

Fascinated by Birds

The fascination dates back as far as Dr. George M. Sutton can remember. He has parlayed that interest into a distinguished career as an author, lecturer, scientist, teacher, and artist.

By BRUCE KILGORE, '54

There were five white men living with the Eskimos on Southampton Island in March of 1930—two priests, two traders and George Miksch Sutton.

"I was walrus hunting with eight Eskimos," said Sutton, who is teaching now at O.U. "I believe my Eskimo friend, John Ell, was along. We had split up to cover more of the bay-ice, and I had stopped on a high ice ridge where I could look out over the floe in an attempt to find seals or walrus. It was somewhat warm that day, and I lay down to rest for a bit 'neath the shelter of an ice bank. I must have dozed off—for when I woke again, the wind had shifted.

"As I started to rise, I glanced down. Below me was obsidian black water—the water of Hudson Bay. It was a most shocking experience."

"What had happened," he explained, "was that the shifting wind had blown all the loose ice out into the bay. It was lucky for me that I woke when I did or I would have been blown out onto the bay myself."

This is only one of this energetic scientist's many experiences in his some 20 expeditions to various parts of North America. Dr. Sutton, now professor of zoology at O.U. and ornithologist for the Oklahoma Biological Survey, is an expert on birdlife of the arctic. Although he will modestly argue the point, he is also an authority on Mexican birds and a world renowned bird-painter and author.

"You've been to the far northern arctic and to tropical Mexico," I pointed out as we sat in his office in the Biology Building. "Why did you come to Oklahoma?"

Sutton, with penetrating eyes and a small, grey-flecked mustache, looked very distinguished as he leaned back and considered the question. "Well, this is not my first trip to Oklahoma, of course, Bruce," he said. "I made four trips down here in the 1930's. In Oklahoma there's a challenge to do something new, and a sort of rejuvenation of my work was possible. But, as for coming to the University of Oklahoma, certainly my experiences at O.U.'s

Biological station in the summer of 1951 had a lot to do with my decision."

Sutton was invited to teach a course in ornithology that summer. He and his students covered the country far and wide. One day his group learned that a farmer lad, one Jerry Cox, had two baby road-runners.

"In fact, I've written a piece about them," he said with a broad smile. "Would you like to see it?"

"I certainly would," I answered quickly.

He turned in his chair and reached for an old manuscript file. ("You might describe these files in the article, too," he chuckled. "I've used them 40 years, if a day.")

Putting on his glasses, he read a portion of the article aloud.

"I knew what young road-runners were like," he began in a hearty voice. "But what I wasn't prepared for was the effect the baby birds would have on me. I didn't feel anything but a sort of professorial interest as we looked down at them, but when I lifted the pudgy, flabby-footed, warm-bodied things out and heard that odd, odd grunt young road-runners always make when they're uncomfortable or annoyed, I was so flooded with memories of my Texas boyhood that for a long moment I was inarticulate.

"Back in 1913," he continued, "when I was fifteen, I had raised a young road-runner out on T.C.U. hill, near Fort Worth, where we had lived. The following year I had raised two more. Back came the bright, free days with their prairie winds, their pale blue flax flowers and red and yellow gaillardia daisies; our awful cow, a Daisy also, whose milk I was obliged to deliver; my two sisters; father and the house I so nobly helped him to build, and mother . . . mother and her music.

"So you see, leaving those baby road-runners with Jerry Cox, letting anyone besides myself bring them up, would have bordered on sacrilege. I gave Jerry fifty cents and he seemed pleased. Certain members of my ornithology class looked at me knowingly as if they had sensed from the

first that I would never leave the place without taking those infant dragons with me."

