

# Discovery of the Common

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In the month of May, the song of the Western Meadowlark can hardly be ignored, loud and lustily does its flute-like song reverberate from the grasslands and fields of those states west of the Mississippi River. Yet, credit for the discovery of this bird falls not to those commonly associated with the exploration of the western frontier, but to a man who lived his entire life in Moorestown, New Jersey.

By the 1840's, a fair number of expeditions had completed surveys of the continent's western flora and fauna. The most notable was the Lewis and Clark Expedition which began in May of 1804 and proceeded to the Oregon coast before returning to where it started, St. Louis, in September, 1806. Others involved Thomas Nuttall, author of *Manual of Ornithology of the United States and Canada*, who made his first exploration to the west in 1811, traveling the Missouri River from St. Louis to Kansas City. Nuttall returned in 1834 in the company of Philadelphia ornithologist John K. Townsend, traveling a route that took them over the Rockies and to the Pacific coast. A large number of the specimens procured by Nuttall and Townsend in this later expedition were used by John James Audubon in the paintings he produced for *The Birds of America* and were described by him in volumes 4 and 5 of *Ornithological Biography*. Ornithologist Thomas Say, a founder of the Academy of Natural Sciences, accompanied an expedition that proceeded to the mouth of the Platte River via the Kansas River in 1819. Noted German ornithologist Maximilian, Prince von Wied, made a trip in 1833 up the Missouri River to Fort Mandan, North Dakota. His account of that journey was published in Germany in two volumes between 1839 and 1841. Doubtless, each of these expeditions, as well as untold others, encountered Western Meadowlarks; yet, none secured a specimen nor formally described the bird.

In March of 1843, Audubon left Philadelphia on an expedition which, upon arriving in St. Louis, would follow the Missouri River to the confluence with the Yellowstone River near Fort Union in North

Dakota. The primary purpose of the expedition was to secure material for a book on quadrupeds Audubon was working on with John Bachman. The secondary purpose of the trip was to collect bird skins for later use in the octavo edition of *The Birds of America*. Accompanying Audubon was his New York neighbor, Lewis Squires, as expedition secretary; John Graham Bell as specimen curator; Isaac Sprague as assistant artist; and Edward Harris, a wealthy amateur naturalist and long-time friend of Audubon.

Edward Harris was born in 1799 in Moorestown, NJ where he lived his entire life. At a young age he inherited a "considerable fortune, it was never necessary for him to actively engage in money-making occupations" (Morris, 1902). Audubon and Harris first met on July 12, 1824 when Audubon was commissioned to paint a "small grouse to be put on a bank-note belonging to the State of New Jersey; this procured me the acquaintance of a young man named Edward Harris..." (Audubon, 1897). A meeting with Harris a week later in Philadelphia caused Audubon to write, "Young Harris, God bless him, looked at the drawings I had for sale, and said he would take them all, at my prices. I would have kissed him, but that is not the custom in this icy city" (Audubon, 1897). From this beginning, a friendship was created which played a central role in the completion of Audubon's great work.

By the summer of 1836, Audubon was nearing the completion of *The Birds of America* when bird specimens collected by both Nuttall and Townsend from their Pacific Coast Expedition arrived on the east coast. Being a friend of Audubon's, Nuttall gave to him specimens of the Yellow-billed Magpie and Tricolored Blackbird he had collected for inclusion in his work. The bulk of the western avifauna however had been collected by Townsend and those skins were at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, awaiting Townsend, who was still out west. While most of the world had embraced the success of Audubon and *The Birds of America*, there was a vocal faction in the Philadelphia scientific community, led

