

B&C CONSER

MEMBER PROFILE:

Frank Michler Chapman (1864-1945)

By Leonard H. Wurman B&C Regular Member



New York's American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) dispatched scientists and adventurers to explore all corners of the globe during the early twentieth century. Prominent

Boone and Crockett Club members on that list were Roy Chapman Andrews, James L. Clark, Carl E. Akeley, and the museum's president, Henry Fairfield Osborn. Another Club member, Frank M. Chapman, explored for the museum, but unlike the others, he never hunted big game. To the contrary, he was a bird-lover.

Curiously, many of the Boone and Crockett Club's best-known big-game hunters, including its founder Theodore Roosevelt, the African hunter Frederick C. Selous, and the above-mentioned Andrews, initiated their outdoor experiences as ornithologists.

Like many early Club members, Chapman traced his roots to colonial times, his ancestors settling in

Connecticut in 1635. His father was a successful Wall Street lawyer who lived on a northern New Jersey estate where Chapman was born June 12, 1864. His maternal grandfather, a retired physician, ran the estate's farm. Chapman was an excellent athlete, a mediocre student, and a poor musician, although he developed the knack to whistle bird songs. The local forests, streams, and marshes offered extensive hunting and fishing opportunities.

Early Birder

Chapman's interest in birds started when he saw his first cardinal at age 8. Unlike his boyhood friends who collected and traded eggs, young Chapman collected wings and feathers, securing his material with a shotgun. There were few hunting laws. By age 13, he was bird-hunting daily with a 12-gauge breech-loading firearm.

After finishing high school, Chapman worked for a Manhattan bank, commuting by railroad from New Jersey three hours daily, six days a week. On the train he met two amateur birders who taught him the art of skinning and preparation, which accelerated his avocation.

Several B&C Club members featured in Chapman's early years as an ornithologist. In 1884, future Club member C. Hart Merriam, then chairman of the Committee on Bird Migration within the year-old American Ornithologists Union (AOU), advertised in *Forest and Stream* magazine for volunteers to observe and record bird migration. Boone and Crockett Club co-founder George Bird Grinnell owned and edited *Forest and Stream*. Chapman volunteered for the study and was accepted.

He rose early every day to hunt and register bird sightings on the half-mile walk to the station, where he changed into his business suit, boarded the train, and went to work. The reverse occurred in the evening. Once home, he skinned his specimens and recorded his notes. Over a 75-day span, Chapman hunted 69 days and identified 103 species. His report received the AOU's top grade for its Atlantic division.

Grinnell used *Forest and*

Stream as a bully pulpit to rail against the extravagant use of bird skins and feathers adorning ladies' hats, and created the Audubon Society to support his cause. On two afternoon walks in Manhattan, Chapman alone identified 40 bird species on the hats women were wearing. In 1885, he attended the AOU's third annual meeting and found his calling.

Chapman was to some degree financially independent because his father's death several years earlier left him a modest yearly income. When the following year his mother purchased a winter cottage near Gainesville, Florida, Chapman resigned from the bank and journeyed south with her to become a full-time amateur birder in what he termed an "ornithologist's paradise."

That winter, Chapman studied and collected birds and occasionally trapped small mammals. When he returned to New York the following spring, he volunteered half-days at the AMNH, sorting their collections as well as his own 581 Florida specimens. He published a paper in the AOU's journal, *The Auk*, and presented another paper at the AOU's 1887 meeting.

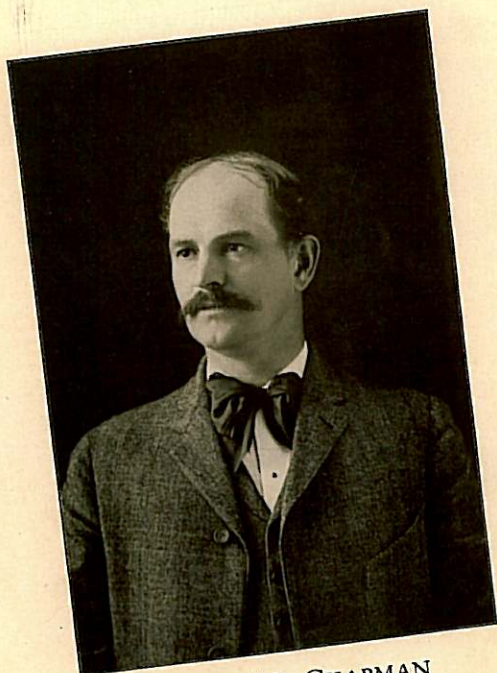
Chapman again visited Florida the following winter, this time with a camera that used photographic plates. Cameras slowly became the indispensable tool of ornithologists, but this took many years, and until then, as contrary as it appears, the bird-loving ornithologist had to hunt and kill his quarry in order to acquire the specimen to study.

