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William Brewster, an Ornithologist Who Was at the Right Place at the Right Time

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ABSTRACT.—William Brewster was one of the most prominent and influential ornithologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. He lived most of his life in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he and a small group of friends founded the Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC), which published the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*; these were first ornithological club and the first publication devoted to ornithology in North America. He was the author of the first Memoir produced by the Club, a series that is still active today (this chapter is published in Memoir 24). Brewster was instrumental in the formation of the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) and the transfer of the NOC *Bulletin* to the fledgling AOU where it morphed into *The Auk*. Brewster was of independent means and despite chronic ill health roamed the fields and forests of his properties in Concord, Massachusetts, producing extensive field journals of his ornithological and other natural history observations and publishing more than 350 papers and monographs on birds. He was influential on the national level, largely through AOU-related work, but also influenced the conservation movement as President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society for its first 17 years, the first of the state Audubon societies and one of the most active and important. Brewster was active during a period of rapid growth in interest in natural history, especially birds, and the founding of organizations and journals supporting this interest. Thus he benefited from the plethora of opportunities available to him.

William Brewster lived most of his life in the greater Boston area and made that area his "patch." Through his involvement with the Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC), the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), and his numerous publications he became a nationally known and respected figure, and although he traveled three times to Great Britain and once to the European continent, he remained at heart a local New England devotee. He had the good fortune to have family wealth but was often in ill health and these two factors played a significant role in the trajectory of his life. But the single most important factor in his life was his consuming love of nature. About 1890, Brewster purchased a tract of land on the Concord River, in Concord, and later added adjoining Ball's Hill. Still later he added the Barrett farm and another

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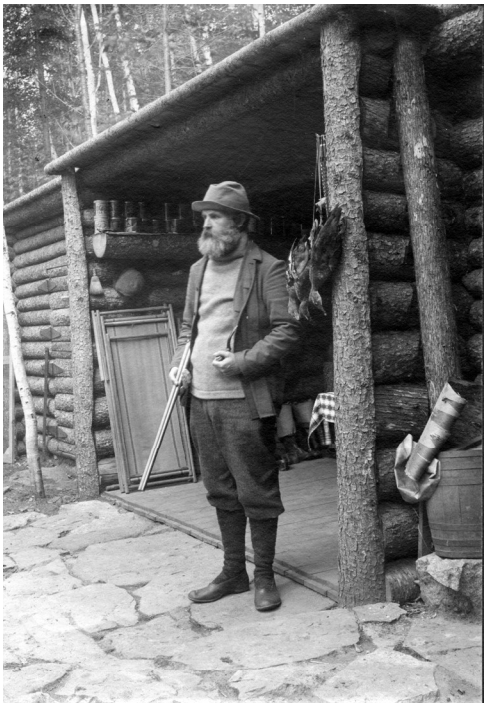

Figure 1. William Brewster in 1895 at one of his Concord River cabins. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

place that in total comprised the roughly 300 acres that constituted his "October farm" (Henshaw 1920) (Figure 1). He built several log cabins at the riverbank, and he invited his friends to camp with him and roam the fields and forests of his "farm." His other "patch" was Lake Umbagog near the Maine-New Hampshire border, to which he returned nearly every year for several decades. His family wealth allowed him to do whatever he wanted to do, and that was to wander and camp in the woodlands of his "patches." In the process he made contributions to the field of ornithology and became revered by those who knew him, and an icon in the local ornithological community.

THE EARLY YEARS, THE NUTTALL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB, AND THE AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION

William Brewster was born on 5 July 1851. His father, John Brewster, was a successful Boston banker with family roots that traced back to the *Mayflower* (Henshaw 1920). William ("Will") was the youngest of four children but his sister and two brothers died in childhood, suggesting that Brewster's fragile health may have had a genetic link. The family lived in a mansion on the corner of Brattle and Sparks Streets in Cambridge, and there Brewster spent his entire life, aside from his travels and forays to his "October Farm." He had a public school education in preparation for attending Harvard University, but ill health kept him from going to college (Figure 2). He was never robust

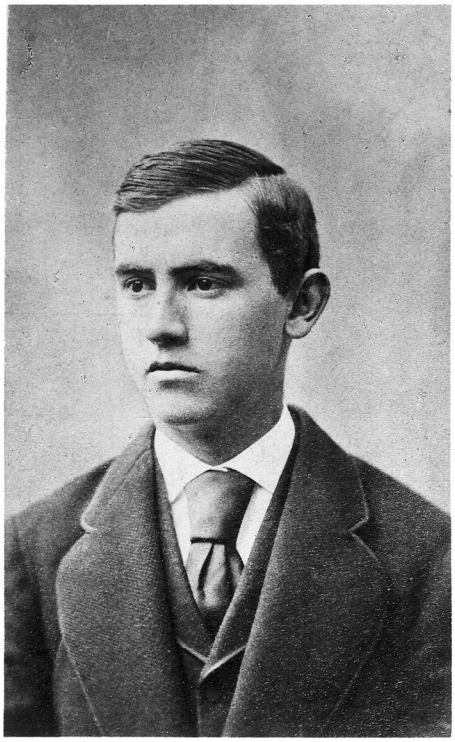

Figure 2. A young William Brewster. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

and suffered from eye problems that prohibited reading for significant periods during his teenage years, but his distance vision was good, and his close-up vision improved with age (Walton 1984). His fragile health followed him throughout life and his letters to friends often contained reference to his many illnesses. For example:

> [25 January 1898] [all letters quoted in this chapter are in Special Collections of the Ernst Mayr Library at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University]
>
> "Dear Mr. Brooks:-
> No doubt you have discovered 'err this that I am a poor & unsatisfactory correspondent but I assure you it is not my habit to treat my friends quite as shabbily as I have treated you in so long delaying this answer to your letter of January 23rd 1897.
>
> The fact is I have had a trying year. An unusually severe attack of the grip in February kept me confined to my room for nearly two months and incapacitated me for work for three months more. In July I went to Europe hoping to receive some benefit from the change but I was taken ill soon after arriving in Holland & had great difficulty in getting home again later in August. The autumn was spent in enforced idleness & more or less misery and I did not get back to my desk again until early in December. . . ."

Brewster didn't compete in the normal sports but was a good shot and enjoyed horseback riding (Henshaw 1920). He was just over six feet tall and "slow in speech and motion" (French 1936). He was something of a recluse, but he made a few local friends and when his father gave him a shotgun at age ten, the open fields and woodlands around Cambridge became the stomping ground for young William. One of his friend's fathers was a sportsman and had mastered taxidermy, so it was natural for young William to be drawn into that sphere.

