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2025

THE BIRD LIFE OF TEXAS

BY

HARRY C. OBERHOLSER

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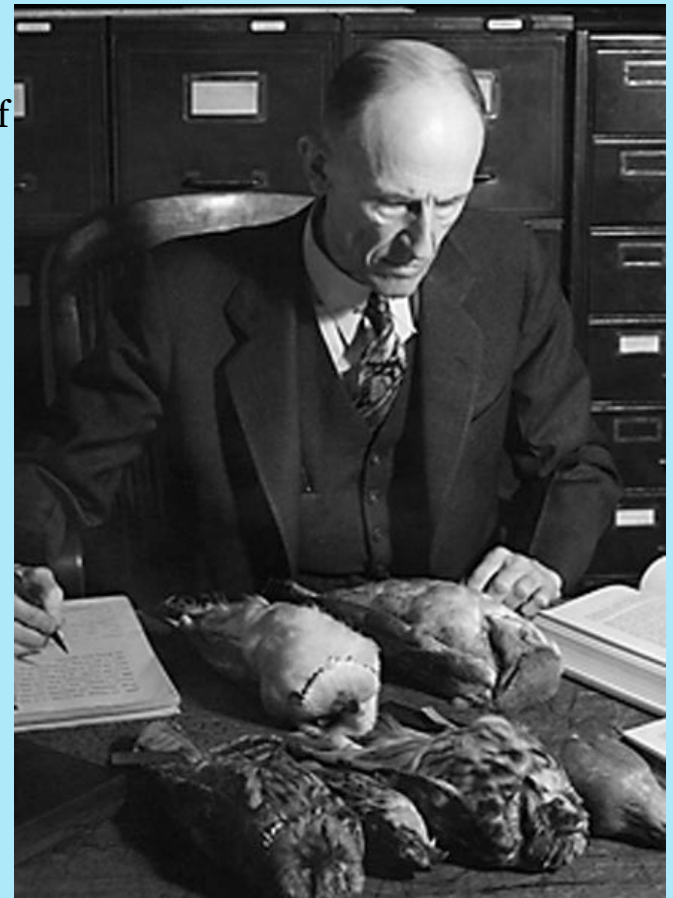
EDGAR B. KINCAID

HARRY C. OBERHOLSER

Harry Church Oberholser was an American ornithologist born in 1870, in Brooklyn, New York. He attended Columbia University, did not graduate, but was later, awarded degrees (B.A., M.S., and PhD.) from George Washington University.

From 1895 to 1941, he was employed by the United States Bureau of Biological Survey (later the United States Fish and Wildlife Service) as an ornithologist, biologist, and editor. In 1928, Oberholser helped organize the Winter Waterfowl Survey, which continues to this day. In 1941, at the age of 70, he became curator of ornithology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Oberholser was the author of a number of books and articles including the monumental “Bird Life of Texas” whose original manuscript exceeded 3 million words. He died in 1963.

