

BOOK REVIEW

*The Washington Biologists' Field Club: Its Members and Its History (1900–2006)*. Edited by Matthew C. Perry. 2007. 21.5 × 27.5 cm, hardcover, x + 342 pp. Published by the Washington Biologists' Field Club, Washington, D.C. \$25. ISBN 13: 978-0-615-16259-1.

The Washington Biologists' Field Club was founded in 1900, and in honor of its centennial, a book describing the 100-year history of the club was proposed in 2001. Six years later the project finally came to fruition, driven by the enthusiastic and indefatigable efforts of editor Matthew Perry, who enlisted numerous club members to supply details, scan photographs, and edit biographies. The result is an informative and often entertaining glimpse into the history of a group of local biologists whose interests and backgrounds were remarkably diverse but were the threads that tied them together. Among club members were naturalists (e.g., John Burroughs), conservation biologists, taxonomists, administrators (e.g., Ira Gabrielson), artists (e.g., Roger Tory Peterson), chemists, geologists, and specialists on a broad array of plants and animals and the habitats they occupy. Some of the early members were responsible for the development of national policies regarding habitat and biological resource management and protection, accumulating the foundations of the collections in the National Museum of Natural History, and contributing to a burgeoning interest in the fields of evolution, systematics, and biogeography.

One of the primary goals of the Club was to encourage the study of natural history in the Washington, D.C. Region (i.e., northern Virginia, Maryland, and the Potomac Basin in general). To these ends, in 1901 the Club leased Plummers Island, a 4.5-hectar property along the

northern edge of the Potomac River approximately 14 km northwest of Washington, D.C., which became its "research station." The Club purchased the property in 1907, and ownership eventually was transferred to the National Park Service in 1958. Today a sign at the east end of the island proudly boasts "The most thoroughly studied island in North America..." and the long list of publications documenting its biota, that have appeared mostly in Proceedings and Bulletins of the Biological Society of Washington, provide evidence in support of this claim.

The book does not present the history of the club in a chronological account or in a detailed list of milestones and dates. Instead, glimpses of the past are provided through 267 biographies (or autobiographies) of all former and active club members that capture the essence of the times in which they lived and worked. These biographic sketches, organized alphabetically, constitute the lion's share (i.e., about 70%) of the text. Some of the most familiar names to those of us in the entomological community are William H. Ashmead (1855–1908), J. F. Gates Clarke (1905–1990), Karl Krombein (1912–2005), Paul D. Hurd (1921–1982) (all former curators at the National Museum of Natural History), James C. Crawford (1880–1950), Eugene A. Schwarz (1844–1928), August Busck (1870–1944) (all employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture), Henry L. Viereck (1881–1931), and Raymond Shannon (1894–1945). Among more contemporary senior entomologists are Ronald Hodges, Paul Spangler, and Donald Davis.

I'm not sure if it's just me, but the older I get, the more enamored I become with the past. Not the distant past, like the Triassic, but the past that includes

those lepidopterists whose field work and publications together represent the foundation upon which virtually all the work I do today is based. For example, the position I occupy as a USDA research entomologist studying microlepidoptera formerly was held by Ronald Hodges, who overlapped with J. F. G. Clarke, who took over from August Busck, the USDA microlepidopterist at the National Museum of Natural History whose career started around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some way, each of these scientists passed the torch to the next generation of systematists with the obligation to continue to add material to the National Collection, to document the global biodiversity of microlepidoptera, and to advance our knowledge through the publication of original scientific research. Hence, reading the biographies of these lepidopterists gives me a strange sense of kinship and continuity.

In addition to the biographies, the book is chuck-full of black-and-white photos of members, outings, island habitats, and other club artifacts. For example, there is a set of photographs of the bronze plaques on the island that honor several notable members, and there are some fine images of the historic old cabin that sits atop the highest point on the island. It always makes me

chuckle to see pictures of the turn-of-the-century field biologists in formal hats, coats, and ties...in the field. Many of the photographs are of poor quality, as would be expected of pictures taken 50–80 years ago. However, some of the recent photos are not as sharp as they could be. But this is a very minor criticism.

The book likely will appeal to an eclectic but narrow audience whose interest in science includes not just the advancement of principals, theories, and knowledge, but of the characters that were responsible for those advancements. Hence, if the recent history of biology or biologists, especially those that spent at least a portion of their career in the Washington, D.C. area, fascinates you, I strongly encourage you to get your hands on a copy of this unique book. The low price provides an additional incentive to own it.

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