The collecting of birds' nests and eggs, a practice that was widespread among those interested in natural history at the time, was supplemented by making mounts and study skins of the local birds and through this, Brewster gradually came to know the birds of eastern

Massachusetts. Brewster's fascination with nature sprung from his early days in the field with his friends in what was then a rural area, in and around Cambridge, and his rather romantic view of nature developed:

> "Here the dandelions and buttercups were larger and yellower, the daisies whiter and more numerous, the jingling melody of the Bobolinks [*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*] blither and merrier, the early spring shouting of the Flicker [Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*] louder and more joyous, and the long-drawn whistle of the Meadowlark [Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*] sweeter and more plaintive, than they ever have been or ever can be elsewhere, at least in my experience." (Brewster in Batchelder 1937, p. 10).

Brewster, when he traveled to Europe, wrote long and detailed letters to his friends. For example in a letter to Walter Faxon from Loch Katrine, Scotland, Brewster waxes lyrical, if sadly, about the results of frost:

> [1 September 1891]
>
> "… I am chilled by the death of autumn flowers and the total absence of insect sounds. There are only a few belated summer flowers in the fields and I have seen no asters and but one little patch of golden rod. No sound of cricket, grasshopper or cicada comes from field or wood. I reached a broad, sunny grass field where the hay had been stacked in the hope of finding some kind of hopping insect but not one did I see. It is a sad lack and I long for a stroll in our own fields and woods before the frost blights them.
>
> Yours sincerely
>
> William Brewster"

In 1869, Brewster, in an agreement instigated by his father, undertook a year's trial at working in the banking world. At the year's end, Brewster found himself unfit for banking, and as a man of independent means, he was free to pursue his ornithological interests. He apparently was uninterested in social matters and politics, and so

devoted himself to nature and birds. Although Brewster married, his relationship with his wife was rather formal. They had no children and it has been suggested that his wife had a close relationship with another woman (Mitchell 2005). Fundamentally, he was free to walk the fields and forests of Concord, and doing so contributed to his obsession with birds and nature.

William Brewster, at the suggestion of one of his field companions, Henry Wetherbee Henshaw, in 1871, invited his group of bird friends, Ruthven Deane, Henry Purdie, and William E. D. Scott, to meet once a week in Brewster's attic to read aloud from Audubon's companion *Ornithological Biography* (Audubon and MacGillivray 1831–1839) to his *Birds of America* plates (1827–1838) (Mitchell 2005). Two years later an expanded group decided to formalize their meetings through the formation of a club (Davis 1987). A letter of invitation was sent out to eight of Brewster's associates and on 23 September 1873, Brewster convened a meeting with eight present and they organized a club to be called, at the suggestion of Ernest Ingersoll, the Nuttall Ornithological Club (Club; NOC), with Brewster as President, Purdie as Vice President, Dean as Secretary, and Scott as Treasurer. Thus was formed the first formal ornithological society in the Western Hemisphere, named after Thomas Nuttall who came to Harvard University in 1823, and while at Harvard compiled material for his manual on ornithology of the United States and Canada in two volumes (1832, 1834).

The Club consisted of Resident and Corresponding Members, and quickly acquired national status through the recruiting of prominent ornithologists as Corresponding Members; by 1877 the number of this group reached nearly a hundred. The Corresponding Member base was important in the discussions about the production of a journal as a publication outlet for Members. The discussions related to this issue and what should be published and what should not apparently led to Brewster's resignation as President in March, 1875. By February, 1876, the matter had apparently been resolved and it was voted to publish a *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*, and Brewster was elected as President again, a position he held until his death in 1919. After a brief scuffle, J. A. Allen became the *Bulletin's* editor, which he was to remain until publication of the journal ceased. The number of Resident Members rose to 23, the number of Corresponding Members continued to climb and the first issue of the *Bulletin* was issued in May, 1876 (Davis 1987).

Everything went happily along with the Club until 1880 when a gradual deterioration occurred. Attendance levels at meetings fell until by 1886 some meetings were not held because of lack of a quorum. In a 10 February 1883 letter to Charles Foster Batchelder, Brewster indicates his despair with the Club's situation and is beginning to think about bigger things:

> "The home members, with the exception of Purdie and Allen, don't seem to care a hang whether the Club and its organ live or die. We had our third blank meeting last Monday; only four members present. I often feel tempted to work on a plan I have had in mind for some time, one which includes the dissolution of the Club and the organization of a new association which shall consist only of persons who care enough about ornithology to do their share of the work. . . . An American Ornithologists' Union, limited to, say, to twelve members, could, I think, be made up in such a way as to be a very strong institution." (Batchelder 1937, p. 46).

Such ideas were in the air, and it was inevitable that ornithologists' thoughts would turn to a national organization. The last half of the nineteenth century witnessed a professionalization of American science resulting in a burgeoning of natural history journals from two in 1870 to nearly 40 by the mid–1890s. The government-sponsored explorations of the western United States as well as rail travel made transportation easier to regions previously impenetrable. The enhanced ease of travel aided the establishment of networks of collectors, and the expansion of museums and their staff to handle the influx of millions of new specimens (see Barrow 1998 for a full account). The time was ripe for a national organization for professional ornithologists and the huge cohort of serious amateurs (Figure 3).

Brewster, together with J. A. Allen and Elliott Coues (pronounced "cows"), set about organizing a meeting of prominent ornithologists and issued invitations for the first meeting in New York in September, 1873. Two dozen of North America's most prominent ornithologists met at the American Museum of Natural History (for a detailed account of the AOU's founding and history see: Barrow 1998, Sterling and Ainley 2016). Brewster called the meeting to order, but was upstaged by Coues who was elected Acting Chair of the meeting. Brewster was apparently