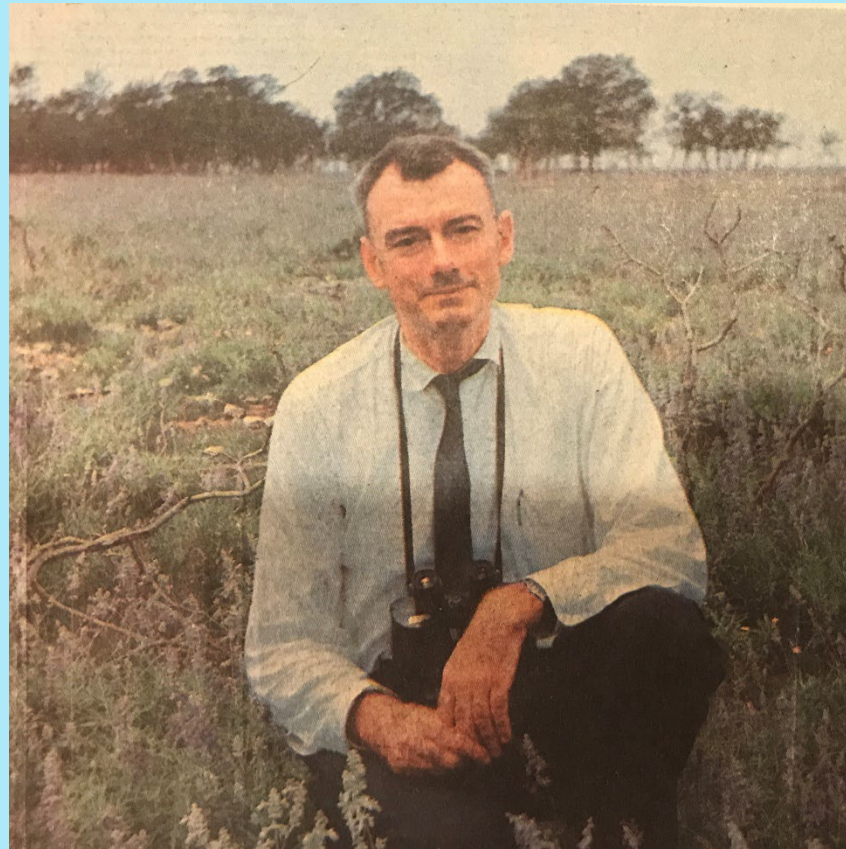
Oberholser named 11 new families and subfamilies, 99 genera and subgenera, and some 560 new species and subspecies. *Empidonax oberholseri* (the Dusky Flycatcher) was named in his honor.



EDGAR B. KINCAID

After Oberholser's death Edgar B. Kincaid of Austin completed "Bird Life of Texas" editing it down to 1 million words.

Something of an eccentric, Kincaid is credited with bestowing bird names upon his birding friends, for instance Victor Emanuel was dubbed "the hooded warbler". He lived in a small house across the street from the UT Law School. He was the nephew of Texas literary icon J. Frank Dobie.



Bird notes

cf. caller
Oct. 1974

Oberholser's 'monumental work'

By KAY McCracken

On the book page in today's Caller-Times is a review of "The Bird Life of Texas" by Harry C. Oberholser, illustrated by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and edited by Edgar B. Kincaid Jr., a book I had despaired of ever seeing in print. The review tells some of the long history of the long endeavor, 73 years from its genesis to the final revelations, but not all. There is more.

The late Connie Hagar told me about it when I first became interested in birds, more than 20 years ago. She was one of many Texans who sent observation reports to Dr. Oberholser. He visited her six times and wrote often, long detailed letters. His verbosity was almost his undoing.

"His Texas book will never be

published," she said sadly. "It's too long, too detailed, three million words and he will not cut one word. The manuscript weighs 120 pounds, and he's still writing."

When Texas Ornithological Society was organized about that time two main objectives were to get a Texas field guide out of Roger Tory Peterson and to foster publication of "Oberholser's monumental work." It took nearly 10 years to get the field guide, more than 20 for the "monumental work." I never heard it called anything but "Oberholser's monumental work," and half expected that to be the title.

Our spirits soared sky-high when Frank Wardlaw, director of the University of Texas Press, dared to undertake publication and we were equally elated when he named Edgar Kincaid editor.

Edgar was tops. Still is. Peterson gave him his deepest salaam in the preface to his Texas field guide. Edgar was an authority on Hawaiian birds years before he visited the islands, and he is probably as well versed on Mexican birds.

Edgar was 10 when he fell in love with birds and forthwith sought the fountain — Connie Hagar — for help. They were great friends. Nephew of Mrs. J. Frank Dobie, he has lived in the Dobie home since I have known him. He was fun and a favorite leader on TOS field trips, galloping ahead on long legs, generously "holding" birds for all to see. He was exacting, too; sloppy identifications he refused as "unsanitary." The word replaced "unacceptable" in our lingo. And, he is eccentric; all birders are to some extent but Edgar's oddities make the rest of us

was 73 years in gestation

seem stodgy.

