

1987

Books

North American Bird Bander

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb>

Recommended Citation

North American Bird Bander (1987) "Books," *North American Bird Bander*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb/vol12/iss2/8>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Searchable Ornithological Research Archive at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in North American Bird Bander by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Books

John Xantus: The Fort Tejon Letters 1857-1859. Ann Zwinger. 1986. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 255 pp. \$23.50.

John Xantus was an insufferably arrogant, hypersensitive, difficult, jealous, generous Hungarian. Xantus had enlisted in the United States Army in 1855, giving his name as Louis de Vesey; at his first station, Fort Riley, Kansas Territory, he came under the influence of Dr. William A. Hammond, an Army surgeon, who taught the immigrant private how to collect and prepare specimens for Spencer Baird at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Xantus' achievements as an indefatigable, all-round collector soon gained him a transfer to the medical department and promotion to the equivalent rank of sergeant.

Baird next arranged Xantus' transfer to Fort Tejon, in the interior of California north of Los Angeles, as a hospital steward, with additional duties as librarian and baker! Here for 20 months, Xantus was indefatigable in collecting insects, reptiles and mammals as well as birds. Forty-eight frank but sprightly letters to Spencer F. Baird tell us about the birds and mammals he encountered, and also mention history, geography and people. Although some of his published works later aroused cries of plagiarism and fraudulence, the Xantus-Baird correspondence, from any Army post in the still largely unpopulated interior, carries the ring of authenticity.

Ann Zwinger has referenced each letter with pages of informative footnotes, their sum often exceeding the length of the original letter.

She also reproduces the list of 143 taxa of birds (plus an owl "too young to identify") that Xantus published in *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia* in 1859. One must look to a footnote to learn of his brief note, published in 1858, which described two new species collected near Fort Tejon: the Spotted Owl, which he named *Syrnium occidentalis* and Hammond's Flycatcher, which he named *Tyrannula hammondii*, as well as the type specimen of a subspecies of Solitary Vireo, now named *Vireo solitarius cassini*. The name of Xantus is also perpetuated in several small beetles and a centipede, in two of the four new species of flower sent from Fort Tejon, *Clarkia xantiana* and *Solanum xanti*, and in a genus of lizard, *Xantusia*.

This book is not quite perfect. Zwinger fails to mention that Xantus at Fort Tejon also collected type specimens of subspecies of Purple Finch and Rufous-sided Towhee. She is wrong in stating that the only bear in California is the Black Bear. I would have appreciated an appendix listing all of Xantus' type specimens, an explanation for

Xantus' unconventional method of citing describers of scientific names, and a more complete index. I do not accept Zwinger's identification of a large white owl which Xantus unsuccessfully tried to collect in July; a Snowy Owl there on that date is not credible.

Those interested in the history of ornithology must applaud Ann Zwinger for deciphering and annotating these interesting letters, written by a controversial but important naturalist from "virgin" territory.

C. Stuart Houston

Hummingbirds, Their Life and Behavior - A Photographic Study of the North American Species. Esther Quesada Tyrrell. Photos by Robert A. Tyrrell. 1985. Crown Publ. Co., New York. 212 pp. \$35.00.

This is a beautiful photo gallery (235 color pictures) of our North American "winged jewels." My husband calls it "a beautiful photographic study." However one wishes to describe it, no one can describe completely the collective understanding, knowledge and love of these species, as put forth by the authors in this magnificent volume. Illustrated here is the most complete and up to date information on anatomy, flight, courtship, nesting and feeding behavior yet put together on this family.

The full color pictures include never-before-photographed sequences, such as nesting, molting, preening and territorial aggression, as well as an unprecedented portfolio of "hummers" feeding from wildflowers. While the book opens with an introduction to this fascinating family of birds, there follows "A Portfolio of North American Hummingbirds" which gives the first-known written account of a hummingbird in the United States - a Ruby-throated, by the Honorable John Winthrop, Governor of Connecticut in 1670. This chapter includes not only field markings, habitat and ranges, but also nesting and migration dates to name but a few topics. Throughout, there is an array of facts geared to answer practically any question a hummingbird enthusiast could have.

The book closes with a list of flowers pollinated by our "hummers" and a list of "Hummingbirds of The World." Just about anything the general reader, scientist, bird bander, etc., wishes to know about hummingbirds can be found in this volume.

Considering the amount of photographic knowledge and the years of hard work, that are very evident in this book, the asking price is a steal.

Mrs. Roger W. Foy