other branches of natural history.

I take it for granted that everyone here accepts in some degree the general theory of evolution as the best explanation for the present state of affairs - though doubtless such belief would be found in varied and modified forms, according to the individuals cast of mind, methods of thought, etc. But at all events we need never lose sight of our surroundings in our specialty - nor of general guiding principles while studying their effects in any one branch.

Without knowing what I was going to write, I find that I have already covered 12 pages of legal cap with nothing in particular. I hope you are not exhausted! So nearly as I am able to make out I have been endeavoring to put two ideas or lines of thought into the heads of my fellow members. First, I have sought to point out the beauties and aesthetic charms to be found in the study of ornithology - appealing to the emotional rather than to the practical side of the naturalist - and yet having a well deserved and really important place in the student's life. And secondly, I have sought to call attention to the great importance of looking at ornithology only as a specialty - as a part of a vast plan, not as a thing by itself, not as a mere collection of facts to be studied and committed to memory, but as a vantage ground from which we can look into the heights and depths of nature where the mind can lose itself in wonder and admiration.

I hope I have not wearied you with my vague and incoherent ramblings. But more substantial ornithological food will doubtless be in store for you at our next meeting.