He dropped out of our picture when he started work on the book. We understood, were glad even, we wanted it done in a hurry. One summer, though, I was in Austin for a seminar and Edgar took me on a midnight search for poor-wills. (I was staying in a dormitory and the surreptitious sneaking out and back in after curfew made me feel like a schoolgirl again.) In his ancient car, which he loved until it fell apart under him and still mourns, we bounced and bumped under a dim moon over rocky hillsides, ignoring roads, if such existed. The back of the car contained the only material wealth Edgar treasured — his bird library. Books were stacked and piled from floorboard to window level. Their weight dulled the bumps; I was black and

blue, but saw and heard poor-wills.

Time passed and no book appeared. Dim lights flickered down the dark road at times; the foreword was written in 1961, the preface in 1971. Ominous gossip was heard, that Edgar, whose job was to trim Oberholser's prolixity was himself proving too prolix! Like the author, the editor was a perfectionist; useful data must be retained — and he counted it all useful.

Things must have gotten pretty sticky around the University Press. Wardlaw, too, was impatient, and apparently helpless. To keep his friendship we quit asking about the "monumental work". To do so was a cinch to ruin a party for Frank. The last time I dared he sidestepped the question but said

gloomily, "It's going to cost \$45." (So it's \$60!)

Four years ago Edgar was with us a week at Rancho del Cielo in Mexico, his old fun self, posing as "the great cassowary," an apt epithet for his gangling figure striding up the mountains. All he would say was "Pretty soon, pretty soon." But all he talked about was Mexican birds. It looked bad; had he defected?

There followed another rumor; Frank had threatened to incarcerate Edgar until he finished the job. Whether the drastic step was taken, I do not know; he did get more editorial help, things finally came into focus, the "monumental work" finally rolled off the presses. I hope it means that "the great cassowary" will be back field tripping with us.

Section E
Austin American-Statesman
Sunday, September 1, 1985

Lifestyle

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(Sunday)

Ann Landers, E11
With love to spare, E11
What's hot, E22

The last flight of a beloved bird watcher

By William Booth
American-Statesman Staff

Among his many eccentricities, it was Edgar B. Kincaid Jr.'s habit of using bird names to address his friends, a practice begun on a field trip to Mexico in 1959 that continued until his sad and mysterious death last month in Austin at the age of 63.

To outsiders, it must have seemed strange protocol to hear the man Roger Tory Peterson called "the greatest authority on Texas birds" address associates as the Brown Pelican, the Western Grebe, the Rufous-browed Peppershrike, and the Hermit Thrush. But the bird names were terms of endearment — special gifts that imparted insight into the personality — and Kincaid loved to use them.

For himself, Edgar Kincaid chose the cassowary, *Casuarus casuarus*, a huge flightless bird found in Australia and New Guinea, an exotic creature with a naked blue head capped by a bony helmet, with two long red wattles dangling from its throat.

The cassowary became the exclusive namesake of Edgar Kincaid, an intense and meticulous scholar who spent his life studying birds and painstakingly recording their habits, ranges, voices, and movements; an eccentric who went into the field wearing a London Fog overcoat, leather loafers, and a tie; a gentle, almost timid, man who loathed and feared violence, who toward his death was afraid to even answer the telephone.

Kincaid picked this strange bird name for darker reasons than its exotica: The

cassowary is reported to kill men, opening up their bellies and chests with slashing blows from its feet, which hold a pair of claws with nails like daggers.

"It is the only bird that can get back at humans for all the trouble they have caused the birds — for their shooting and poisoning, for killing their eggs and destroying their habitat. I think Edgar liked the idea of at least one bird being able to get even," said Dr. Charles Hartschorn, a close friend of the Cassowary, and emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Texas.