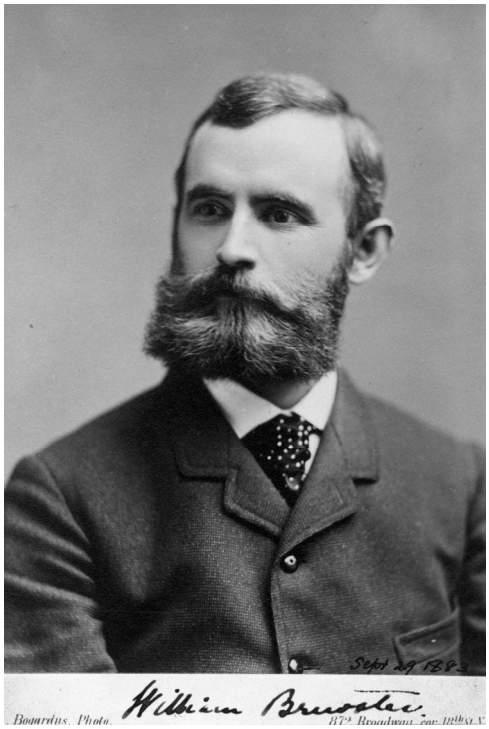

Figure 3. William Brewster in 1883. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

unhappy with this surprise and clearly thought that he would fill that position. Coues, however was probably a better choice, for his highly aggressive nature if nothing else. The meeting was a great success, and the American Ornithologists' Union became a reality with the provisional bylaws and constitution presented by Brewster, Allen, and Coues; six committees were established and memberships of the committees appointed. The last day of the meeting, Brewster reported, when the topic of a journal for the new organization came up, that as President of the NOC, "he was authorized to say, though he could not do so officially" that the NOC would offer the "prestige and

subscription list" to the AOU (Barrow 1998, p. 53). The minutes of the next NOC meeting (archived in the Ernst Mayr Library) tell the story:

> "Mr. Brewster gave an account of the proceedings of the recent convention of ornithologists . . . stating in brief the aims and purposes of the organization called the American ornithologists' union . . . Some discussion ensued as to the continuing of the Nuttall Club on its present basis; and in view of the organization of the Am. Orn. Union, and its proposal to issue a quarterly journal of ornithology, which would thereby leave the 'Nuttall Bulletin' in a manner a competitor in the same field, the question of continuing its publication was considered. Upon motion a vote was passed referring the subject to the Council. All the members except one of the Council being present, and having already expressed themselves in favor of discontinuing the 'Bulletin', Mr. Brewster as Chairman of the Council advised to discontinue the publication. . . . the Club voted to stop printing the 'Bulletin' . . . and to offer to the American Ornithologists' Union our good will and subscription list,—to place the 'Bulletin' in the Council of the Union, with the tacit understanding that the new serial of the Union shall be ostensibly a second series of the Nuttall 'Bulletin.'"

Thus the *Bulletin* became *The Auk*, and J. A. Allen became its Editor; William Brewster was appointed an Associate Editor. The Nuttall Ornithological Club survived giving birth and after 1886–1887, when Brewster had built a museum on his Cambridge property to house his vast collection of bird skins and mounts, he hosted the meetings of the Club in his museum. The Club survived and, under his leadership, grew in membership and prestige (Figures 4 and 5).

Although Brewster served as President of the new Union from 1895–1898, his greatest influence on the Union and on American ornithology was probably in his service to the most important and influential of the AOU committees, the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature to which he had been appointed at the inaugural meeting. The Committee's goals were to establish a standardized nomenclature for North American birds and produce a *Checklist* of North American birds. The powerful Committee included, in addition to

Figure 4. Group of Nuttall Club members near the Brewster Museum in 1889. Listed as present but not identified in the photo, were: William Brewster, H. W. Henshaw, C. F. Batchelder, F. Bolles, H. M. Spelman, J. A. Jefferies, Edward A. Bangs, A. P. Chadbourne, H. A. Purdie, A. M. Frazer, and Outram Bangs. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

Brewster, Coues, and Allen, Henry W. Henshaw (a great friend of Brewster), and Robert Ridgway who was a leading ornithologist at the Smithsonian institution. Allen and Coues were on a subcommittee to deal with the code of nomenclature, and Brewster, Henshaw, and Ridgway were in charge of determining the status of subspecies and species (Lewis 2012). The Committee was to break with English ornithologists on several major issues, including adopting the 1758 version of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* rather than the 1766 version favored by the British, and the adoption of a trinomial system of nomenclature that identified subspecies. Brewster was to be an

Figure 5. Nuttall Club meeting at the Brewster Museum, ca. 1900. Front row, left to right: Walter Deane, C. F. Batchelder, Francis H. Allen, William Brewster (Club President 1873-1875, 1876-1919), Glover M. Allen, and Jewell D. Sornborger. Standing, right: Reginald Howe; remainder of standing unidentified. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

influential and outspoken member of the Committee. For example, when the Committee accepted, due to European publications, several genera of hummingbirds that the AOU had previously rejected, Brewster responded heatedly to both Allen and his close friend Frank Chapman:

> [7 February 1893 letter To Frank Chapman]
>
> ". . . The A.O.U. Committee are getting a sound cursing hereabouts because of their late revival of those defunct

genera of Hummingbirds. It was certainly a great mistake, whatever the reasons may have been, for a point of such importance & involving so gran[d] a precedent should have been submitted to the entire Committee instead of decided at a meeting where three out of the total of nine members, constituted a majority. Don't take up this question now. You haven't time. I have merely freed my mind by speaking of it to you . . .

Good bye & God bless you!

Sincerely

William Brewster"

[9 February 1893 to J. A. Allen]

"Dear Mr. Allen:

The reasons which you give of the Committee in regard to the genera of Hummingbirds fill me with amazement and consternation. It seems as if I could not understand you aright but your words appear very plain. Because Salvin and other eminent foreigners continue to recognize these genera and because a '[illegible] member of the Committee' has seen fit to reinstate these in a special paper on the family, ergo; the actions of the original Committee must have been ill-judged and there is nothing left for the poor A.O.U. but to confess itself in the wrong and bow to the superior wisdom of the great Englishman and his following.

If this is sound reasoning why should we not also yield many of the other points on which the first Committee took so bold a stand and in regard to which it has not been followed by the English ornithologists or by all of its own members. What reason is there for taking Linnaeus at 1758 since our British contemporaries prefer his edition of 1766 as a starting point! Why not revise the whole check list from its foundations since there are things in it which do not please everybody? . . ." [the letter continues through six pages]

Brewster remained on this important committee until his death in 1919.

