A HISTORY OF

THE MEMPHIS CHAPTER

OF

THE TENNESSEE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

FROM THE BEGINNING . . .

In 2010, the Memphis Chapter celebrated the eightieth anniversary of its organization on January 20, 1930. The driving force of the new chapter was Ben B. Coffey, Jr. Ben was only twenty-six years old when he and three of his close friends, Jack Embury, Mary Davant and John Bamberg, connected to establish the Memphis chapter. The new chapter had only ten members, but the low number did not deter the group from organizing hikes and sponsoring other birding activities.

Albert Ganier, one of the founders of the Nashville chapter founded in 1915, helped the first official chapter hike to study Bald Eagles nesting at Horseshoe Lake. Ben was an active Boy Scout leader, and several of "his boys" from the troop later joined the chapter. As a consequence of Ben's tutelage, they became avid birders in their own right. Fred Carney, Wendell Whittemore, and Franklin McCamey to mention a few of the early members were well-respected locally and across the state making major contributions to the scientific study of birds and mentoring hundreds of other bird watchers.

Another cornerstone of the early chapter was Lula Cooper. Lula accompanied Ben on several hikes. One such outing was a motorboat trip to check nesting terns on a sandbar at the confluence of the Loosahatchie River and Mississippi River. Whether it was the enchantment of the nesting terns or poling the disabled boat several miles back to their takeout point, Ben and Lula married November 17, 1930. Both their marriage and mutual love for birding and for the members of the Memphis chapter lasted well past sixty years until Ben's death in 1993.

From the beginning, the Memphis Chapter's unique characteristics mimicked the talents and interests of its members. With Ben's engineering background it was not surprising that many of the early chapter activities were somewhat scientific in nature. Scientific observations were very important as members recorded their sightings and reported the numbers and species sighted to Ben. Accuracy and supporting documentation became tenets of outings and hikes. Perhaps most noteworthy of all bird investigations were the exploits of Ben and Lula. Their birding expeditions took them to Mexico, Central and South America, India, Nepal, the Fiji Islands, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and across the United States. The purpose of these travels was to record bird songs and

calls that are now treasured possessions of the Coffey Neotropical Collection at the University of Florida, Florida Museum of Natural History. As a consequence of their outstanding and valuable work Ben and Lula were vested as Field Associates in Ornithology at the university.

The Coffeys, assisted by chapter volunteers, engaged in banding studies that heralded new information on migration patterns of several species of birds. One early project covered twenty-three years and resulted in banding over 113,000 chimney swifts within Shelby County. Based on the recovery of five of Ben's bands and eight bands from other banders, the elusive wintering grounds of chimney swifts were located in the upper Amazon basin in South America. Another early banding project included banding over 1500 Anhingas and 15,000 herons and egrets. The recovery of two banded Anhingas in Mexico was all that was needed to verify the wintering grounds for that species. Thousands of migratory and nesting birds were banded by Ben and other chapter members who were banders. In addition to Ben's banding efforts another member, a master bander, supplied valuable research data during the 1970's and 1980's on inland nesting of Least Terns on the Mississippi River. Other research included a detailed study of re-trap data on plumage color and feather patterns of Starling, Purple Finch, Pine Siskin, and Goldfinch as an aid to determine age and sex of these species. This same bander has banded nineteen species of raptors as a means to document rehabilitation of injured and orphaned raptors and hacking projects for Osprey, Peregrine Falcons, Bald Eagles, Barn Owls, and Mississippi Kites. In 2011, another member who is also a master bander has banded chimney swifts as an ongoing study at Rhodes College.

Complementary to these noteworthy accomplishments of individual members and chapter volunteers was the emergence of chapter philanthropy to promote interest in bird study and bird conservation. The chapter has donated over sixteen thousand dollars to fund bird conservation projects and public education endeavors from endowments established by individuals and the generosity of the general membership. Donations to nonprofit organizations such as the Wolf River Conservancy were made to purchase land as a means to secure, sustain and protect habitat. The support for the Mid-South Raptor Center exemplifies the chapter's effort to preserve and help stabilize bird populations. The

chapter demonstrated its desire to enhance public awareness of bird life through its donations used to build observation platforms, to purchase educational materials, and to promote media programs. Chapter funds have been donated for research and to publish bird studies such as a graduate study of nesting Mississippi Kites in West Tennessee and for the publication of a valuable reference for the seasonal occurrence of birds in Shelby County.