Dorothy Hartschorn remembered, "His aunt was so surprised to hear that her gentle Edgar called himself the fierce Cassowary."

"Some people didn't even know his name was Kincaid. I've heard them address him — unknowingly — as Mr. Cassowary. Oh, Edgar loved that!" said Jo Alys Downs, a friend of Kincaid's who designed the pages of *The Bird Life of Texas*, the encyclopedic two-volume survey of Texas birds to which Kincaid devoted 14 years.

"The Cassowary used bird names with people he felt close to. He felt that birds were nobler than people, and using the names I guess was a way he could relate to people. The names served a special function. It was his way of separating the people he felt close to, from all the others he abhorred," said Rose Ann Rowlett, a partner in Field Guides Inc. and friend of Kincaid's since 1959, when he took the then little girl on her first birding trip to Mexico.

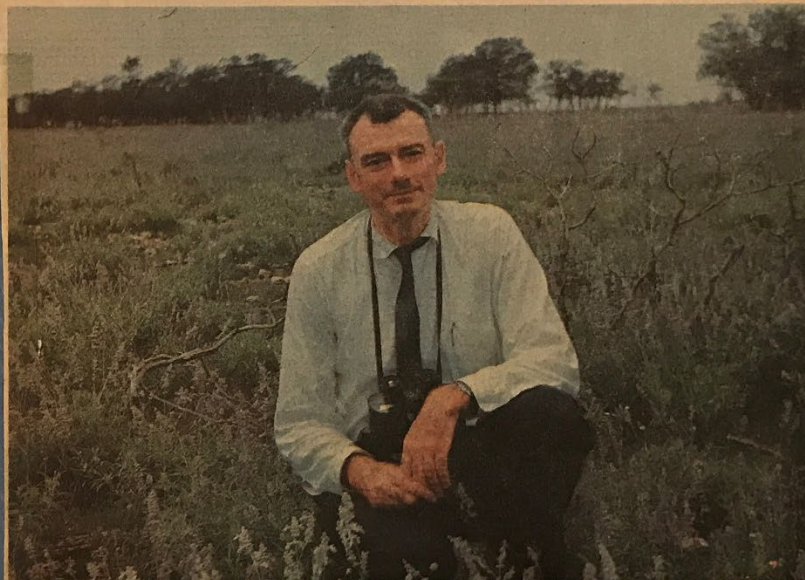


Photo by Rose Ann Rowlett

Gentleman scholar: Edgar Kincaid, shown in a 1967 photo, never went into the field without a tie.

"Edgar always thought there were too many damn people in the world," Rowlett said. "He thought that overpopulation would destroy all the habitat and so he thought it was good for the world that there were cassowaries to scratch out the bellies of men."

The story of Edgar B. Kincaid Jr. is studied with ironies like this: The gentle nature lover chose for his name a bird that claws men to death. The meticulously dressed country gentleman lived in a house so cluttered with notes, articles, and books that for a time he slept on the floor instead of clearing off his bed, which was piled with work. The widely respected ornithologist who after the publication of his

masterwork ceased to write.

"Edgar was from a family of aristocratic ranchers. A Texan that will soon be no more — like an endangered species," said Suzanne Winckler, an assisting editor on *The Bird Life of Texas* project and a close friend of Kincaid's. "He couldn't cope with the growing urbanness of Texas. He hated what was happening. He was lost in the changes."

Edgar Kincaid was born in San Antonio Dec. 30, 1921. He was raised on his family's ranch in Uvalde County near Sabinal, where his father was one of the largest landowners in the county. John Boykin, a friend of Kincaid's since childhood, said the Kincaid family owned three huge

ranches that covered more than 200,000 acres of Hill Country. But Edgar Kincaid was not a rancher.

"I don't think it would be saying too much to call Ed a genius. He had a very sharp mind and a photographic memory for facts — particularly about birds," said Boykin.