LOVE OF NATURE, BREWSTER'S JOURNALS AND PUBLICATIONS

"The foundation of William Brewster's life was an intense love of nature. Like some delicately adjusted apparatus, his whole being responded to the influences of the open" (Chapman 1919, p. 277). Brewster from an early age kept a very detailed journal of his excursions into the field that became the basis for many of his publications and for the sometimes lyrical passages that were published posthumously in *October Farm* (French 1936) and in *Concord River* (Dexter 1937). All of his journals are available on line through the Hollis catalogue of the Harvard University Libraries: "William Brewster journals." His love of nature is clear in two passages in *October Farm*:

> [*October Farm*, p. 14, 4 October 1879]
>
> "It is in the broad woodlands that one may see October to the best advantage. There is a ripe golden quality there that I miss in the open places where the grass is still as green as in midsummer. The dropping of acorns and chestnuts is an ever-present sound there and the squirrels are all busy with their annual harvest. Their chatter, chuckling, and rustle keep perfect accord with the screaming of the Blue Jays [*Cyanocitta cristata*] and the ceaseless whisper of the falling leaves."
>
> [*October Farm*, p. 69, 14 October 1892]
>
> "Yellow-jacket Hornets came in numbers to a tumbler of currant jelly which we opened and into which they crawled fearlessly. They were tame and gentle as possible, alighting repeatedly on my face and hands. At 2 P.M. we started through the woods for Walden. It was a walk to be long remembered. I think I have never before seen oak woods so richly colored as these—*painted woods*—wine-red the dominant tint. The scarlet oaks were steeped with this color and the undergrowth of huckleberry bushes seemed to reflect it . . ."

Two more passages from his journals further illustrate the rather poetic quality of his writings, in which he describes the chorus of American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*), Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*; often called "barn pewee" or "bridge pewee" in the 19th century), Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*), and Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*):

> [2 May 1886, Concord]
>
> ". . . Early this morning there was a grand chorus of bird voices such as we used to hear in Cambridge before the wretched sparrows [House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*] came, Robins, Song Sparrows, Bluebirds, Purple Finches etc. made the air ring. . . .
>
> Early in the forenoon I went down to the boathouse and spent an hour sitting on its sunny western wall. Redwings singing in all directions, a Meadow Lark whistling over by the railroad station, the Pewees occasionally coming to see that their nest on a rafter inside the boathouse still held its two rosy eggs. In the water beneath, several species of fishes were feeding or playing. I compared them to boats; the red perch long, narrow, swift of movement, resembled a steam launch; the bream, deep, broad and yet graceful, a roomy schooner . . .
>
> In the evening I walked to the top of Ripley's Hill. The shad bush was in full bloom, and the birches and maples dense with young foliage. Robbins, Chipping Sparrows, and Song Sparrows singing among the pines. . . ."
>
> [12 May 1886, Concord]
>
> "As I passed through the birches lining the turnpike and entered the old orchard the scene was equally attractive to three of the senses—Sight, Smell, and Hearing. The apple trees were snowy domes of blossoms which scented the air with their delicate fragrance and among which

countless bees droned and hummed. The orchard was framed on every side by a setting of the tenderest green with every now and then a touch of salmon red, marking the position of a solitary maple, with its clusters of winged seeds. Three Brown Thrashers were singing at once in different directions, their varied notes drowning the weaker voices of the Warblers and Sparrows . . .”

His journals illustrate the detailed observations that were to typify his professional writings, particularly as he moved progressively to the study of the living bird:

[*October Farm*, pp. 28–29, 9 March 1892]

“As I watched a Shrike [probably Northern Shrike *Lanius excubitor*] it flew from the topmost spray of a small maple into some alders and alighted on a horizontal stem . . . as I afterwards found, the snow had thawed quite down to the ground, leaving a trench . . . into which the Shrike, after peering intently for a moment, suddenly dipped with fluttering wings and wide opened tail.

Within a second or less it reappeared, dragging out a Field Mouse of the largest size. The moment it got the Mouse fairly out on the level surface of the snow it dropped it apparently to get a fresh hold . . . The Mouse, instead of attempting to regain its run way, as I expected it would do, turned on its assailant and with surprising fierceness and agility sprang directly at its head many times in succession, actually driving it backwards several feet although the Shrike faced the attack with admirable steadiness and coolness and by a succession of vigorous and well aimed blows prevented the Mouse from closing in.

At length the Mouse seemed to lose heart and, turning, tried to escape. This sealed its fate for at the end of the second leap it was overtaken by the Shrike, who caught it by the back of the neck and began to worry it precisely as a Terrier worries a rat, shaking viciously from side to side.”

In another example of his detailed observations Brewster entices a Northern Harrier (Marsh Hawk; *Circus cyaneus*) in close:

> [*Concord River*, pp. 83–84, 2 April 1893]
>
> "We saw two fine white male Marsh Hawks and one female coursing about the fields and meadows. At about sunset, as one of the males was passing Ball's Hill . . . I began squeaking. The bird turned instantly and with the usual long, steady wing beats came directly towards me. I could see him only dimly through the bushes until he came to the line of alders in front of the cabin, where he rose above them and, discovering me, sheered upwards and then turned back, twisting and doubling like a Snipe [Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*] as he darted off in evident great alarm. He was within 20 yards of me when he made the turn and I distinctly saw his eyes and facial disk. I observed to-day that this species while scaling holds the wings upward like the Turkey Buzzard [Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*]."

Brewster published his first note in 1868 in the *American Naturalist* on a Red-winged Blackbird sporting an orange crescent on its breast. It was the first of more than 350 papers and monographs he would publish in his lifetime, most of them (80%) by the year 1900 (Batchelder 1951). Aside from a few mammal, plant, and miscellaneous notes his publications were all bird related. His ornithological work was similar to most of the scientifically oriented amateur ornithologists—he was a product of his times. About 40% of his papers dealt with bird distribution and arrival and departure dates, mostly reports of sightings of vagrants. About 23% dealt with natural history subjects, such as observations of breeding or feeding behavior that reflect observations he made on living birds, for example his extensive natural history study of the Swainson's Warbler (*Limnothlypis swainsonii*) (Brewster 1885a) or his 1893 study of the feeding behavior of Northern Flickers. An additional 15% were systematic papers that involved naming of new species or subspecies, hybrids, or nomenclature problems. Reviews of other people's work were another 9%. The remaining 13% I classified as miscellaneous, and included the occasional mammal or plant paper,

obituaries, letters to newspapers, reports of AOU committees, and a few papers on bird protection that he published near the end of his life. Generally lacking were theoretical papers in the general field of biology, or on evolution, a situation in contrast to several of his colleagues including J. A. Allen (Davis 2005). He lacked the formal biological training of colleagues such as Allen and Coues, and this may have been the key to his low output of theoretical work.