In addition to monetary donations, chapter members have amassed thousands of service hours to promote conservancy of fragile bird populations. Over twenty volunteers from the Memphis Chapter sustained a hacking project of Bald Eagles at Reelfoot Lake in the 1980's. These volunteers spent several weeks for eight consecutive summers, feeding a total of over forty baby eaglets to successfully re-establish nesting pairs of Bald Eagles not only at Reelfoot but in a tri-state area including Shelby County and the fringes of Arkansas and Mississippi. The tireless efforts of studying and recording migratory waterfowl and shorebirds at Ensley Bottoms, affectionately known as "The Pits," resulted in protection of habitat for nesting Black-necked Stilts. These birds also became the logo seen on curbside recycling bins and trucks in the Memphis area. Bird records for the upper Wolf River were extremely helpful securing the land purchased for the Wolf River wildlife area in Fayette County. Members of the Memphis chapter have constructed and erected several hundred bluebird nesting boxes and boxes for American Kestrels, Prothonotary Warblers, Wood Ducks and Barn Owls throughout West Tennessee. Members have given public talks and staffed information kiosks for school groups and community-wide Earth Day events. Information from years of MTOS records is still used by many regional parks for bird lists and for refuge management of song birds and waterfowl. These records came from field trips, point counts, Audubon Christmas Counts and breeding bird surveys. The data provided a foundation for statewide and local publications including *The Migrant*, *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Tennessee* (1997), and *Seasonal Occurrences of Birds in Shelby County (3rd edition)*. Peterson, Zim and Robbins also called upon the Memphis Chapter to provide data for their field guides.

Perhaps a legacy of the early founders of the chapter is the members' enthusiasm and camaraderie to pursue and fulfill their enjoyment of birding. In addition to trips that regularly take

them to neighborhood “hot spots,” several members have birded throughout the United States and North America and to localities within the western hemisphere and beyond. Groups of members have taken trips to Peru, Mexico, Minnesota, Michigan, Alaska, Kansas, Texas, Illinois, California, Maine, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Florida and completed pelagic trips in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, the Bering Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico. The chapter has been represented one time or another on all seven continents. Some members are recognized internationally for the number of species they have sighted world-wide. Members often share their trips at chapter meetings that provide a world-wide perspective of an activity with many different venues of interests and opportunities to act upon those interests.

These past activities provide a solid groundwork for the future accomplishments of the Memphis Chapter. Conservation issues are still at stake as a consequence of local urban sprawl and national and world-wide environmental concerns. Issues with habitat for migratory waterfowl, the destruction of wintering habitat for neo-tropical migrants, shrinking habitat for resting and nesting migrants and resident species, prudent management of fragile migratory populations, and environmental threats created from certain mining practices and overzealous gas and oil drilling and capturing techniques need to be examined and monitored with responsible oversight from local, state, and national environmental groups.

Membership growth may result from action-planning the chapter’s response to these issues, but membership sustainability is more dependent on membership participation in chapter activities that include bird study on hikes and shared projects that impact habitat promotion and protection. From backyards and neighborhoods to local and regional levels the chapter continues to be vibrant and ready to reach out to welcome new members.

Martha Waldron, 2012

In support of the mission of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, to encourage the “enjoyment, scientific study and conservation of birds,” the Memphis Chapter has donated money, time and talent to foster this effort. Monetary gifts from chapter funds and individual members have sustained numerous local, state, and international research and conservation projects.

International Migratory Bird Day - our chapter participates in the annual spring migration count. This event is celebrated in Canada, United States, Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Earth Day – The chapter participates at various locations in Shelby County celebration sites.

Mid-south Raptor Center

Chimney Swift Tower at Lichterman Nature Center

EARL (Exotic Animal Rescue League – Dr. Hannah)

Smith Bend Land Purchase – Smith Bend/Yuchi Refuge is a unique 2,500-acre tract on the Tennessee River in east Tennessee. The land was purchased and given to TWRA.

Anderson-Tully Land Purchase – Land acquisition project by several organizations for what is now the Anderson-Tully State WMA located north of Fort Pillow State Park.

Wolf River Conservancy – Ghost River Purchase - The area now known as the Wolf River WMA.