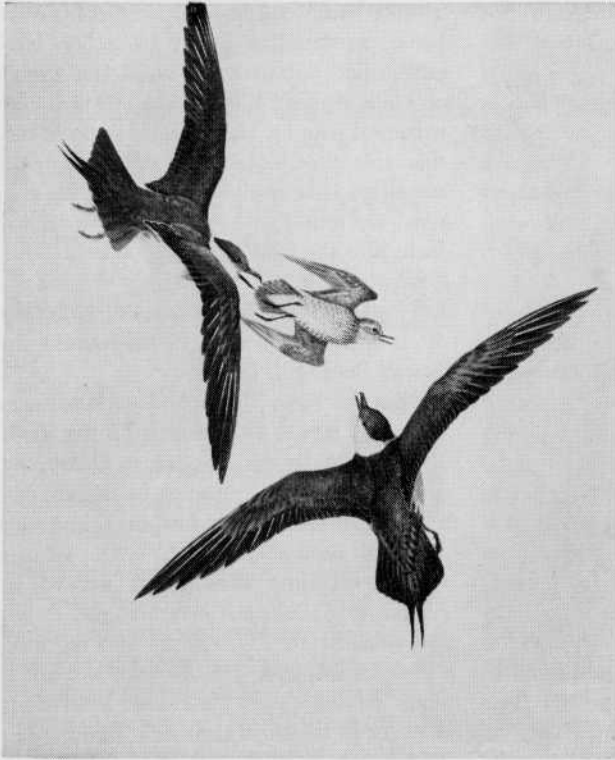
He laughed as he set the manuscript down on his desk, but his words, though written, described the man's true feelings.

His fascination which birds hold for Sutton dates back as far as he can remember. In his book, *Birds in the Wilderness*, he says, "I cannot remember the first bird I ever saw. Nor can I recall a time when birds did not thrill and charm me. My most vivid recollections of the persons who came to our house in Nebraska are of birds or pieces of birds that adorned the ladies' hats of that bygone age. My idea of a tolerable church service in those days of my youth was one during which I could be near enough to some Triumph of Millinery Art to observe, or perhaps even to touch, the feathers attached thereto."

His interest in bird painting also began early. "If I could find a pencil, I drew pictures of birds or of birds' heads along the margins of my Sunday School paper," he said with a smile. Today, this author-naturalist is known as well for his illustrations of birds as he is for his study and research in ornithology.

George M. Sutton was born in May, 1898, in Bethany, Nebraska. Since his father was a preacher and college teacher, the family moved from place to place. This partially explains the fact that young George attended T.C.U. at Fort Worth, Texas, for one year, then completed his B. S. degree at Bethany College, West Virginia, in 1923. He became a member of the staff of Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh in 1919 and there began his contact with the sponsoring organization for many of his arctic expeditions.

Sutton's arctic work began in 1920 when, at the age of 22, he traveled down the Labrador as far as Cape Chidley, a promontory known also as Land's End. In the following years, from 1923-28, Sutton returned three times to the arctic. Then in 1929-30 came one of the major expeditions