When Edgar was 6 years old, his mother, Lucille McKee Kincaid, gave her son *The Burgess Bird Book for Children*. On its cover was a picture of the Eastern meadowlark, its yellow breast blazing with color. Yellow remained Kincaid's favorite color. His station wagons were always yellow.

See Kincaid, E

ow, his ties were yellow, the knit caps he wore even in warm weather were yellow.

"When we met in the second grade, Ed could already recognize all the birds around Sabinal," said Boykin.

Boykin remembered the two driving down to a turkey vulture's nest that Kincaid had discovered. "We'd take one of the old ranch cars. You have to know that in those days, in that part of the country, you started driving when you were about 10 years old. We'd go down to this buzzard's nest on the weekends and we watched the little ones hatch. Ed took pictures of the whole thing. He was so intensely interested in birds."

About this time, Edgar's mother found an essay her son had written urging boys to desist from the popular pastime of slaughtering songbirds with their slingshots. She sent the essay to *Nature* magazine. Years later, Kincaid liked to tell people that he received only one letter after his essay appeared in print. It was from a man who said he always shot as many songbirds as he could and he would continue the practice.

When Kincaid was in the seventh grade, his mother died. "He was so deeply hurt that I never saw Ed cry. He never did release that grief — his whole life. Ed's mother was our room mother in the little school and I remember for Christmas one year, she gave everybody in the class three pencils — a green one, a red one, and a black one — with the child's name on them. I still have my pencils. Ed's mother was a precious great woman. He was her only child. And she poured her whole life into Ed."

After graduating from high school in 1939, Kincaid came to Austin and the University of Texas, where he studied zoology, botany, and history. He never returned to live at the ranch near Sabinal. Instead, Kincaid moved in with his aunt and uncle, Bertina McKee Dobie, in a her husband, the folklorist J. Frank Dobie, in a white frame house across the street from the law school. Kincaid lived in the same house until his death.

Bertina Dobie didn't have any children, and Boykin said she took in Edgar as her own son. "She was a very gentle and committed person. She and Edgar were very much alike, very polite and proper, and everything had to be just so. Very different than J. Frank Dobie."

Kincaid and his uncle were opposites. Kincaid was the gentle bird watcher, the careful scholar whose life's work was one book. Dobie was macho and bombastic. His string of books about such topics as wild mustangs and rattlesnakes are not praised for their careful scholarship.

"But Edgar was the perfectionist. In all the years we knew him, he never said anything that was not correct. I never found him wrong on any detail. He was not an important theoretician. There was no big idea behind his work. But oh, the man was amazing in the sheer number of facts he could digest — particularly about birds," said Charles Hartshorne.

"He had a photographic memory of animal life," said Winckler. "He was regarded as an authority on the birds of Hawaii before he ever actually went there. He just sat at home and read and accumulated facts."

"He never worked in the sense of how most people think of work. He never had any jobs," said Hartshorne. "He was a country gentleman who had no need to work."

Kincaid's job for 14 years was editing *The Bird Life of Texas*, subsidized by the substantial wealth generated by his family's ranching and oil interests. Begun by Dr. Harry C. Ober-

holser in 1901, *The Bird Life of Texas* was scheduled for publication in 1905, but Oberholser wasn't ready to publish. By 1941 his manuscript had reached more than 3 million words on 11,754 typed pages. It was immense. For example, Oberholser's introduction went on for 961 pages. The original bibliography listed 572 pages of citations. The huge project led Texas naturalist Roy Bedichek to joke that publication of *The Bird Life of Texas* was perhaps an undertaking too big even for the State of Texas.

In 1963, after Oberholser died at the age of 93, Kincaid was brought in to publish the unpublished. Over the next 10 years, 2 million words were cut. The bibliography was trimmed to 30 pages. And Kincaid and a crew of young and enthusiastic bird watchers set out across Texas "to bird the underbirded counties." They drove more than 400,000 miles to look for birds in 243 counties where few records of bird sightings existed.

