

FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY – ORNITHOLOGIST

Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey (1863-1948), whom we honor with our NMOS Florence Merriam Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award, was a woman of “firsts.” She was the first woman associate member of the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) (1885), the first woman elected as a Fellow of the AOU (1929), and the first woman recipient of the AOU’s William Brewster Memorial Award (1931). She was also a member of the Cooper Ornithological Club, the Wilson Ornithological Club, and the National Audubon Society.

Florence was born 8 August 1863, in Locust Grove, New York, the youngest of three children of Clinton Levi and Caroline (Hart) Merriam. She was educated at a private school in Utica, New York, and attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1882 to 1886, although she did not receive a degree. Smith College later granted her a B.A. in 1921. Florence acquired her interest in natural history, and particularly ornithology, early from her father and her brother Clinton Hart Merriam who later became the first chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, the predecessor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While in college, largely in response to the threats posed to birds by their harvest for the women’s hat industry, she organized The Smith College Audubon Society and was very active in protesting these practices. She also began writing articles for the *Audubon Magazine*. At 26 years of age, and refusing to use a man’s nom de plume as women writers frequently did at that time, she revised and published a series of these articles in her first book *Birds Through an Opera Glass* (1889).

Soon after college she developed tuberculosis, resulting in a series of western trips to “take the cure” in southern California, Utah, and Arizona. In addition to improved health, these trips resulted in three more books—*My Summer in a Mormon Village* (1896), *A-Birding on a Bronco* (1896), and *Birds of Village and Field* (1898). This last book was written for beginning ornithologists and became one of the first popular American bird guides, including simple field keys for identification and illustrations by Ernest Thompson Seton, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and John L. Ridgway. Following these travels, she moved to Washington, D.C. to live with her brother Hart. There she met Vernon Bailey (1864-1942) who had been hired by her brother as a naturalist for the Biological Survey. They were married on 16 December 1899, and made their home in Washington, D.C. Florence frequently accompanied Vernon on his Biological Survey field trips to the West where he collected and studied mammals, birds, reptiles, and plants, and Florence observed the birds. They explored New Mexico systematically and, over the next 30 years, also worked in Texas, California, Arizona, the Pacific Northwest, and the Dakotas. Florence published about 100 articles in ornithological journals, such as *The Auk*, *Bird-Lore*, and *The Condor*, and authored 10 books. Among these books was *Handbook of*

Birds of the Western United States (1902) with 600 pages and about as many illustrations. Additional recognition came to Florence when Joseph Grinnell named a subspecies of Mountain Chickadee—*Parus gambeli baileyae* (now *Poecile gambeli baileyae*)—in her honor (1908).

Florence was a founding member of the Audubon Society of the District of Columbia and was an active promoter of the society, its publication projects, and the bird classes it organized to provide basic instruction in field and laboratory ornithology to teachers of nature study.



Florence Merriam Bailey conducting field research in the Guadalupe Mountains, New Mexico. Courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

In 1916, Professor Wells W. Cooke died before completing a project to publish on the birdlife of New Mexico. Dr. E. W. Nelson, then chief of the Biological Survey, asked Florence to complete the volume. Based on her knowledge of western birds and her experiences with her husband thoroughly surveying the biological resources of New Mexico, she completed *Birds of New Mexico*, published by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish in 1928. She received the AOU's William Brewster Memorial Award for this publication and soon after received an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of New Mexico in recognition of the value of her work.

Her final major work was titled *Among the Birds in the Grand Canyon National Park*, published in 1939, by the National Park Service when she was past age 75. Vernon Bailey retired from the Biological Survey in 1933, and they continued to live in Washington, D.C. Vernon died in 1942, and Florence died six years later on 22 September 1948, at the age of 85.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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