

In Memoriam: Barbara Blanchard Dewolfe, 1912–2008

Author: Rothstein, Stephen I.

Source: The Auk, 127(1) : 235-237

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2010.127.1.235>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

In Memoriam



The Auk 127(1):235–237, 2010
© The American Ornithologists' Union, 2010.
Printed in USA.

IN MEMORIAM: BARBARA BLANCHARD DEWOLFE, 1912–2008

STEPHEN I. ROTHSTEIN

Department of Ecology, Evolution and Marine Biology, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California 93106, USA



Barbara Blanchard DeWolfe, 1912–2008

Barbara B. DeWolfe, member of the AOU since 1947, Elective Member and Fellow (1979), died in Santa Barbara, California, on 2 May 2008, just 12 days shy of her 96th birthday. Barbara did pioneering research on the reproductive physiology and annual cycle of the White-crowned Sparrow and, as Joseph Grinnell's last graduate student at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, was a link to the early days of modern ornithology in the American West. Further, she was a remarkably successful example of a woman in academia during the 1930s and 1940s, when it was a man's game and the deck seemed to be stacked against her.

Barbara was born in San Francisco on 14 May 1912 to Marion and Elizabeth Blanchard. She loved telling stories, and one of her favorites was that of her parents' return from their honeymoon on 17 April 1906, the night before the epic San Francisco earthquake. Her parents' first home was a tent in Golden Gate Park. The family remained in San Francisco until Barbara was 10, when they moved to her grandmother's bungalow on the edge of Mill Valley, California. The location gave Barbara access to wildlife and helped cultivate an interest in animals that had begun a year earlier, when she spent part of a summer at a resort where she learned to identify

The Auk, Vol. 127, Number 1, pages 235–238. ISSN 0004-8038, electronic ISSN 1938-4254. © 2010 by The American Ornithologists' Union. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/auk.2010.127.1.235

birds by their songs. Barbara was a sickly child and did not attend school for her first 2 years in Mill Valley. This gave her ample time to observe wildlife and to record her observations in a journal, an activity her parents strongly encouraged. She was the only child in an extended family that included her parents, her grandmother, aunts, and uncles. She was the adults' main focus, and it was not until she left home that she discovered that not all families were as "chronically anxious" as hers. She graduated from Tamalpais High School in 1929 and then attended UC Berkeley, where she received her bachelor's degree in zoology in 1933.

Barbara had always wanted to be a teacher—one of the few professions, along with secretary-stenographer and nurse, that woman were encouraged to pursue in those days—but few teaching jobs were available in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. A counselor told her that she would have an easier time being placed as a high school teacher if she could coach a sport. Given that a "D" in tennis was her only contact with sports of any kind, Barbara had even more reason to despair of finding a position in a high school. She returned to Berkeley because she thought that a master's degree might improve her prospects for teaching biology at the high school level. This plan was upgraded to applying for the Ph.D. program when her undergraduate mentor told her that the zoology department would not even look at her application unless she planned on getting a Ph.D. So, having no other option, she applied to the doctoral program and was accepted by Grinnell. Although pursuit of an advanced degree was borne of economic necessity, Barbara realized later on that she was "infinitely happier teaching at the college and university level" than she would have been teaching high school.

When Barbara first met with Grinnell and expressed her interest in working on birds, he told her that studying something like a worm would be easier, but he quickly relented and accepted a Ph.D. project on birds when she told him that invertebrates did not interest her very much. Barbara's thesis research followed up on Grinnell's description of a new race of the White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys pugetensis*). In the early 1920s, Margaret Wythe of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) told Grinnell that the local territorial Nuttall's White-crowned Sparrows (*Z. l. nuttalli*) that bred on the UC Berkeley campus tolerated flocks of similar-looking sparrows in the spring. These flocking birds sang differently, and they were gone in the summer but reappeared in the fall. Thomas McCabe, also of the MVZ, suggested that it would be of interest to compare the behavior and reproductive cycle of the two forms. Assessing intraspecific variation in anything other than morphological characters was a fairly new approach at the time. The work led to the widely accepted understanding that the main difference between *Z. l. nuttalli* and *Z. l. pugetensis* was that only the latter migrated. Barbara's research, which focused on white-crowns at Berkeley and at Friday Harbor, Washington, started this species on the path to becoming one of the most intensively studied birds in the world (the "white rat of ornithology"). The *nuttalli* at Berkeley showed breeding-related behavior for at least 6 months, underwent gonadal recrudescence in December, had only a slight prealternate molt, and never carried much fat. By contrast, *pugetensis* such as those at Friday Harbor showed breeding behavior for less than 4 months, did not have breeding-sized gonads until after mid-April, had an extensive prealternate molt, and put on huge amounts of fat before spring migration. Later work showed that the break between the migratory

and nonmigratory birds occurred gradually in northern coastal California, starting just south of Eureka, and that birds with the physiological characteristics of each race flocked together in late winter. In 1950, Barbara went to Alaska to study *Z. l. gambelii*, a long-distance migrant race. Although this race's breeding distribution is disjunct from that of *nuttalli* and *pugetensis*, it overlaps in winter with both.