So in overcoat, tie, knit cap, and loafers, Kincaid led his entourage on field trips around Texas. Rowlett said, "A lot of birders just go to a site to look for a particular bird. They're lost without maps to the exact spot where they're supposed to find a particular bird. Edgar wasn't like that. He appreciated the whole environment. He knew what habitat the bird he was looking for liked."

"He always championed the aesthetics of birds. He wanted to really see the bird in good light and he made sure that everyone with him would get a careful look at the bird. Edgar thought bird watching to be this beautiful aesthetic experience," Rowlett said.

"He never taught a class, but Edgar trained some of the best birders now in Texas," said Hartshorne.

The Bird Life of Texas was finally published by the University of Texas Press in 1974. To the people who helped with the book, Kincaid's trademark inscriptions were loaded with typical Kincaidian hyperbole. For example, "To the wonderful, most extremely noble Hartshornes, who are even more rare than the endangered Golden-cheeked warbler. With great admiration and affection, The World's Oldest Cassowary."

"The book has Edgar's name on it as the editor, but I never thought that was fair. It should have had both Oberholser and Kincaid listed as co-authors," said Roger Tory Peterson, the naturalist and painter.

The Bird Life of Texas was Kincaid's masterpiece, but in its pages are hints of the darker pessimism that loomed in Edgar Kincaid. In the closing paragraph about one of Kincaid's favorite birds, the golden-cheeked warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) and the importance cedar (*Juniperus ashei*) plays in its survival, Kincaid wrote: "In the final analysis, many more people are working to exterminate *Juniperus ashei* than to conserve it. Besides those people trying to grow grass for cattle or sheep, there are a surprising number of persons who are allergic to *J. ashei* pollen, which blows about the central Texas landscape in winter and early spring. *Dendroica chrysoparia* and its cedar brakes are unlikely to reach the twenty-first century alive, but then, who is?"

"That's pure Edgar," Hartshorne said. "The Cassowary had this sense that the world was falling apart," said Rowlett. Everytime Kincaid went into a store he purchased cellophane tape. In his cluttered house inherited from the Dobies, there were drawers full of cellophane tape.

Rowlett said, "He thought he needed all this tape to hold everything together."

But the world of Kincaid wasn't holding together. In the years following the publication of his book, Kincaid became increasingly withdrawn and preoccupied with an infinite supply of details. His friends say the burden of disposing of the Dobie estate began to consume Kincaid. He refused to venture from Austin, afraid that someone would break into the Dobie house.

"None of us ever really knew how he was spending all his time. He saw a lot of lawyers and bankers. He hated them. The older he got, the more he became wrapped up in little tiny details," said Winckler.

"Edgar was concerned that the world for birds was being destroyed. I think that was one reason we couldn't bear to go on trips anymore. He had seen the habitat before the superhighways came and everything was covered in pavement. Most of us try to keep plugging away, but Edgar was depressed and had given up," said Greg Lasley, a bird watcher and sergeant in the Austin Police Department.

Kincaid became more and more reclusive. A group of bird watchers whom Kincaid dubbed the oxpickers, after an African bird species that picks the ticks off water buffalo, came to his house and tried to clean it up. The effort took almost a year. The house had become so cluttered with notes and books and old newspapers that a visitor had to snake his way through the living room. With Kincaid's bed piled with work, he slept on the floor in a down sleeping bag.

The significance of the down sleeping bag was not lost on his friends. "It was a nest," said Allan Griffith, Rowlett's husband and friend to Kincaid.

"He was very frightened of this new, emerging world," said Lasley. "He was comfortable within his circle, but he didn't venture outside of that circle. He was a perfect victim. His biggest fear was that someone was going to come into his house and rob him."