There were exceptions, however. His short monograph on bird migration (1886) was a landmark paper on this subject, and the first Memoir published by the Nuttall Ornithological Club. It was a two-part paper in which he reported his observations on nocturnal migration at a lighthouse in the Bay of Fundy and a second part that dealt with theories of bird migrations and the facts available to support them. His 1906 Memoir *Birds of the Cambridge Region of Massachusetts* is regarded as a classic for its long-term intensive study of a small region. He had begun bird counts on his Cambridge property in 1860 and repeated them in 1900. Similar counts of the area by Charles Walcott in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, and by M. W. Strombach and others in 2012, provided documentation for a study of the effects of urbanization over a 150-year period (Walcott 1953, 1959, 1974, Strombach et al. 2014). Some of Brewster's short papers were theoretical in nature, for example his 1883 paper on the movements of birds in winter, which included suggested causes for the irregular movements of birds such as Snowy Owls (*Bubo scandiacus*) and Pine Grosbeaks (*Pinicola enucleator*).

Another of his important regional works, on Lake Umbagog, was edited and published posthumously in four volumes (1924, 1925, 1937, 1938). Volumes 1 and 2 were edited by Samuel Henshaw, volumes 3 and 4 by Ludlow Griscom. In addition to editing these last two Umbagog volumes, Griscom had studied Brewster's various journals and provided insight into Brewster's field work. He suggested (1949) that Brewster didn't publish the Umbagog data or his planned works on the birds of Concord and on the birds of Massachusetts and New England, because he basically became data bound. He had, starting in 1868, made field lists of the birds he encountered on his rambles, listing both species and numbers of individuals. These field lists plus his 40 volumes of journal was more than he could hope to analyze and publish. Nonetheless, Griscom was very impressed with Brewster: "Having spent some thirteen years in studying Brewster's field work and records, it is my humble opinion that he was one of the greatest and most

naturally gifted field ornithologists that America has ever produced" (Griscom 1949, p. 13).

It may be that Brewster realized his limitations in the realm of the theoretical. We see a hint of this in the following letter to Frank Chapman:

> [2 January 1893]
>
> "Dear Friend:
>
> I have just read your paper on West Indian birds & bird life with the keenest pleasure and interest. It is far & away the best thing you ever have done and raises you at one bound, I should say, to the plane of such men as [J. A.] Allen and [C. Hart] Merriam and distinctly above that of all other living American ornithologists. Your chapter on the affinities and probable derivation of West Indian bird and mammal life is, of course, what I directly refer to. It is compact, philosophical and convincing to a degree. I have long predicted such progress and development on your part and now that it has come I rejoice exceedingly and congratulate you with my whole heart. . . ."

Brewster did pretty much what he wanted to do, and his publications and journals suggest that being in the field was most important to him.

BREWSTER'S FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES, INFLUENCE

Many descriptions of Brewster as a rather austere, formidable, and Jovian character, came from people who knew him only late in life and mostly within the rather formal atmosphere of Nuttall Ornithological Club meetings at his private museum. In his younger years, up to about 1900, when he was most active in ornithological endeavors, he had close personal friends, and close relationships with colleagues that indicate a warm personality and a sense of humor. One of his closest professional and personal relationships was with Frank Chapman, head of the ornithology department at the American Museum of Natural History, who, among his many accomplishments initiated the Christmas

Bird Counts near the turn of the century and founded and edited the journal *Bird-Lore*, which eventually became *Audubon Magazine*. Brewster accompanied Chapman on several collecting expeditions, including those far afield for Brewster, to the Suwannee River of Georgia and northern Florida, and Trinidad. Brewster's correspondence with Chapman indicates a warm and collegial relationship and exemplifies Brewster's sense of humor. They also give some indication of Brewster's gradual shift from strictly collecting bird specimens to studies of the living bird, although he still would collect a rarity or two such as an Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*) as in the following brief sample:

> [11 December 1890]
> Dear Friend:
> . . . If I could take the trip again [to Suwannee River] I should write ten times as much and shoot nothing but Ivory-bills—except for purposes of identification."

Brewster invited Chapmen to spend time in the field with him at his "October Farm" in Concord, and his letter of invitation highlights Brewster's ongoing health problems:

> [16 May 1892]
> Dear Friend:
> Set your mind at ease about me. I am worth two dead men although I have had a hard time and am not out of the woods yet. The kidneys gave out a month or so ago and there were alarming symptoms of Bright's disease but they are passing off. I really cannot write without suffering acute pain, however. Now one thing you can do for me is to come here and spend just as many days as you can possibly spare. I will take you over all of Thoreau's grounds and entertain you in my log house on my little bird & tree possession at Ball's Hill where I have twenty-five acres of woodland. The sooner you come the better for the country is at its loveliest now but you can choose your time.
> Sincerely
> William Brewster

In remarking about a previous trip, Brewster provides evidence of his deep love of being in the field as well as a warm and appreciative relationship with Chapman:

> [26 May 1890]
>
> ". . . It is a pleasure to know that you enjoyed your stay here so much but I am quite sure that you did not enjoy it more than we enjoyed having you with us. . . . There are so few who appreciate the woods and birds in <u>just the way</u> that I appreciate them. It is a great delight to me to be in the woods with a man after my own heart—when I find him."

In a series of snippets from letters to Chapman we glimpse a lot of Brewster's thoughts about his beloved "October Farm," his sense of humor, and his study of living birds:

> [30 November 1890]
>
> "Dear friend:
>
> . . . Dr. [J. A.] Allen writes that you have just brought him a 'fine Gila Monster' [*Heloderma suspectum*] Heavens! Did you have it in your jacket at the A.O.U.? I shudder to think of such a possibility. In future I shall give all you New York men a wide birth."
>
> [28 November 1892]
>
> "Dear Friend:
>
> I have just moved down from Concord for the winter and feel like a caged bird. Where are my river, and fields, . . . and sky? Where are the cawing Crows [American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*] and screaming Jays that come about the house early in the morning?"
>
> [30 June 1893]
>
> ". . . During the trip I shot only one bird—a Savanna Sparrow [*Passerculus sandwichensis*], but took some

twenty nests & sets of eggs. Of course the notes I made are among the most valuable results."

[24 May 1894]

"Dear Friend:
. . . Confound your shoes! I did not know that I had them until I reached home when they turned up in a bundle. . . . I now send them by express mail with my humblest apologies for the delay (I wish I had a cockroach to put in with them)."