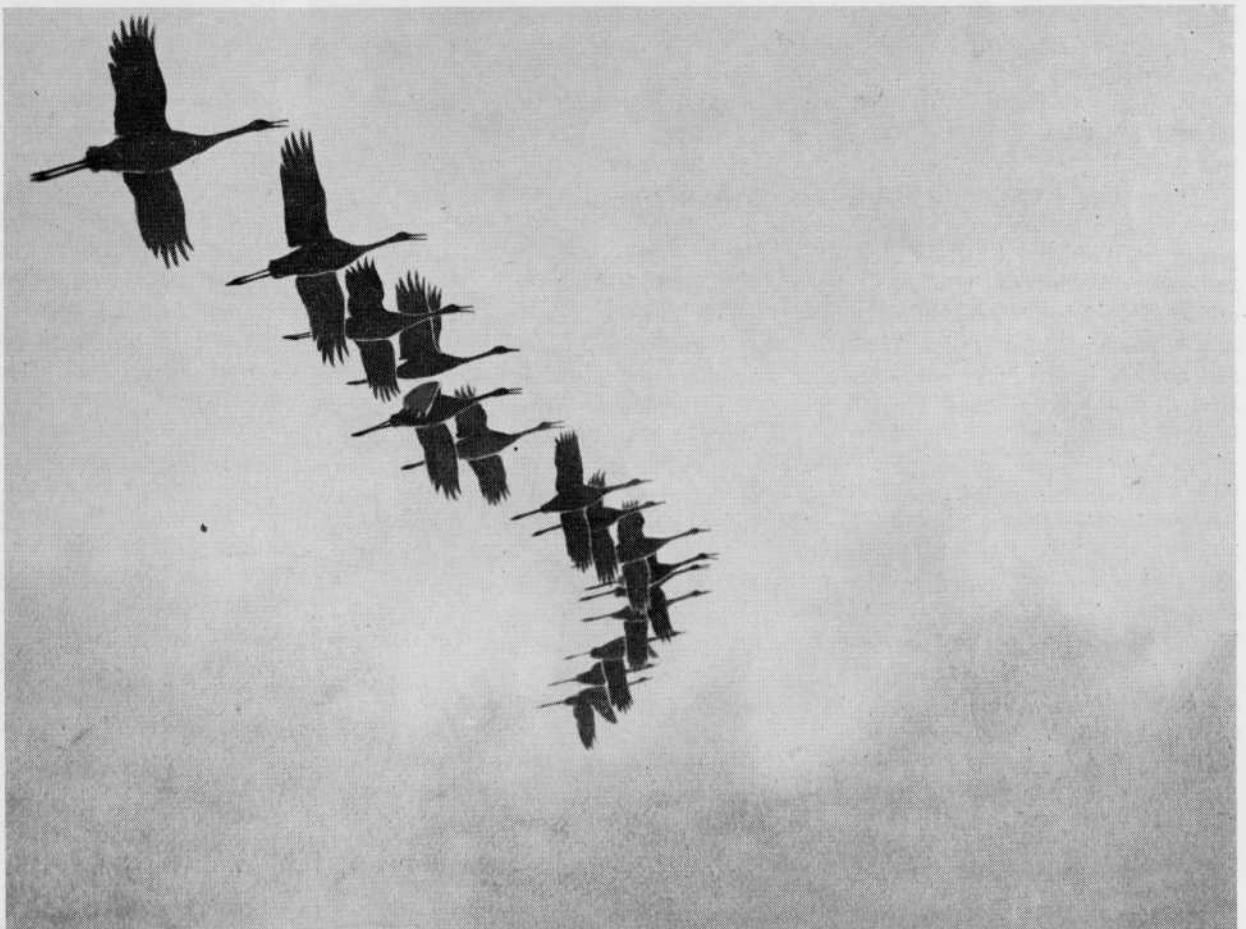
TWO PARASITIC JAEGERs attack an immature golden plover over Southampton Island. Sutton has painted many arctic birds.



IN MICHUACAN, MEXICO, Sutton sketched these grey silky flycatchers. They were so tame that he could sketch them close by.

O. U.'s ornithologist is recognized as one of nation's leading bird painters. Here are three examples of his work taken from a large collection.

DR. SUTTON PAINTED these little brown cranes over the Black Mesa, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, in 1933. An authority on Mexican and arctic birds, Sutton's art work has brought wide acclaim. He has had little time for painting while teaching at the University.



of his career when he wintered with the Eskimos on Southampton Island.

Although many Eskimos have played an important role in all his arctic adventures, his face lights up when he speaks of three particular Eskimo companions—John Ell, Muckik and Tommy Bluce. He enjoys recounting incidents from the 1929-30 "Eskimo Year" on Southampton Island.

John Ell was nicknamed for John L. Sullivan, but his real name was Amaulik Audlanat, which means "dorsal fin of a salt water trout he goes away." He once told Dr. Sutton that he was going to make a movie camera like the one he saw Sutton using. "He said that he would make the sprockets out of ivory," said Dr. Sutton, smiling fondly, "and so far as film was concerned, he said he would have it sent from civilization, but his wife would put in the perforations."

With a twinkle in his eye he told of the day when "we had been caribou hunting, John Ell, Muckik, and I. And we had been successful. Confined to the igloo by a 9-day blizzard, I was consulting my diary and suddenly realized it was Thanksgiving Day.

