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IN MEMORIAM: EMMET REID BLAKE, 1908–1997

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EMMET REID BLAKE, 1908–1997

(At Greater Rhea nest in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, in 1937)

Emmet “Bob” Reid Blake, a member of the AOU since 1933 and a Fellow since 1952, was born at Abbeville, South Carolina, on 29 November 1908, and died in Chicago on 10 January 1997, at the age of 88. Bob’s career will always be identified with the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. He was first hired there as an assistant in 1935, and except for a four-year hiatus during World War II, he served on the museum staff until his retirement in 1973. He continued to be an active participant in the Bird Division into the 1990s as he worked to finish long-term projects on Neotropical birds.

Bob’s interest in natural history dated to his childhood near Greenwood, South Carolina. As a boy he roamed the forests and fields around the family farm, trapping muskrat and mink and learning all he could about the local flora and fauna. At age 15 he entered Presbyterian College, where he turned an empty dormitory into a museum filled with specimens of the local fauna. So successful was he at capturing reptiles that his senior yearbook entry was under the name of “Snaky” Blake.

After graduation in 1928, and with only \$2.65 in his pocket, Bob roller-skated 900 miles from Greenwood to Pittsburgh to enroll as a part-

time graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. He supported himself by pumping gas at night, by teaching boxing and swimming at the YMCA, and on occasion by working with local carnivals as a boxer who would take on all comers. While in Pittsburgh he got his first opportunity to participate in ornithological field work overseas on a National Geographic expedition led by Ernest Holt to the previously unexplored Brazil-Venezuela boundary along the Rio Negro. This trip marked the beginning of a career that took Bob into some of the most remote parts of Central and South America. It was a career that earned him the reputation of an inveterate explorer and prolific collector.

His first connections to the Field Museum came in 1931 when Leon Mandel hired Bob to lead a hunting and collecting trip to Venezuela under the auspices of the museum. He eagerly seized this opportunity. The expedition sailed from Miami on Mandel's yacht and reached the delta of the Rio Orinoco after stops in Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad. Here, after 10 days of hunting, the rest of the party departed, leaving Bob to make his first Field Museum collection. He succeeded in reaching the top of Mount Turumiquire in northeastern Venezuela, and in 35 days, completely by himself, collected 803 birds, 96 reptiles and 37 mammals—an extraordinary achievement and still one of the most complete and important collections ever made from this area.

On his return, Bob completed his M.S. at the University of Pittsburgh in 1933. Nearing the end of the Depression, this was not enough to land him a job, but the impression he had made on Mandel resulted in an invitation to participate in a Field Museum expedition to Guatemala. Again, Bob made important collections from previously unexplored areas. Although the Field Museum now clearly recognized his skills, there was as yet no opening on the staff. After a collecting trip to Belize for the Carnegie Museum, a position finally did open, and Bob joined the staff in 1935, beginning an association that lasted more than 60 years. Before the decade had passed, he had mounted two additional important expeditions, one to Guyana (where he nearly lost his life in a boating accident on the Courentyne River), and a second to southern Brazil, where he collected for the research collections and the exhibit halls.

Bob's ornithological career was interrupted

by World War II. He was inducted into the Army in 1942 and served in counter-intelligence in the European and African theaters. At the end of the war he turned his attention to the collections and published on them. Although at age 12 he had published a newspaper article titled "Purple Martins slaughtered by city employees," it was not until after the war that he produced much of his most valuable work. Included was his 1953 *Birds of Mexico*, the first handbook to the avifauna of Mexico, which went through seven printings (and even today after the publication of more glossy guides, it maintains value for students of Mexican birds). His technical publications covered the whole of South and Central America, and he revised the classifications of five bird families for Peters' *Checklist of the Birds of the World*. He described five species of birds new to science as well as numerous additional subspecies. After one last expedition in 1958 to southeastern Peru, during which two previously unknown species were collected, he embarked on his most ambitious project, *Manual of Neotropical Birds*. This was to have been a five-volume work covering all of the 3,000+ bird species of the Neotropics. The first volume, published in 1977, became an important reference for all ornithologists working in the area. Unfortunately, Bob's energy for this massive task seemed to flag during the preparation of the second volume; it and subsequent volumes were never completed.

While devoting his career to ornithology, Bob also had time to raise a family in Evanston with his wife Peg. He is survived by Peg; two daughters, Peggy and Betsy; and a grandson. He and Peg would have celebrated their golden anniversary in 1998.

Bob was a delightful colleague, regaling us all with stories of his childhood in the South and his adventures in the field. He brought a great sense of humor to his job, reminding us not to take ourselves too seriously. He was a wonderfully colorful conduit to an era of ornithology that combined science with adventures more exciting than any in the movies. Headings such as "Museum party marooned 10 days on island," "Emmet Blake reaches Georgetown after disaster to expedition," "Fer de lance is fatal to member of Blake expedition," and "Emmet Blake nears death on expedition," all from newspaper articles chronicling his field expeditions, give a hint of the richly exciting life that he led. Bob

was also a great companion in the field, always trying to do more than his share of the camp chores.

Bob's legacy includes important ornithological collections and publications, all of which will be valuable to generations of ornithologists, biogeographers, and environmentalists.

He worked at the geographic frontiers of ornithology, delineating the ranges of birds and documenting their diversity. He belonged to a generation of alpha taxonomists whose work framed the foundation for ornithologists using more modern techniques; his heritage will not diminish with time.