Brewster usually started his letters to Chapman "Dear Friend" but started signing his letters to Chapman "The Sahib," suggesting that Chapman was a close friend:

[11 April 1895]

"Dear Friend:-
… I shall be delighted to have you spend May 4th & 5th here. We can go to Concord for the Sunday, have a sail on the river, and dine at the cabin. (Coffee, this time, here)
Sincerely
The "Sahib""

Brewster made many collecting trips with his friends. In 1874 he collected with Ruthven Deane and Ernest Ingersoll in West Virginia. In 1878 he collected with Robert Ridgway at Mount Carmel in Illinois, and he was part of group that in 1881 collected in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In 1882 he joined J. A. Allen in Colorado, and in 1883 he traveled to South Carolina where he was assisted by Arthur T. Wayne while carrying out his studies of Swainson's Warbler. For more than 20 years he was accompanied in the field and at home by his manservant, "Mr. Gilbert," a black man with whom he became good friends, and who in all probability was the photographer who took the more than a thousand glass-plate photographs that were attributed to Brewster (Mitchell 2005). These companions in the field contributed to Brewster's high productivity, as did his hiring for a decade, of his friend Walter Deane as his personal secretary and museum assistant—wealth has its advantages. He also hired professional collectors to work areas

for him that he apparently could not or did not wish to visit. For example Frank Stephens collected for Brewster in Arizona and California in 1881 and 1884, and R. R. McCleod collected for him in 1883–1885 in Arizona and Mexico (Henshaw 1920). These professional collectors not only helped Brewster acquire the largest private collection of birds in the United States, but became the basis for many of his publications, for example a paper on birds collected by Stephens (Brewster 1885b).

Brewster held several positions that provided him with authority and influence. From 1880–1889 he was curator of the bird and mammal collections of the Boston Society of Natural History, and from 1885–1900 he held the same position at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University. From 1900 until his death in 1919 he curated just the birds at the MCZ. These positions gave him status and connections to powerful people in other museums. For example, he had influence with the head of the MCZ, Alexander Agassiz, son of the Museum's founder, the legendary Louis Agassiz. In the following two letters to Agassiz we witness Brewster yielding influence that affected museum politics on the national level, in this case at the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution:

> [9 October 1896]
>
> "Dear Mr. Agassiz:
>
> I am a good deal disturbed at news which has just come to me on excellent authority from Washington that Prof. Langley 'has announced to some of the Regents that he desires to appoint [F. TV.] True as [George Brown] Goode's successor [Goode was Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and responsible for the United States National Museum] and wishes to do so at once.' My informant adds that 'the appointment is near to be made unless the Regents positively decline to confirm it.' Now I have known True ever since he entered the National Museum and I am fairly familiar with the work that he has done there and with the few papers that he has published. My estimation of him is that he is merely a systematic Zoologist of fair ability whose experience and work have been confined within very narrow lines and that he is almost wholly lacking in breadth of scientific

knowledge and judgment, knowledge of men and tact in dealing with them, and general force of character. If I am not mistaken this estimate of him is very generally held among the Zoologists who know him and the quality of his work at all well. If it is at all a fair estimate he is surely not the man to succeed Goode and Baird. The feeling among the scientific men at Washington is very strong to this effect, I understand. I should like very much to see you about it at the Museum next Wednesday if you can spare the time for a few minutes talk. If I can persuade you to use your influence to discourage this appointment I am sure it will be most [illegible].

Yours very sincerely
William Brewster

[postscript] I have absolutely no personal bias against Mr. True but am simply concerned for what seems to me the best interests of the Nat. Museum."

[27 October 1896]

"Dear Mr. Agassiz:

True is apparently out of the race at Washington and I have just seen a letter from Jordan saying that under no circumstances would he accept the position were it to be offered to him. This leaves [C. Hart] Merriam as the next choice and as far as I can learn nine-tenths of the zoologists of this country regard him as the best man who is available for the place. . . . If, at this juncture, you feel willing to write a few lines to one of the Regents stating simply that you understand that Merriam's name is under consideration and that in your opinion he is well qualified for the place it will help his chances very materially. . . . I have felt great reluctance about writing to you about this matter and I certainly would not have done it on personal grounds, but it seems to me of vital importance that the best man should be chosen and I believe Merriam to be this best man.

Very Sincerely
William Brewster"

Because of his close association with the leading ornithologists of the day through his work for the AOU, and his forthright manner and honesty, Brewster weighed in on the many controversies that erupted in the upper management of the AOU. For example, Robert Shufeldt was a prominent physician, ornithologist, and member of the AOU, who in 1890s precipitated a nasty scandal that resulted in his divorce from his wife who was the granddaughter of John James Audubon. The AOU decided to consider expelling him from the AOU. Brewster weighed in on the situation and its aftermath.

> [15 October 1897 letter to Frank Chapman]
>
> "Dear 'Friend'!
> . . . I shall be very anxious about the outcome of the Shufeldt matter. Coues is rash and over confident, Merriam likely to lose his temper, Shufeldt nearly certain to be outrageously & violently abusive and uncontrollable. Unless the hearing is managed with tact, firmness and fairness it will surely end in a disgraceful row. [J. A.] Allen is, I think, the only man who can be counted on to carry it through safely. . . . If you agree with me I hope you will use every effort to have him put in the chair. . . .
>
> Sincerely
> The 'Sahib'"
>
> [postscript:] Please show this letter to Dr. Allen. It will save the necessity of repeating much of the matter which it contains. Please consider yourself & ask Dr. Allen also to consider what I have said about Dr. Coues & Dr. Merriam as strictly confidential. You will understand, of course, that it is a wholly friendly characterization prompted wholly by the exigency of the present situation and its probable future dangers."

After the decision was made that the AOU had no jurisdiction in the case, Brewster expressed his displeasure to Eliott Coues. Brewster had not been able to attend the AOU meeting where the discussion and decisions took place and he first agrees with several of Coues' assertions and then strongly argues against others. We see in these

letters Brewster constructing reasoned arguments and a sense of fairness and belief in due process that is to be commended. He also demonstrates a keen ability to judge people's strengths and weaknesses, and provides some insight into why he was so influential in the upper echelons of North American ornithologists. We also see a deeply seated morality and the importance of frankness and honesty, hallmarks, as we will see, in the comments of those that memorialized him.

[28 November 1897]

"To Dr. Elliott Coues,

Washington, D.C.-

My dear Dr. Coues:-

In reply to your recent letter I will say that the outcome of the Shufeldt case disappoints rather than surprises me. It is true that up to within a short time of the meeting I had supposed that the sentiment for expulsion would be practically unanimous and I even feared that the case might be rushed through with unbecoming haste and Dr. Shufeldt denied an opportunity for a fair hearing. . . .