On the night of Aug. 9, three men entered Kincaid's house wearing masks and gloves. The robbers ripped two phones off the wall. According to Lasley, Kincaid was tied up with a belt, placed on his knees, and threatened with a shotgun in his face. They stole his station wagon, his watch, a radio, and \$500 in cash.

During the night, Kincaid untied himself. He called the Hartshornes and spent the next two nights at their house. Dorothy Hartshorne said Kincaid seemed all right. "He was happy about hearing a screech owl from his window," she said.

Around midnight Aug. 12, Edgar Kincaid died in the Hartshorne's upstairs bathroom. For six months he had been suffering from poor health and a fever. The Travis County medical examiner's office ruled that his death resulted from a fever of unknown origin. They make no connection between the robbery and his death two days later. Police found Kincaid's wrecked station wagon in San Antonio Wednesday. There are no suspects in the robbery.

"I'd like to say that if it's the last thing I ever do it would be to find the people who did this to Edgar. If this were TV, we'd find them. But I'm a realist. The chances of catching these guys and getting them sentenced is next to nil," said Lasley. "It's eating me up."

Kincaid was buried beside his mother in San Antonio. In addition to his name and dates, his tombstone will make note of the final resting spot of the Cassowary.

book

The manuscript became unwieldy — three million words! No publisher would touch it, but Oberholser adamantly refused to cut the mass of detail; it was his life, 50 years of labor. All hopes that his findings would ever see print faded to zero.

The deadlock was broken in the early '50s when Frank Wardlaw, young, imaginative, audacious director of the University of Texas Press, learned of the manuscript, recognized its worth and dared to sponsor it. He accomplished the seemingly impossible by persuading Dr. Oberholser that the text could be edited and abridged to a million words without sacrificing the author's unique scientific contribution.

Wardlaw also found a financial "angel" in Mrs. Marrs McLean of San Antonio, who established a fund at the University Press in honor of her late mother, Mrs. J. L. Hooks of Beaumont, an amateur naturalist who had supplied material to Oberholser — as did many Texans.

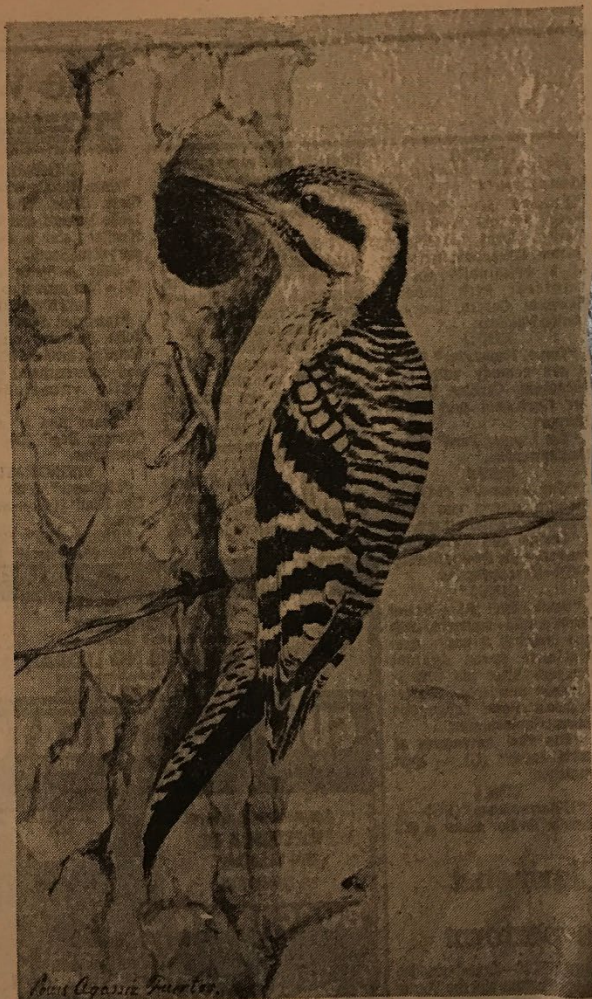
Most strategically, Wardlaw selected Edgar B. Kincaid Jr. of Austin to do the editing, a choice nobody could quarrel with and one that pleased Oberholser. Everyone knew that Kincaid, a native son, knew his birds. Still, the author did not entirely surrender his prerogatives until death stilled his pen. But the book was on its way.