Early Museum Years

The AMNH's entire professional staff consisted of seven scientists. In 1888 the museum hired Chapman as the director of the bird division within its two-man Department of Mammalogy and Ornithology. When that department split 20 years later, Chapman became head of the Department of Ornithology, a position he held until retiring in 1932.

Chapman's initial task was to identify, label, catalog, and give a serial number to each specimen brought in, including large donated collections. Unlike the banking business, which bored him, he loved museum work. In time, his interests turned to the relationship of birds to their environment and the challenge of educating the public about his avian friends.

When Chapman joined the museum, there was a disorganized array of 12,000



FRANK M. CHAPMAN

Associate Curator of Mammalogy and Ornithology in the American Museum of Natural History, New York City; Author of "Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America," "Bird-Life," "Bird Studies with a Camera," etc.; Editor of "Bird-Lore."

FRANK M. CHAPMAN BEGAN BY VOLUNTEERING FOR THE AMNH, BECAME AN ASSOCIATE CURATOR IN 1901, AND EVENTUALLY THE CHAIRMAN OF A NEWLY FORMED BIRD DEPARTMENT.

VATIONISTS

mounted bird specimens. One of his first projects was to put all of the birds found within 50 miles of New York into a single display case. He next developed a monthly series that displayed birds in their proper seasonal plumage found within New York City. With time, he did this for many of the world's different geographical regions. He created "accessory" groups showing parents, eggs, and the young within their immediate surroundings, as well as exhibits showing molt, protective coloration, and geographical variation. Some of the youth who attended the museum's activities developed into prominent ornithologists themselves.

Museum Groups

In his book *Autobiography of a Bird-Lover* (1933), Chapman takes credit for creating the concept of animal groups: in his case, bird groups. A museum group is the recreation of a specific geographical site in which the animals and birds, often in family groups, are meticulously mounted, along with soil, vegetation, and rocks in the foreground and accurately portrayed painted background scenery. Chapman's first group, in 1899, was a 6-by-18-foot Virginia beach scene with both flying and nesting birds.

In truth, the development of museum groups probably occurred over several fronts, with Chapman being one of several innovators in the field. In the late 1880s, future

Boone and Crockett Club member Carl E. Akeley, then at the Milwaukee Public Museum, created a group showing five muskrats in various positions above and below the water surface amidst boggy earth and partially dead vegetation. This concept became known as the "Milwaukee Style."