Of course you will understand that up to the time when it was definitely decided that I could not attend the meeting my official position obliged me to exercise the greatest caution in respect to what I said or wrote but there can be no longer any impropriety in admitting that while I took every precaution to ensure a fair and dignified consideration of the case I was from the first strongly in favor of expulsion. Had I attended the meeting I should have spoken and, if the opportunity had occurred, voted on that side of the question. I agree with you in thinking that the final action of the Union was a mistake—not only of principle but even of policy, for I believe that the case came within our jurisdiction, that the grounds for expulsion were sufficient, and that the risk we ran was less than that which we have now incurred. There is much truth in what you wrote me to the effect that Dr. Shufeldt may prove to be more dangerous as a member than he could have been as an outsider—provided of course that

his expulsion could have been accomplished on technically just grounds.

But beyond this point our views diverge. It does not seem to me to have been right or wise after deciding that the Union had no jurisdiction to add, to the formal motion to that effect, a statement that 'the Union has evidence to show that the charges xxx are substantially true as alleged.' What would be thought of a judge who should say, 'This court has no jurisdiction in the present case but I have looked over the evidence and am convinced that the prisoner is guilty'? Yet obviously the action of the Union was scarcely less extreme. By 'no jurisdiction' I suppose the Union must have meant that the nature of the charges was such that we had no right to take up the case. If we had not this right what business had we to examine the evidence-still more to pass verdict on it? . . . But the matter should have been handled in some other way-as for example by passing a resolution expressing its thanks to you and Dr. Merriam for the service which you had rendered in bringing the matter to its attention, its appreciation of the arduous and self-sacrificing character of your labors, in collecting the evidence, and its regret at finding that the existence of certain precedents affecting apparently similar cases necessitated the conclusion that Dr. Shufeldt's acts, however disgraceful, were not of a nature to warrant his expulsion from a purely scientific society. . . .

Your motion, adopted by the Council on Nov. 10th, also seems to me to have been a rather grave mistake. If the Union could find no good or sufficient cause for expelling Dr. Shufeldt what right had its Council to pass and record a formal vote directing the Editors of the Auk to decline anything and everything that he may offer them for publication regardless of its intrinsic interest or value? Does it not seem a little like persecution to thus treat a man who remains one of our active Members and whose standing as an ornithologist has not as yet been impaired-or even questioned? Suppose he were to find a remarkable fossil bird with two heads and eight legs or were to hit

> upon and elaborate a new law as interesting and important as that of evolution! In such a case should we not make ourselves simply ridiculous by refusing to publish his discovery purely because he is a man with whom we cannot continue to maintain close personal relations? I confess I should have voted against this motion even if it had been made after Dr. Shufeldt had been expelled. . . .
>
> Very sincerely
>
> William Brewster"

Brewster was always gentlemanly, but did not pull his punches when he was convinced that he was in the right, as we see in the following letter to C. Hart Merriam, a very prominent ornithologist and mammologist:

> [30 November 1885]
>
> "My dear Merriam
>
> . . . After hearing your and Henshaw's objections to the single-card system of cataloguing and weighing them carefully I am satisfied you are both wrong and that such of your objections as have real importance can be easily done away with. I think you will admit this when you hear my present plan for a card catalogue of Birds. . . ."

Nor did Brewster shirk what he considered his responsibilities when he thought that someone was acting unprofessionally:

> [20 May 1902]
>
> "My dear Mr. Howe:
>
> . . . I found on looking through some ten or twelve trays of the cans of the Bigelow Collection errors of identification affecting sixteen species or subspecies (most of them full species) and upwards of thirty or forty specimens. It is quite true, as you have evidently been informed, that a large proportion of the mistakes which I noticed occurred among the Flycatchers but most of those wrongly named by you were typical specimens of species

> which may be readily and certainly identified while some of them were common eastern birds which even amateur ornithologists are accustomed to recognize at a glance. . . . I must confess that this condition of affairs surprised me greatly. Occasional slips, due to inadvertence or inexperience, were, of course, to be expected on your part and would, I need hardly say, have been quietly corrected by me without mention to anyone else; but under the circumstances I felt it to be my plain duty to report the facts at once to Dr. Woodworth, who in turn communicated them to Mrs. Bigelow. The latter has since written me that she does not wish you to do any more work on the collection until her son's return and that she has notified you to that effect. This being the case I cannot authorize any change in the labels until Mr. Bigelow has seen them as they are. After he has done so, you shall of course have a full list of the errors that I have already discovered as well as of such additional ones as may be brought to light when the entire field of your work on this collection has been gone over by me."

In another example, Brewster was a bit harsh in his handling of the situation of the Boston Society of Natural History's mistaken selling of Alexander Wilson birds from the Peal Museum to a private party, but was, as always, honorable. One wonders what role Mr. Batchelder played in the affair:

> [28 December 1900]
>
> "My dear Hyatt,
>
> Thinking over the matter of those supposed Wilson "types" which the Society inadvertently sold to Mr. Maynard and which I afterwards purchased of him, I have come to the following conclusions:- (1) That while I have an undoubted technical or legal right to these birds, the moral right to their possession lies with the Society. (2) Feeling thus, I stand ready to restore them to the Society on this condition; viz., that I first receive your official and formal assurance that as soon as may be [possible] the specimens will be put in good order, placed in a suitable

> moth-proof case or cabinet and plainly and definitely labeled as supposed types of Wilson's plates and descriptions with a condensed statement of the evidence on which this assumption is based. . . . [as a postscript:] I shall give Mr. Batchelder the opportunity to personally compensate me for the expense connected with the acquisition, from Mr. Maynard, of these birds, but I cannot accept such compensation either from the funds of the Society of from any other one of its officers."