There was much to do besides reducing verbiage. Distribution and abundance of species had to be re-assessed, updated and converted to individual range maps, the maps replacing thousands of words. Species new to Texas kept showing up, including "our" Leach's petrel, the only documented record of that Mother Carey's Chicken in the state. Expense outran time, but the National Science Foundation came to the rescue.

This book is more than birds of Texas, it is an encyclopedia of bird life in Texas with a history of ornithology in the state and a section on the ecology of birds involving climate, physiography, vegetation and recent changes affecting avifauna, all illustrated by photographs.

Dr. Oberholser's taxonomic descriptions and nomenclature are kept intact (with additional information in appendices) following Kincaid's species accounts written in easy, often breezy, style and using modern nomenclature, where it differs. Oberholser is for the scientist; Kincaid will delight the average reader.

If ever the phrase "at long last" were fitting, it applies to this book. At long last, at long, long last, **THE BIRD LIFE OF TEXAS** is in print!



LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKER ONE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Corpus Christi Caller

BOOKS AND ART

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1974

PAGE 6C

'Bird Life of Texas' is lots of book

By KAY Mc CRACKEN

THE BIRD LIFE OF TEXAS. By Harry C. Oberholser, edited by Edgar B. Kincaid Jr., 36 paintings and 36 drawings by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, maps, photographs. Two volumes, boxed, 1,100 pages. University of Texas Press, \$60.

Sixty dollars for a book, even a two-volume book, is lots of money, but **THE BIRD LIFE OF TEXAS** is lots of book. Seventy-three years in the making, it will stand alone in its field for at least as many years to come. Long awaited, it is the ultimate reference on birds in this state, indispensable to the ornithologist, a fund of lively information for the ardent field observer. Combined with aspects of field guide and life histories, it has a feature unique in the literature—updated status accounts for some 500 species in Texas.

The preface by John W. Aldrich, protege of the author and subsequently his successor as research specialist in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, relates the origin and progress of this work, begun in 1901 when the Wildlife Service (then Bureau of Biological Survey) launched an extensive study of wildlife distribution in North America and assigned Texas to two young scientists, Harry Oberholser, ornithologist, and Vernon Bailey, mammalogist. To illustrate their reports

the Bureau commissioned Louis Agassiz Fuertes, at 28 already famed as a wildlife artist whose technique made subjects come alive on paper.

Bailey's report was published in 1905. Oberholser, however, insisted upon more study and information on the unexpectedly rich avifauna of Texas and was given an extension of time, the first of many. It became his life work. He published other works, including a book on Louisiana birds, but the Texas book was his career, continued after retirement from government service in 1941 and on to his death at 93 in 1963.

Fuertes also continued, along with other commitments, until his death in 1927 in an automobile accident. Most of his Texas birds are reproduced for the first time in this book.

Dr. Oberholser was a great taxonomist; and many of his discoveries also, are here revealed for the first time. He was a perfectionist, and a "splitter," one who held that certain anatomical and plumage variations constituted separate species, although many contemporaries considered the variations minor. For example, he described 20 races of yellowthroat in Texas!

Research went on and on; species new to the state were found within its boundaries and had to be included, adding to the already staggering size of the book. That it would be big was unavoidable since more than two-thirds of North American species occur in Texas. (Still others have appeared since last year's cut-off date and more will come; such an opus is never complete.)

The manuscript became a three million words! No publisher touched it, but Oberholser refused to cut the mass of detail. Life, 50 years of labor. All hopes of findings would ever see print were zero.

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