WKNO – Sponsorship of Stokes Birding Series

Chickasaw NWR – Observation Platform – National Wildlife Refuge in west Lauderdale County

Purchase of The Birds of North America for the library at the Memphis Zoo. This set may be used by members of the MTOS.

Institute of Bird Populations – MoSi (Mist–netting Bird Banding stations) Project studying the habitat quality for land birds in Central and South America.

Chickasaw and Hatchie NWR - Bluebird nest boxes

Reelfoot NWR – Purchase “critter crates”

Digitizing MTOS field cards

Observation tower at Camp Currier Boy Scout Camp near Eudora, MS

Gifts for Wilson Fund recipients

Bluebird boxes for Girl Scout Camp and state visitor centers

Memphis and Shelby County Science Fair - Field Guide (Wilson Fund)

Donation - Save Shelby Farms Forest

Lichterman Nature Center Display Case Rental

Donation to Cumberland Wildlife Rehabilitation Center

Donation to Tennessee Atlas Fund

Peterson “First Guides” for Bird Workshop

Donation to Nature Conservancy

Plot at Burch Natural Area

Wolf River Conservation - Contribution for Beasley Tract (from proceeds of Coffey Book Sale)

Student Science Project Materials (from Wilson Fund)

Donation/Plaque for Mid-South Raptor Center

Memorial Donation, Foothills Land Conservation

Lula Coffey Orchard Memorial – MTOS donated money for fifty apple trees

Van Dyke Fund, UT Martin – a donation in honor of Dr. T. David Pitts as a thank you for his years of programs given for the Memphis Chapter of TOS.

MEMPHIS CHAPTER PAST PRESIDENTS

Term	President
1930-31	Mr. Ben B. Coffey, Jr.*
1932-33	Miss Mary Davant*
1934	Mr. Earl Henry*
1935-36	Dr. Clarence E. Moore*
1937	Mr. Thomas Simpson
1938-39	Mrs. L. G. Guth*
1940-41	Mr. Lawrence C. Kent*
1942	Mrs. M. L. Torti*
1943-44	Mrs. Irene Daniel*
1945	Mr. J. Southgate Hoyt*
1946-47	Mr. Luther F. Keeton*
1948-49	Bro. I. Vincent*
1949-50	Mr. Kirby Stringer*
1951-52	Miss Nelle Moore*
1953-54	Mr. R. Demett Smith, Jr.
1955-56	Miss Mary Davant*
1956-57	Mrs. Ben B. Coffey, Jr.*
1957-58	Mr. John Bigham*
1958-60	Mr. Charles E. Wilmeth*
1960-62	Mrs. Arlo I. Smith*
1962-64	Mrs. Henry A. Schiller*
1964-65	Miss Alice Smith*
1966-67	Mr. Earl J. Fuller*
1967-68	Dr. Lyndal York
1968-70	Dr. Julian Darlington*
1970-71	Mr. Quentin B. Dowdy*
1971-73	Mr. George E. R. Hervey*
1973-74	Miss Mary Davant*
1974-76	Mrs. Henry Dinkelspiel*
1976-77	Mr. Billy C. Grimm
1977-78	Mr. John H. Embury*
1978-79	Mr. Joe Guinn
1979-81	Mr. Robert L. Browne
1981-82	Mrs. Martha Waldron
1982-84	Mr. James A. Ferguson*
1984-86	Mr. Claude W. Brown
1986-88	Mr. George R. Payne, Jr.
1988-89	Mr. Frederick T. Carney*
1989-91	Mr. Van Harris
1991-93	Mr. William B. Fowler*
1993-95	Mrs. Susan McWhirter
1995-97	Mr. Forrest Priddy
1997-99	Mr. Dick Preston
1999-01	Mrs. Virginia Reynolds
2001-03	Dr. Robert Ilardi*
2003-05	Mr. Rob Peeples*
2005-07	Mrs. Margaret Jefferson
2007-09	Mr. Dick Preston
2009-11	Mr. Jay Walko
2011-13	Mr. David Blaylock*
2013-15	Mrs. Gaynell Perry
2015-17	Mrs. Kate Friedman
2017-21	Dr. Michael Collins
2021-22	Mr. Clifford VanNostrand
2022-24	Dr. Jim Varner

* Deceased