



## VERDI BURTCH

1868 — 1945

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Who was Verdi Burtch? From nine to five he was a quiet, highly respected proprietor of a 19th century-style general country store in the hamlet of Branchport in Yates County. Otherwise he was a nationally known amateur ornithologist and bird bander whose Life List included the Passenger Pigeon, an almost professional wildlife photographer, a much-in-demand musician, a popular lecturer and prolific nature writer, an ahead-of-his-time ecologist. His love of birds was such that he named his only daughter Vireo Cerula Burtch!

Burtch's life centered in the Finger Lakes district of central New York where he was born on Christmas Day in 1868 in the village of Penn Yan, a town named for the Pennsylvania Dutch and New England Yankees who jointly settled it. When he was seven years old, the family moved a few miles to Branchport, a village of 300 persons at the north end of the west branch of bifurcated Keuka Lake. There his father set up a carriage factory, where Verdi worked until his father's death. He then became a house painter and interior decorator.

Like so many ornithologists and birders, his interest in the natural world was apparently inborn, though strongly abetted at age six when his father gave him a copy of Wood's *Natural History*. This was soon reduced to tatters. A short time later he was given access to a complete set of the *Natural History of New York State* which included a volume on birds by James DeKay. This belonged to his "Uncle Sammy," Dr. S. Hart Wright. He was soon embarked on a diligent study of birds with frequent visits to a nearby tamarack swamp, the marshes at the end of the lake, the cool hemlock-shaded glens, the deciduous woodlands, and the waters of the lake. During his teenage years he met frequently with friends of kindred natural history interests, which included botany, a subject in which he became adept.

About the time of his marriage in 1894, he began to exercise a musical talent, inherited from his mother, by giving solo concerts and playing in the village band on the clarinet, baritone horn and trombone, an activity he continued most of his life.

The urge to collect and classify was strong in Verdi Burtch, and in accord with the avocational and scientific mores of the times, and in a period when field guides were nonexistent, he shot many birds to study the characteristics of the families and genera, and to learn identification. Later, when it became legally necessary, he was granted federal and state collecting permits. He voluntarily surrendered them in 1935; his field tools had become the notebook, the camera and binoculars. Early in his collecting days he mounted many of his specimens, but he soon gave that up and undertook the collecting of nests and eggs instead.

As was the custom with oologists, as the then numerous egg collectors were called, Burtch actively traded eggs with oologists all over the U.S. An intriguing picture of the barter nature of the exchange can be deduced from his carefully kept records. Apparently the system was based on an accepted value scale for the eggs of each species. One of his egg "account" books contains the names of many other oologists with notations of the species whose eggs he had sent them, of what they had sent him, and a note as to whom was indebted to whom and for how much. It appears that an actual exchange of money was infrequent. Each set of eggs was given a number, notes were entered on the nature and location of the nest, actions of the parent birds, on the eggs and young, to whom they were sent, and what was received in return. For example, Item No. 45—"Red-tailed Hawk, April 23, 1898, Burton, N.Y. Sent to Charles S. Thompson, Paso Robles, California. To apply on a Golden Eagle." This referred to an egg transaction.

Among his papers is a small leaflet entitled, "Price List of Birds' Eggs." This was issued by William F. Polsson (Naturalist), Halldorstadir, Laxardal via Husarvik, Iceland—"Sets Always in Stock." Listed are 53 species, mostly pelagic ones, with some shorebirds and a few European passerines. The cheapest eggs are those of Arctic Tern and Oldsquaw with prices ranging up to Gyrfalcon at \$5.00 and Red Knot at \$10.00. Most are listed at 15 to 50 cents. He also advertised sets of two different species which have "shared the same nest" (!) such as 3 eggs of Whimbrel with 4 of Eurasian Golden Plover, 8 eggs of Oldsquaw with 10 of Rock Ptarmigan, 2 of Snow Bunting with 5 of White Wagtail—amazing, if it can be believed. Polsson also offered sets of dwarf eggs at 30% above list price. With sets of duck and goose eggs, some of the nest down was included. Today such traffic

is hard to comprehend. As Burtch's absorption in observing, banding and photographing birds grew, he gave up oology.

