



Roundtable

Dean of Bird Watchers: WENDELL P. SMITH

GARVIN HUGHES

Every year the CBC Christmas Bird Count includes a report from North Wilkesboro with one observer. This lone observer is Wendell P. Smith, 79, dean of bird watchers and one of the best ornithologists in the Southeast. Last December Wendell and I drove up the Yadkin River to look for waterfowl wintering on the Kerr Scott Reservoir. He was making his sixty-eighth Christmas Bird Count.

"You can never tell what will be found around the lake," Wendell said. "Once, after a storm on the coast, we found two Red Phalaropes and a flock of Golden Plovers that had been driven this far inland by the storm."

Born at Wells River, Vermont, Wendell was confined to the family farm by a childhood illness. The self-taught naturalist has never attended school a day in his life. He was taught in the home by his mother and at an early age began the lifetime study of the natural history of the family farm. On his daily walks around the farm, young Wendell began keeping records of nesting birds and of the arrival and departure dates of migratory birds moving through the Connecticut River valley.

Although most of his life was devoted to the study of a 100-acre hill-country farm, he became well known in scientific circles for his discoveries. He has been elected to learned societies, contributed to leading scientific journals, and for 25 years he served as the State Ornithologist of Vermont. In 1954 he retired from this position and moved to North Wilkesboro near the home of his wife, the former Louise Pearson of Moravian Falls.

Once settled in North Carolina, Wendell immediately began studying the natural history of Wilkes County and the northwestern piedmont. Every year he searches the surrounding countryside for nesting birds and records the passage of migratory species. A few years ago he was invited to Washington, D. C., to be honored by the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife for his volunteer contributions to its Migratory Bird Study. At that time he had reported migration data to the bureau for 57 years. When the study was complete in 1969, Wendell's records covered 65 continuous years.

Wendell is very active in the affairs of the Carolina Bird Club, and has served as treasurer of the club. His amazing ability to identify a bird with a quick glance or a few notes of its song has made him a popular figure on the club's field trips. His presence on a trip always attracts a large group of birders. A field trip with him is a quick course in bird identification because Wendell is happy to share his lifetime accumulation of nature lore. "You don't need a guide book with Mr. Smith," a young birder once commented. "He knows all of the birds."

We asked how he had adjusted to the Yadkin River Valley after a lifetime in the Connecticut River Valley in Vermont. "There isn't a lot of difference," Wendell replied.



Wendell P. Smith checks the Kerr Scott Reservoir for waterfowl wintering on the lake. The 79-year-old dean of bird watchers was participating in his sixty-eighth annual Christmas Bird Count. (Photo by Garvin Hughes.)

"Nature is much the same everywhere. We have many of the same birds passing at migration, but I do miss the Snow Buntings in winter."

A lifetime of patient observation has taught Wendell Smith the continuity of nature's show. Forever old, and yet forever new; he knows there is always something new and exciting waiting to be discovered.

Department Editor Needed

Beginning with this issue of *Chat*, CBC Roundtable combines the two popular columns that formerly appeared in the bulletin, *Bird Watcher's Roundtable* and *Carolina Birds and Birders*. Willie Morrison finds she is no longer able to combine editing with her busy schedule of home, church, and community activities. Doug Pratt is in graduate school at Louisiana State University, and Mark Simpson is attending Yale University Medical School. The Editor appreciates the efforts of the three excellent staff members. Replacing them will be difficult. If you are interested in editing this department, please write Eloise Potter, Box 277, Zebulon, N. C. 27597.