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by George Ord, who still harbored resentment of Audubon, believing that his work was inferior to that of Alexander Wilson. Arriving in Philadelphia, Audubon was shown Townsend's collection where he "... turned over and over and over the new and rare species; but he (Townsend) was absent at Fort Vancouver, on the shores of the Columbia River; Thos. Nuttall had not yet come from Boston, and loud murmurs were uttered by the *soidisant* friends of science, who objected to my seeing, much less portraying and describing those valuable relics of birds, many of which had not yet been introduced into our fauna. The traveller's appetite is much increased by the knowledge of the distance which he has to tramp before he can obtain a meal; and with me the desire of obtaining the specimens in question increases in proportion to the difficulties that presented themselves" (Stone, 1899, 1916). Upon Nuttall's arrival in Philadelphia, and with the assistance of Harris, an accommodation was reached. Audubon and Nuttall would jointly publish a description of 12 new species under Townsend's name. Thereafter, Edward Harris was permitted to purchase duplicates of the skins, for Audubon's use in *The Birds of America*.

Audubon, Harris and their colleagues left St. Louis on April 25, 1843, aboard the steamship Omega, intending to sail up the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Missouri River. A week later, the expedition had reached Independence, Missouri, 379 miles from St. Louis. By May 3, the party reached Fort Leavenworth, the last permanent Army post on the river. On May 19, Harris wrote in a letter to his brother-in-law, Dr. John J. Spencer back in Moorestown, NJ stating that "Bell has also found a Vireo which is undoubtedly new" (Morris, 1895). Where exactly on the Missouri River this discovery took place is unclear because Harris, in his letter, only identified their location by indicating that his letter will be sent in 6 to 8 days upon the expedition's arrival at Fort Pierre in central South Dakota. This discovery would become known as Bell's Vireo.

Three days later, on May 22, Harris in his diary writes, "We have seen a Meadowlark to-day which must prove a new one, its note is so entirely different from ours." And on May 24 Harris again records the following: "We killed Red-shafted Woodpecker, Say's Flycatcher, Arkansas F., Lark Finch and several of the new Meadow Larks, for new I will insist it is

notwithstanding that we cannot from the books establish any specific difference, yet it is totally different. But as we cannot set down notes on paper, and the world will not take our words for it if we do, we must be content to refrain from publishing this good species unless we can on our return find something about the bird more than we can now discover to establish a specific difference: Mais nous verrons" (Street, 1948). Ultimately, Harris was correct when he stated that "...it is utterly impossible that the same bird in different parts of the world can have notes so totally different" (Harwood, 1985).

So how did *Sturnella neglecta*, the neglected meadowlark, earn his moniker? The June 20 and 21 entries by Harris in his diary offer some thoughts: "Sprague pointed out to me to-day a passage in Lewis & Clark's Journal with which we were unacquainted before but which goes far to confirm us in the opinion of the whole of our party that the Meadow Lark of this country is a new one, although we are not prepared without examination and comparison to vouch for any of the differences mentioned by them with the exception of the notes of the bird about which there can be no question....I neglected last night to give the extract from Lewis and Clark's Journal about the Meadow Lark and will insert it here. It was on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June while they were making portage around the Great Falls of Missouri. They say 'There is also a species of Lark, much resembling the bird called Old-Field Lark, with a yellow breast and a black spot on the croup, though it differs from the latter in having its tail formed of feathers of an equal length and pointed; the beak too is somewhat longer and more curved, and the note differs considerably'" (Street, 1948). Clearly from this entry, the Lewis & Clark expedition recognized the Western Meadowlark as being a potentially new species; yet, as its name implies, they neglected to collect specimens for later study.

Harris however also wonders how an esteemed naturalist like Nuttall could "...have passed through this country without noticing this bird as he is so remarkably accurate in describing the notes of birds, indeed, he is almost the only man who has written the language of birds" (Street, 1948). Perhaps a partial explanation can be found in a comment of Audubon's where he notes that Nuttall "was not in the habit of carrying a gun on his rambles" (Stone, 1899).

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The reason why the Western Meadowlark was not discovered sooner is probably of less importance than the lesson to be learned: pay attention. For, while a Western Meadowlark may resemble its eastern counterpart, just because it looks like a duck and walks like a duck, doesn't mean it is a duck unless it talks like a duck.

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