Burtch became an ardent bander, although it is not clear just when he began this activity. One of his notebooks says that in 1911 he was invited to join the American Banding Association and that he received bands "to be returned to the American Museum." There are only occasional notations of bandings until 1921 when he received a banding permit from the Bureau of Biological Survey along with forms, bands and instructions on how to build a wire trap.

His journals contain copious notes on his banding activities, which were conducted at a spot quite close to his home and store. The first banding of which I can find a record was on August 8, 1915. It is not clear when he applied his last band because of a contradiction in the records. One note says it was on November 6, 1941, yet another one speaks of "Total number of birds banded, 1921-1943 = 22,267." The number of yearly bandings ranged from 93 in 1921 to 1889 in 1929, providing an annual average of about 1,000 over some 22 years.

Between 1915 and 1944, Burtch had 178 recoveries of 28 species in 17 states and 3 provinces, of which the first was a Marsh Hawk banded on August 8, 1915 (possibly his first banding) which was recovered November 4 the same year at Burtonville, Ohio. Probably his last recovery was a Rusty Blackbird banded October 6, 1941 at Branchport and recovered March 10, 1944 at an unspecified location. The banding of a juvenal King Rail at Branchport on August 23, 1941 and the extraordinary number of 42 Lincoln's Sparrows banded between July 18 and August 30, 1923 were outstanding events of his banding career.

The mystery of migration and the regular return of birds to the same place fascinated Burtch who frequently spoke and wrote of this in his lectures and writings. Throughout his life this modest man retained his youthful enthusiasm and wonderment for such natural phenomena.

Verdi was an inveterate recorder of his observations and thoughts, and who made notes almost daily of the birds he saw, of how they behaved, and of anything which seemed to him noteworthy. A reading of his bibliography shows the wide range of his inquisitiveness. There one finds titles dealing with such subjects as: a vireo singing while on the nest, the wing action of a grebe as it dives, maggots in the ears of nestling hawks, cannibalism in a buteo, the occurrence

and nesting of various species, feeding habits, etc. Today many of the things he considered unusual and worthy of record may seem rather simplistic and would probably not be accepted by our sophisticated modern journals. But with the growth of breeding bird surveys with their emphasis on "What is the bird doing?", we may be returning to a greater appreciation of the type of things Burtch was constantly perceiving.

Despite his perseverance in keeping regular and detailed notes which his daughter says he made every evening when he retired to his collection room, and which have survived in his many notebooks and scrapbooks, the majority of which are preserved in the archives section of the Olin Library at Cornell University, they are not well organized. They are a mishmash of scribbblings on sheets of scrap paper, on the back of business letters (in one instance a "Thank You" letter from a customer satisfied with shoes purchased by mail for his wife), in old account books supplied by grocery and hardware suppliers with their ads on the covers. This is regrettable because it makes it difficult to distill his innumerable valuable observations.

Burtch found expression for his desire to share his observations and experiences with others through a regular, very popular series on birds, flowers and other nature topics which he wrote for the Yates County Chronicle beginning in 1915 and continuing for many years.

He often wrote strong letters to the editors of Rochester and Syracuse newspapers regarding what he felt were the threats of urbanization and industrial development. He was considerably in advance of his time. In a very tragic instance, his fears came true when the faunal-and-floral-rich wilderness of his beloved Potter Swamp was drained, the timber harvested and the rich soil converted to farmland.

In 1886, when he was 18, his first paper, on "A Grosbeak Colony," was published in *The Osprey*. Over the next 55 years he wrote almost 70 articles for such journals as: *Osprey* (1), *Nidiologist* (1), *Bird-Lore* (15), *Oölogist* (19), *Auk* (27) and *Forest and Stream* (6).