"I tried to show my two Eskimo companions what a Thanksgiving dinner meant by drawing two turkeys, one with feathers and one without. Muckik pointed to the one without feathers, then pretending to shiver, he said, 'This one, cold!'

"I was trying to indicate that the bird was hot when I remembered something that Jack Ford, son of the chief trader at the Hudson's Bay post, had sent with us as a holiday treat—a can of peas. I dug down into my taxidermy box and finally at the very bottom, I found the peas, frozen solid. So, I put the can on the Primus stove to thaw, and continued to explain to John Ell and Muckik about Thanksgiving as best I could.

"Then, all of a sudden BANG!!!—peas exploded in all directions. That Thanksgiving feast which I'd carried over miles and miles of Northland now studded the ceiling of the igloo. What I'd forgotten, of course, was an elementary law of physics, and actually it was lucky we weren't all burned. But John Ell and Muckik just laughed and laughed.

"So, there we were, miles from civilization, with our one can of peas seemingly lost. But here is where our ingenuity came into action. Quickly, I fumbled in my taxidermy kit once again and found my forceps. Then, for an hour or so, John Ell, Muckik, and I (in that cold environment so far from an ordinary Thanksgiving) carefully picked each pea out of the igloo walls and we had our dinner after all."

During that winter, Dr. Sutton's base

was the Hudson's Bay Company post, but he traveled all over the island with the Eskimos, living with them in their igloos or tupeks. (Tupeks are permanent houses made of rib bones of whales covered with skins, while igloos are temporary camping houses made of snow.) He collected about six tons of specimens, ranging from caribou, white whale and seal skeletons to bird eggs and minute tundra moths.

During this expedition, he discovered the second known nesting ground of the famous Blue Goose, one of his many notable achievements. "The first nesting ground known to science," he carefully points out, "was discovered a few months before by a Canadian, J. Dewey Soper. The two nesting grounds were only a few hundred miles apart."

By an odd twist of fate, lack of funds seem to have helped the ornithologist-artist to make a second discovery the following year. At the mouth of the Churchill River, on his way south from the Blue Goose nesting area, Sutton saw young of the Harris' sparrow and reasoned that its nesting grounds were nearby. "I'd have never come that way if I hadn't been trying to save money," he said thoughtfully. "After finding the nest of the Blue Goose, I thought I could save money by returning to the States via Churchill."

When he told the Carnegie Museum authorities of seeing the young sparrows, they decided he should return the next season, actually only a few months away. And this trip also was successful.

Although Dr. Sutton made a trip to Florida in 1924, the years prior to 1932 were devoted mainly to the arctic. In 1932, Dr. Sutton received his Ph. D. degree from Cornell University and became its curator of birds. Most of his expeditions from then until last summer dealt with the birdlife of southern and southwestern U. S. and Mexico.

On various occasions he has visited and studied the Rio Grande Valley, the Southern states, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Mexico. He has become an authority on Mexican birds through eight trips to that country, the last in 1951 to confirm reports of rediscovery of a bearded wood partridge believed extinct for almost a century. He is author of a number of books, the latest, *Mexican Birds*, published in 1951 by the University of Oklahoma Press. Dr. Sutton has credited the outstanding work done on this book by the Press as being one of the influences leading to his coming to O.U.

Sutton's paintings also have brought him wide acclaim. His large files of painstaking,

minute handwork have illustrated his own books as well as books by other bird authorities. Sutton was a pupil and friend of Louis Agassiz Fuertes, famous bird and mammal painter. He is quick to point out that this experience with Fuertes greatly stimulated his work with art. His illustrations are found in more than eight books, including the bird section of *World Book Encyclopedia*. The most recent volume using his art work is *A Guide to Bird Finding West of the Mississippi*, by his friend Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr.

"But for now," he sighed with perhaps a note of regret, "painting is on the shelf. I've done none since I came to Oklahoma and did none last summer in the arctic." He explained that art consumes time that he hasn't been able to give.