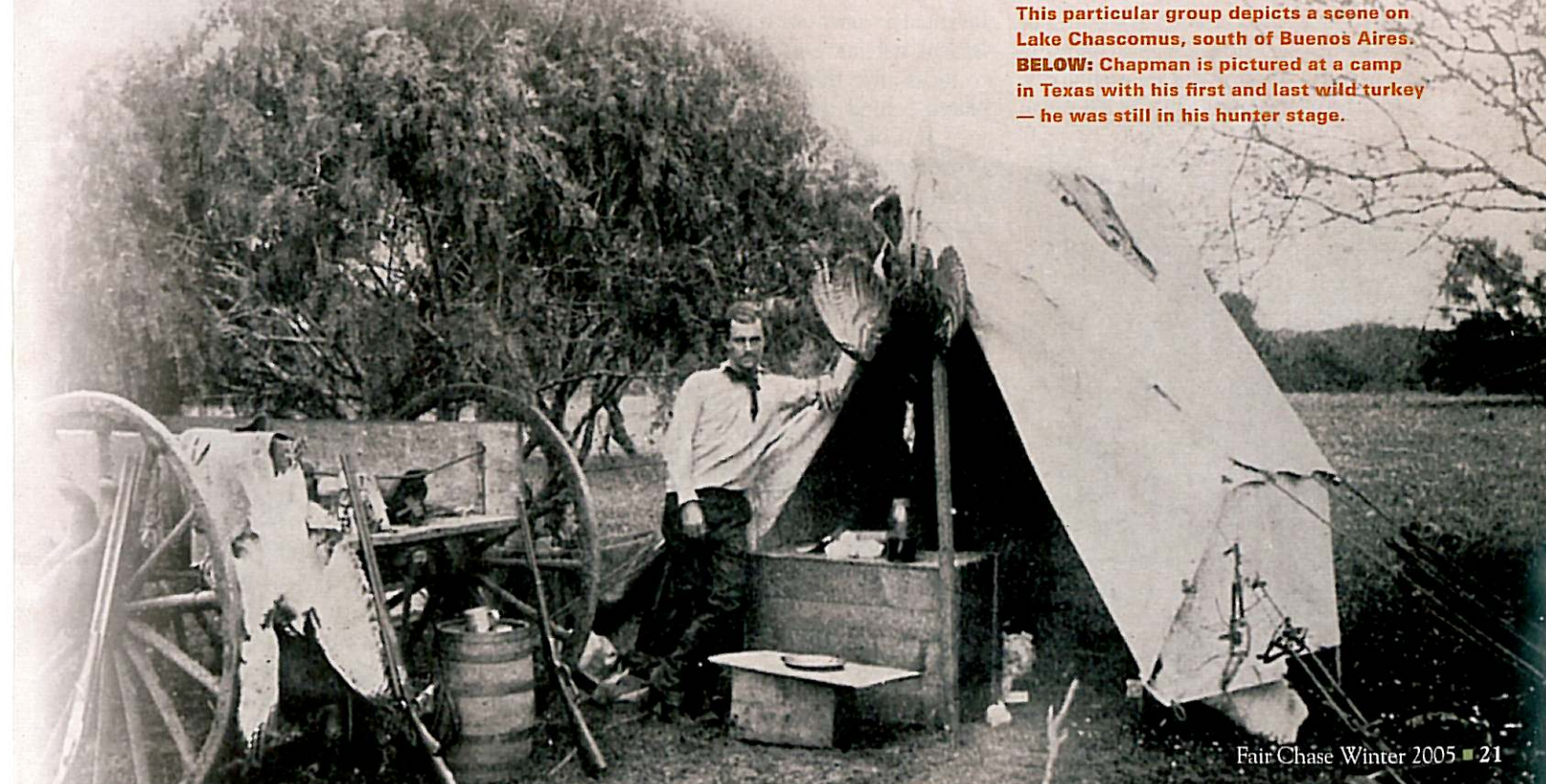
As this style developed, more and more emphasis was placed on the background painting, and several well-known artists and illustrators got their starts painting backgrounds for museum groups. In 1925, when the AMNH opened the Bird Hall to much acclaim, birds in flight were suspended from a domed ceiling painted to display the sky, clouds and other birds.

Organizations

Chapman became an AOU associate fellow in 1885 and three years later a full fellow, fellowship being limited to 50 members. The Union elected him to its governing council in 1894, and from then until 1911 he served as associate editor of



ABOVE: The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) as it stood in 1889. The Bird Department occupied the top room at the left. The diorama pictured is "The Pampas Group," and was featured at the AMNH. Chapman was a contemporary of recreating a specific geographical site. This particular group depicts a scene on Lake Chascomus, south of Buenos Aires. **BELOW:** Chapman is pictured at a camp in Texas with his first and last wild turkey — he was still in his hunter stage.



MEMBER PROFILE: Frank Michler Chapman

the AOU's scientific journal, *The Auk*. He became the AOU's president the following year.

Chapman felt that "birds are nature's most eloquent expression," and it pained him that ladies, wearing bird skin and feathered hats, did not know the names that adorned their heads and understood nothing about these creatures. Wishing to advise the public on birds as a service to conservation, and believing that birds would be their own best advocate, Chapman "embarked on a campaign in the rudiments of bird-lore."

In 1895, he published the *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, which was reprinted many times, and two years later, *Bird-Life*, which goes into greater detail about the more common birds.