Over the years Burtch made many notable observations of birds in the course of his almost daily walks about his immediate neighborhood. About 1880 he saw what must have been one of the last flocks of Passenger Pigeons in central New York.

Among his outstanding records for Yates County were the following: (\*=published in the *Auk*)

\* Western Grebe — April 23, 1942

Eared Grebe — May 15, 1937

- European Wigeon – May 7, 1922
- \* King Eider – April 25, 1946
- \* Black Vulture (Steuben County) – July 11, 1909
- \* Little Blue Heron – April 6, 1944
- \* King Rail – August 31-September 14, 1941
- Red Phalarope – 1921 – on his list for that year
- \* Parasitic Jaeger – May 13, 1945
- Sabine's Gull (immature) – October 29, 1921
- Brunnich's (Thick-billed) Murre – December 20, 1896, one collected; December 1, 1902, one collected; December 13, 1927
- Passenger Pigeon – about 1880, a flock seen near Branchport
- Connecticut Warbler – September 27, 1896, one collected in Potter Swamp; October 1, 1922 one seen near Hall, N.Y.
- "Nelson's" Sharp-tailed Sparrow – several records of birds seen in marsh near his home – September 4, 1896; October 9, 1923; September 28, 1928 (banded); October 11, 1928; October 12, 1929; October 15, 1931.

Burtch's inland record of Parasitic Jaeger is extraordinary enough to bear recounting. On the morning of May 13, 1945 he was observing birds over the lake with a neighbor couple, his daughter Vireo, and Dr. Hazel Ellis (Professor of Biology at Keuka College, and an active officer of the Federation of N.Y.S. Bird Clubs in its early years). While they were watching loons, grebes, ducks and gulls, they caught sight of nine large, dark-colored birds with long, narrow, pointed wings flying northwesterly, directly overhead. In the dull light the birds appeared almost black with middle tail feathers which extended conspicuously several inches beyond the rest of the tail. As they were discussing these unusual birds, seven more came over, followed by five more – 21 in all. The conclusion of all was that these were Parasitic Jaegers.

His birding was done on short walks before breakfast and after work. On weekends, or whenever he could steal time away from the obligations of the store, he went to the renowned Potter Swamp about 7-8 miles from Branchport, first on foot or by bicycle, in later years by car. His daughter Vireo says that if he needed storm shelter or a place to sleep for the night he used a nearby barn. He made daily, trip and yearly lists, and scattered through the papers there occur every few years what he entitled as "Desiderata" lists. Today's "listers" make the same sort of thing with many refinements. During his last years the annual species counts were 175, 189, 158, 143 and

for the year of his death, 152. A list entitled "List of North American Birds Seen By Me During My Lifetime to October 20, 1941" with an addendum to 1944 includes 298 species. About 25 of these, among them Anhinga and Brown Pelican, were undoubtedly seen on one of his southern trips, and there are 13 which are no longer considered species by the A.O.U. This leaves a list of 260 species seen in his home territory or elsewhere in New York. Over the years he found 95 species nesting in his beloved Potter Swamp.

Burtch was not a widely traveled man. He made his first recorded venture of any distance in 1921 when he spent 11 midsummer days in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Presumably he drove his own car over the rough and mostly unpaved roads of those days.

In May and June of 1922 he made his first trip to the Adirondacks. This was a rather restricted trip in the Old Forge and Fulton chain of lakes. His business partner, friend and fellow birder, Clarence Stone, accompanied him. They so thoroughly enjoyed themselves that the next summer, 1923, they spent two weeks on a trip which took them from Old Forge through the heart of the mountains across to Lake Champlain, with a swing back through the more southern part of the Adirondack Park. This was not an easy trip as the author of this article can attest as he traveled almost exactly the same route a year later.

