

## BOOK REVIEW

**An Expedition to Ramsey Canyon: The 1896 Field Journal of Ornithologist Harry S. Swarth**, by Christopher W. Swarth, 2018. Yaqui Gulch Press, 88 pp. Many drawings, maps, photos, and tables. Paperback, \$ 15.99. ISBN 978-1724410382.

Christopher Swarth's publication of his ornithologist grandfather's journal of his first trip to Arizona, then called the Arizona Territory, transports the reader back to the 1800s and to a time when birding and field ornithology were much different from today. This era was a time of great ornithological discovery and when little was known about Arizona's unique avifauna. This slender volume of Harry S. Swarth's journal is not only a readable scientific document of a bygone era, it remains a relevant description for comparison to the avifauna of Ramsey Canyon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The book is organized into three sections.

Part One of *An Expedition to Ramsey Canyon* begins with the 18-year-old Harry Swarth's expedition field journal, with notes and descriptions, in verbatim, of his 650-mile journey with three other young men, Ozzie Howard, Will Judson, and Harry Rising. The journey starts in Los Angeles on 29 February 1896. After eight weeks on the trail, the young men arrive in Ramsey Canyon, where they remain until 17 July. Harry's field notes, pages 2–57, may seem a bit repetitious, but his descriptions of the day-to-day hardships, habitat, and activities are captivating.

The difficulty and hardship of traveling for months via covered wagon, living off the land, and caring for the horses while remaining steadfast to writing field notes, collecting birds, and preparing specimens cannot be overstated. It is hard for today's reader to overlook the fact that we live in an era that delays our young people from stepping off the edge into adulthood and independence. In young Harry's era, the wherewithal and maturity needed to accomplish such a trip were still formidable but not insurmountable, and his experience sets an example for today's aspiring young ornithologists.

The team's journey through San Bernardino, the San Geronio Pass, Beaumont, and the Colorado Desert in California, before the Salton Sea, brought back a lot of memories. I grew up birding this "Inland Empire" of California. In 1896 most of the area between Los Angeles and the Territory of Arizona was sparsely inhabited or wilderness, and California Condors still soared the skies. The Inland Empire is now a network of freeways, industry, and urban/suburban sprawl. And, counting even for traffic, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Harry's trek can be made in a day of air-conditioned driving. The gradual but profound changes in the landscape, fauna, and avifauna between the Los Angeles Basin of California and Ramsey Canyon in Arizona, which Harry appreciated at his plodding pace, are lost on nearly all of today's expeditioners making the same journey. On 17 March 1896, Swarth's group crossed the Colorado River via ferry boat into Yuma, Arizona, continued to Phoenix on 2 April, Tucson on 4 April, and finally reached Ramsey Canyon after nearly two months of travel on 24 April.

Young Harry's descriptions of the habitat and birds of Ramsey Canyon reveal conditions very similar to today's. The canyon remains a pilgrimage point for ornithologists and birders from all over the globe. The Ramsey Canyon Preserve, managed by The Nature Conservancy, was first set aside in 1970 with 280 acres spared from development, and subsequent acquisitions have expanded the preserve to 380 acres.

Part Two: The second section of this slim volume, Names, Collections and Breeding Birds, pages 55–65, is a set of five tables. Table 1 contains the names of birds Harry used in his field notes and their current common and scientific names. Table 2 has the updated names of specimens from the expedition, the number in museum collections, and the museum. The other three tables detail the days and number of species encountered in the field, clutches collected, and breeding species observed.

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Breeding Species Observed, Table 5, also compares observations of what was seen in 1896 to species expected or likely absent today. Chris Swarth could have eliminated the table of old names vs. new names and made it more convenient for the reader by including the new name in parentheses following the old name in the field notes, but he explains that he didn't want to alter the original field notes.

Part Three, Noteworthy Birds of Ramsey Canyon, contains my favorite part of the book, the enigmatic story of the first record of the Bumblebee Hummingbird in the United States and a discussion of same. It is followed by a detailed treatment of the “nettlesome” Nutting's Flycatcher, and another on those “wonderful” red warblers of the canyon.

*An Expedition to Ramsey Canyon* is a pleasant and delightful read for all who wandered off young and explored, for those who followed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and for those who will pioneer the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a book just 88 pages, in an afternoon the reader can be carried back in time to the age of discovery and birding in a world without cars, social media, or Internet.

*Kurt A. Rademaker*



Red-faced Warbler and Painted Redstart

*Drawing by Narca Moore-Craig*