The Audubon Society, which initially failed because the sheer number of new members had overwhelmed Grinnell's *Forest and Stream* office staff, was now replaced by individual state Audubon Societies, of which there were 36 in 1904. Chapman was the first editor of *Bird-Lore*, a position he held for 40 years. *Bird-Lore* in 1941 changed its name to *Audubon Magazine*. Chapman served on the society's board for 32 years.

Caribbean and Central America

Chapman continued his forays to Southern climes, spending several winters in Florida and another in Texas. In Florida, he shot the only Ivory Billed Woodpecker he saw, but saved the skeleton and not the skin. The following year he learned Spanish and wintered in Cuba, studying and identifying new species. In all his explorations, Chapman

Chapman holding a bird while on an expedition to Barro Colorado Island in January 1926.

visited the most out-of-the-way places, often living in shacks with poor families or camping in tents.

In 1893, he visited Trinidad. His routine was the same every day: observing and collecting in the morning, preparing specimens in the afternoon, and collecting again and writing his journals that evening. He collected 24 species of bats, one of which ate fish, and five mammal species new to science.

Chapman visited Mexico in 1896 and collected 165 bird and 45 mammal specimens. He again explored Mexico the next year, climbed to 13,200 feet of elevation, and recorded that the species of birds and trees changed as he climbed from the lower tropical and sub-tropical zones to the higher temperate zones, just as they would have had he traveled thousands of miles north. Altitude affected vegetation and bird species the same as did latitude.

As a rule of thumb, he surmised that as one proceeded from the equator to the poles, one degree of latitude would lessen the mean temperature one degree Fahrenheit. The same mean temperature change would occur by climbing 300 feet vertically. He also concluded that the higher in altitude a bird species was found, the greater the likelihood that its ancestral type would be found in the next lower zone.

The camera was replacing the shotgun as a collection method, but cameras used film plates and needed to be focused before the plate was inserted. The AMNH invented a camera with two coupled, parallel lens systems. One lens system was used to focus after the photographic plate was placed behind the second. Chapman first used this on a trip to the gulf of the St. Lawrence River, and it proved to be a boon, allowing the photographer to snap a picture at a moments notice.

New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, a lifelong "birder" as well as a big-game hunter, contacted Chapman in 1899, beginning a 20-year friendship. Chapman, who had visited Florida's Pelican Island several times, was one of several influential voices that successfully urged President Roosevelt in 1903 to establish Pelican Island as our nation's first bird refuge.

South America

Because a variety of North American birds wintered in the southern hemisphere, Chapman sent museum scientists to explore South America. He led annual expeditions in the Andes, where travel was often by cart, mule, and foot. In Argentina, he met one



Chapman spent four years over 12 seasons on Barro Colorado Island where he developed remote-controlled photography, researched tropical biology, and wrote life histories of tropical birds.

hunter who had killed 16,000 condors, sending the wing and tail feathers to Parisian milliners. In Columbia alone he identified 1,200 bird species, and in 1917 published a 700-page volume on the birds of Colombia. Eleven years later he completed a similarly sized book on the birds of Ecuador, identifying 1,508 species and sub-species.

During the First World War, the Red Cross recruited Chapman, who was fluent in Spanish and knowledgeable about Latin America, to raise funds from the numerous American communities that settled and worked in South and Central America. At war's end, the Red Cross sent him to Paris to assist in the post-war efforts. On the way home, Chapman spent six weeks in London's British Museum studying its South American bird collection.

Returning to America, Chapman continued to winter in Southern regions. For 10 years, he inhabited a shack on an island sanctuary within the Canal Zone, a place he called "my tropical air castle," where he extended his studies.

Awards

In 1913, Brown University awarded Chapman an honorary Doctor of Science degree, and eight years later the National Academy of Sciences elected him to membership. He was vice-president of the Explorers' Club from 1910 until 1918, received the Roosevelt medal for distinguished service in 1928, and was admitted to the Boone and Crockett Club in 1936. In all, he published 14 books on birds.

One can summarize Chapman's achievements by saying that he not only influenced the populace to appreciate our feathered friends, but he was an early ecologist who appreciated nature as a balanced whole and its essential relationship to man.

Frank Michler Chapman was the dean of American ornithologists. He continued his research and writing until six weeks before his death from kidney failure on November 15, 1945. ■