BIRD PROTECTION AND THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

Brewster was always interested in the movement for the protection of birds, which soon developed into the modern conservation movement. He was well aware of the problems caused by development and wholesale destruction of forests. Eventually he decided not to return to his beloved Lake Umbagog region because of the inroads of people and their destructive actions (his last trip to Lake Umbagog was in the fall of 1908; Griscom 1949). He was appointed the AOU's Committee on Bird Protection. He was the first President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the first of the regional Audubon societies, serving from 1896 to 1913 (Walton and Davis 2010), and later served as a Director for the National Association of Audubon Societies, the forerunner of the National Audubon Society. He served on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Fish and Game Protective Association and was its President for two years. He was a member of the Advisory Committee of the American Game Protective and Propagation Association from 1911 until his death (Henshaw 1920). He was an avid hunter throughout his life and steadfastly defended the rights of scientific collectors, but he understood the constraints that would be necessary to produce sustainable harvests. However, Brewster was opposed to leislation that would prohibit the sale of all game. This disagreement with the Board of Directors members over liberal game law legislation, as well as difficulties with personnel, led Brewster to submit his resignation as President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society that he had served for 17 years:

[21 July 1913]

"Dear Mr. Boles:

Thank you for your kind note, received here this morning. Similar expressions from other Directors including Mina Hall have influenced me recently to consent to remain in office up to the change of the present year with the understanding that my resignation may then be offered and accepted. The promotion of Mr. Packard to Miss Kimball's vacated position is only one of several changed or changing conditions to which I am unable to adapt myself. Because of these I am absolutely unwilling to continue as President of the Society or even one of the Directors . . ."

WHAT MADE BREWSTER THE ICON THAT HE BECAME?

Brewster reaped many rewards for his many contributions, including an honorary A.M. degree from Amherst College in 1880 and an honorary A.M. from Harvard in 1889. The year after his death the AOU (1920) established the William Brewster Memorial that awards a Brewster Memorial Medal every two years to the person judged to have made the most important contribution to ornithology in the Western Hemisphere. It is considered by many as the highest award given by the AOU (now merged with the Cooper Ornithological Society to form the American Ornithological Society).

Why did Brewster become so successful? Part of the answer comes from his personality, part from his inherited wealth and the freedom it gave him to do what he pleased, and part from being at the right place at the right time. He was a tall, handsome man with character traits that, at least in the last half of the nineteenth century, were considered commendable. He didn't drink tea or coffee, rarely used alcohol, and in today's world might be considered a little boring. But his biographers all agreed that he was an admirable person. Henshaw (1920, p. 23) concludes:

"He possessed the judicial temperament and in his anxiety to be just and make no mistake was sometimes long in

> making up his mind. Once convinced, however, of the righteousness of a cause, he never after waivered but upheld it with heart and soul without fear of consequences. He was absolutely truthful, habitually refrained from all exaggeration, and falsehood and evasion were foreign to his nature. . . ."

His friend, Frank Chapman wrote (1919, pp. 278, 286):

> "His senses were unusually keen and discriminating . . . Enthusiasm, combined with a passion for accuracy, made him a tireless and careful recorder of every detail of his observations. . . . [after spending several days with a friend, Brewster said to Chapman:] 'I believe,' said Brewster as we left our host's home, 'that there is a nearly perfect man.' I have never recalled the incident, during the quarter of a century which has followed its occurrence, without thinking how unconsciously deserving of this tribute was its author."

Glover Allen, the man who was to succeed Brewster as President of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, wrote (1938, pp. 84, 97):

> "Again it was my privilege as a younger man, to have known him slightly in the later years of his life and have fallen under the spell of his remarkable personality. For William Brewster, though great as an ornithologist, was first of all one's ideal of a gentleman and a lover of truth and beauty. . . . Other men have produced more . . . but the personality of William Brewster stands out like one of his favorite pine trees against the sky. Tall, dignified, and of noble mien, he was a commanding presence, the center of whatever group he formed part."

Richard Henry Dana, one of Brewster's boyhood friends with whom he re-connected in late life wrote (1919, pp. 89, 91):

> "I have referred to his wonderful use of words. His desire to express himself clearly and with conviction in all his

> writings led him to rewrite and correct and to discuss with his wife and friends just which word or expression was most apt. And all through his life, for he was always writing, he was training himself to be one of the best talkers of his generation I have ever met.
>
> He was the sweetest-tempered of persons. I never knew him to be angry. He had a great sense of justice tempered with mercy. . . . But with all his honors and valuable work, he is to us who knew him above all the beloved, sweet-natured, kindly, honest, pure, fair-minded, cultivated, unaffected, and charming friend."

Witmer Stone summed it all up in a 1919 note:

> "Great as were his attainments as an ornithologist it was not these alone that gained him wide recognition that he received. His fair and impartial judgment of all questions that came before him created a profound and widespread respect for his opinion; his keen and unconcealed delight in everything out of doors, be it bird, mammal, or plant, was contagious and inspiring; while his uniform courtesy and kindliness to young student and master alike, endeared him to all with whom he came in contact. . . . Probably he himself never realized the part he played in shaping the ornithological activities of others, and his influence upon the development of American ornithology cannot easily be measured."

Even considering the early twentieth century hyperbole, it is very clear that Brewster was highly influential and had an impact on the lives and careers of ornithologists who encountered him (Figure 6). But had he not been born in the right time and place, it seems doubtful if he would have achieved such recognition. He reached early manhood at a time when interest in science and natural history was burgeoning on the American scene. The American Ornithologists' Union, or a similar one with a different name, would have probably become reality within a few years given that many of America's ornithologists shared Brewster's views. But it was Brewster and his intimate cohort of Cambridge friends

who brought it to reality through the founding of the Nuttall Ornithological Club and its *Bulletin,* thus forming the backbone of Brewster's success and any measure of greatness he might have achieved.

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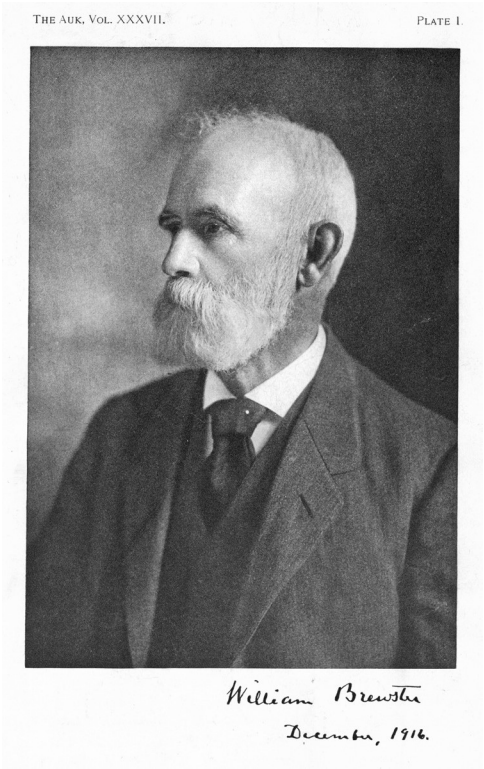

Figure 6. William Brewster in 1916. Courtesy of the Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

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