Over the years Burtch attended three meetings of the American Ornithologists Union of which he was a member, Ottawa (1926), Charlotte, S.C. (1928) and Philadelphia (1929). At these meetings he met and mingled with many of the foremost ornithologists of the time, with many of whom he had corresponded for years, and by whom he seems to have been well liked and respected. Except for his trips to these meetings, on which he birded ardently, and his two Adirondack trips, his out-of-state traveling was confined to a visit to Louisiana in 1930, a trip to Point Pelee in 1931, and one to Cape Cod in 1934. He visited Oak Orchard Swamp in western New York on two occasions, and between 1934 and 1941 he made almost yearly visits to Sandy Pond at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, a spot now well-known to Syracuse birders. His observations there are now of considerable historical interest because of the nesting colony of Piping Plovers which he found there. This colony is now long gone due to human disturbance.

In addition to numerous notes published in the *Auk* and *Bird-Lore*, he contributed observations on 13 species to Arthur Cleveland Bent's

*Life Histories of North American Birds*, specifically Florida Gallinule, Virginia Rail, Stilt Sandpiper, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Hairy Woodpecker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Brown Creeper, Cerulean Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Mourning Warbler, American Redstart, and Sharp-tailed (Acadian) Sparrow. Chapman, in his pioneering work on *The Warblers of North America*, quotes Burtch's observations on the construction and location of the nests of nine species of warblers. These notes were apparently submitted in manuscript especially for this purpose. Elon Howard Eaton drew upon Burtch's records for migration and breeding data for his *Birds of New York State*.

Between 1908 and 1925 nature photography became a major avocation of Burtch. There seems to be no record of the type of equipment used, other than the fact that much of his work was done from a blind. It is apparent from his results as seen in his voluminous albums and in the pictures accompanying his published articles, particularly in *Bird-Lore*, that his equipment was of fine quality, and he was an expert in its use. His pictures display prime quality in clarity and composition. Even without the high speed apparatus of today he achieved some remarkable stop-action results. An extraordinary, almost unbelievable such picture is in a 1914 *Auk* article entitled, "Does A Grebe Spread Its Wings Just Before Diving?" The bird is out of sight under water but a veritable "ghost" of water droplets remaining in the air outlines perfectly the entire bird, almost erect with outspread wings. His photographs were published in New York and Syracuse newspapers, in *The Conservationist* and *American Forestry*. Moderate supplementary income came to him from the sale of pictures and slides to the U.S. Biological Survey, New York State Department of Education, Penn State College and U.S. Department of Agriculture. There is a notation which indicates Burtch made about 1600 negatives.

Burtch's friends and colleagues were warm in tributes to him during life and at his death. Herbert Brandt, author of *Alaska Bird Trails*, wrote in a presentation copy, "To Verdi Burtch, dean in the lovable science of oology, this volume is inscribed with sentiments of esteem and best wishes by his truly, and sincerely attached admirer." At his death, A. C. Bent said, "I always valued his friendship and the notes and photographs he sent me from his own file."

His obituary in the *Auk* read, in part, "Burtch will be missed by the many bird lovers who had the pleasure of knowing him, as a very

definite personality for whom no one will quite substitute. With his quiet but deeply sincere love of birds and nature, his many friends are certain to feel that, among all the companionable bird men, there will never be quite another Verdi Burtch. — B. S. Bowdish.”

Following his death on December 27, 1945, a Verdi Burtch Fund was established for an annual memorial lecture at Keuka College under the auspices of the Keuka Park Conservation which was founded by Verdi Burtch.

I am indebted to the late Mrs. John (Vireo C. Burtch) Whitaker of Penn Yan and the Olin Library of Cornell University for generous permission to examine the notes, notebooks, clippings and photographs of Mr. Burtch. Mr. Durward C. Skiff of Webster, N.Y. provided some personal reminiscences of Mr. Burtch.

*27 Mill Valley Road, Pittsford, New York 14534, August 12, 1981*