During the 1950s to 1970s, Barbara and others determined that besides differing in song structure, *nuttalli* and *pugetensis* also differed in patterns of song variation: *nuttalli* has numerous local song dialects, *pugetensis* has a relatively small number of widespread but spatially separated dialects, and *gambelii* has no clear geographic structuring to its song variation. In still later work, she described breeding in the fourth white-crown race in western North America, *Z. l. oriantha*. In the 1970s and 1980s, Barbara collaborated with Luis Baptista and published with his group on white-crown behavior. Barbara also worked with Mary Erickson, who had been a fellow graduate student with her at Berkeley and was later a faculty colleague at UC Santa Barbara. Overall, Barbara published nearly 30 papers, most on white-crowns but also a handful on reproductive physiology of rodents and lizards. She published under three names, Blanchard, Oakeson (the result of her marriage to Nels Oakeson from 1950 to 1954), and DeWolfe, the result of her marriage in 1960 to Robert DeWolfe, a UC Santa Barbara chemistry professor who died in 1977. Barbara was an Honorary Life Member of the Cooper Ornithological Society and received the society's Loye and Alden Miller Research Award in 1995 for her pioneering research on white-crowns (Condor 91:1096).

Barbara faced a great deal of open discrimination as a woman. One of her first such experiences was in 1930 when a visit to Yosemite made her think of becoming a biologist in the National Park Service. A cousin arranged an interview with the regional director of National Parks. When Barbara asked the director about the college courses she should take to prepare for such a career, he said, "We don't hire women. If you want to live in a Park, go marry a ranger." This was a short interview. While still a graduate student in 1938, Grinnell was notified that the Biology Department at San Jose State had a faculty opening and that although they preferred a man, they "would be willing to accept Miss Blanchard." Much to Grinnell's dismay, Barbara turned down the offer because she had not yet finished writing her thesis. When she had finished it, the department chairman—the same man who had been her undergraduate mentor and had told her that the department would not look at her application unless she applied for a Ph.D.—told her that the department would grant her the Ph.D. because she had earned it, but that "we will never recommend you for a position for which we have a man available." Of course, there always were men available, so Barbara realized that she would have to find a position pretty much on her own.

Barbara never related such stories with any bitterness, but instead used them to describe how ludicrous things used to be. She also stressed that she never experienced any sort of discrimination from Grinnell, although, even with him, there was no doubt that being a woman meant different treatment. When Grinnell sent her and Erickson on a collecting trip to northern coastal California in 1937, Barbara suggested that a letter from him might help in dealing with landowners. Grinnell's brief letter read, "These young women are of cheerful disposition. I bespeak the cooperation of

landowners in meeting their requests.” It is hard to imagine that a cheerful disposition would have been stressed had the letter been for men. But at least this gave Mary and Barbara the title by which they referred to themselves while graduate students, “The Museum Sisters of Cheerful Disposition.”

Barbara completed her Ph.D. in 1939 and took an instructorship at Placer Junior College in Auburn, California. This was a poorly supported institution, run more like a high school than a college. A large proportion of the students were Japanese Americans, all of whom were sent to internment camps several months after Pearl Harbor. This was a tragic event for Barbara, who had become very close to many of these students and even kept up a correspondence with them for decades. When an instructor’s position became available at UC Davis in 1942, Barbara eagerly accepted it. This position lasted only a year because all undergraduate education at Davis was suspended for the duration of World War II as students joined the military, which had taken over much of the campus for training activities. Barbara’s next position was at Smith College in Massachusetts, which conformed to Grinnell’s advice that she would be best off in a women’s college. But Barbara was homesick for California and did not find the more competitive academic and formal climate of the East to her liking. She resigned after 2 years and then, in 1946, had the good fortune to be offered a position at Santa Barbara State College, which had been taken over by the UC system in 1943. Barbara spent the rest of her career at UC Santa Barbara, where she taught a variety of zoology courses, became an associate dean, and retired in 1977. She spent parts of sabbaticals in Alaska studying white-crowns, which led to a deep affection for this state and its people and a seemingly endless supply of her Alaska stories. Barbara produced no Ph.D. students of her own, because UC Santa Barbara did not have a doctoral program for much of her time on the faculty, but she developed close relationships with many of her students and maintained these associations until her death. Her physician, her dentist, and many others in Santa Barbara with whom she interacted had been students in her classes.

Barbara maintained a close relationship with UC Santa Barbara after her retirement. She was a major benefactor of the Vertebrate Museum, and her financial support was crucial, because institutional support for the museum dwindled, as has occurred at many universities. Barbara continued to be active in research through her collaboration with Baptista and continued other activities, such as weekly attendance at my lab meetings, until around 5 years ago, when she gave up driving.

Barbara had a number of chronic health problems over the past decade but was in relatively stable condition until she fell ill about a week before her death. When medical tests showed that she had an intestinal blockage, Barbara, ever the realist, told friends that she assumed that she would die within the week. She was incredibly well organized and very accepting of reality and always tried to avoid troubling others. Barbara spent much of her last 20 to 30 years winding down various aspects of her life to ensure that she minimized the task others would face in attending to her affairs after she was gone. She found recipients for her journals, research papers, and other belongings as she moved from a large house in the foothills to a condo, and then to an apartment in a retirement facility, and finally to a room in the assisted-living section of the same facility. Other than to tell humorous stories, Barbara almost never talked about herself and was a remarkably modest person. She always looked on the bright side of things, despite having experienced many hardships. In the 1990s, she decided to record her life’s experiences, and two privately published autobiographical pieces are deposited in the UC Santa Barbara library. These books, *Joyous Errand* (1998) and *Further Recollections* (1999), are the source of many of the anecdotes and all of the quotations in this memorial. Barbara was a remarkable person, and for those who were not fortunate enough to know her, there is a great deal of wisdom and humor waiting to be found in her autobiographical pieces.

I thank Mark Holmgren, Marian Rothstein, and Susanne and Carroll Barrymore for their help with this memorial.