Lack of time has always seemed to plague this ambitious ornithologist. A fellow-scientist at O.U. said of him recently, "He's an inspiring teacher with a tremendous driving force. He's done a fabulous amount in the short time he's been here in Oklahoma, in fixing up the museum, in carrying on his day-to-day teaching activities, and in readying himself for last summer's arctic trip. And anything he does, he goes all out on."

"Take, for example," the scientist continued, "the field trip to the Panhandle last Thanksgiving ('52). During blizzard weather, when most people were staying home by the fire, he was willing to chance a trip to one of his favorite haunts, the Black Mesa of northwestern Oklahoma, to study birds."

Further illustrating the man's energy, Dr. Sutton expressed his own displeasure with having to take time out for sleep in preparing his book on Mexican birds. Upon arriving late one evening in a new area in Mexico, he wrote, "The shame of it all! Here we were in the land of which we had talked for weeks, yet sleep was the order of the hour. . . The thought of having to sleep at a time when the night was so full of activity was hard to bear."

Having been a member of Dr. Sutton's first ornithology course at O.U. last spring, I know his morning field trips often have accomplished a great deal before the average O.U. student hears his alarm clock.

On one of these early morning excursions, our class visited the Oliver Wildlife Sanctuary near Norman. While we were studying the birds in those woods, suddenly a large, dark-colored bird was stirred to flight. "It's a barred owl, Doc!" called Dick Graber, one of Sutton's graduate students who accompanied us on the trip. As if in answer to his call, a number of crows appeared and immediately began chasing the

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owl and making their familiar "cawing" noises.

With a shout to the class to follow, Dr. Sutton was off in pursuit. He wanted us to see this instance of crows chasing an owl. The other students and I found it hard to keep up with our instructor, whose agility belies his graying hair and more than 50 years.

In the classroom, his enthusiasm is contagious. He compliments people for a job well done, and doesn't criticize. "I've never heard him run down anyone for making errors," one zoology graduate said of Sutton. However, he expects his students to know their work. During a brief classroom quiz session, he said, "I want you to know *all* these birds, 'cold' as they say."

Far from new at the teaching profession, the Nebraska-born naturalist taught ornithology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1925 and at Cornell University from 1931-1945. As a major in the Arctic, Desert, and Tropic branch of the A.A.F. tactical center, during the latter half of World War II, he worked especially on arctic briefing films and in testing arctic gear.

As I sat in his office talking with him, I realized how difficult it would be to catch the full range of this man's interests. He can make anything seem alive and interesting because he genuinely sees the good things in life. He has a dynamic personality, with a willingness to talk about birds to anyone who is interested.

In fact, this past summer, in the Frobisher Bay area of Canada, he talked to construction workers of the north who had never before looked at birds. By the end of the summer, some of them would walk several miles to supply him with information about birds seen while working.

Although Sutton has been a Sooner only since the summer of 1951, except for his studies in the state in the '30's, he is already enthusiastic about putting Oklahoma on the scientist's bird map. One of his current projects is a bird check-list for every Oklahoma county. "This is a notation of all birds seen within the county boundaries and positively identified," he explains, "usually by taking specimens."

Specimens are a necessary part of scientific study. And since museums are the main repository for bird skins, museums have been connected closely with Sutton's work. His first and many of the succeeding arctic trips were sponsored by the Carnegie

Museum of Pittsburgh; he was curator of birds at Cornell University, for the University of Michigan's museum, and now, for the O.U. museum as well.

Since Dr. Sutton's arrival, a tremendous change has come about in the bird range of the museum. ("Range," Sutton said, "is a word we ornithologists use for a room in which scientific skins are kept for reference and study.") It began as an old gun shed.

"There was a mountain of bones and incredible confusion," he said attempting to describe its former "attic" appearance. "You would have had to see the way it was before our work began, to appreciate the present condition."

The display cases no longer house as many birds as in the old days, but those that are present are pleasingly presented. (The man is an artist, too, you will remember. He is a perfectionist when it comes to "putting up" bird skins—but the term "taxidermist" does not fit him. He is more properly an artistic displayer of birds.)

"Our bird range is large, well-lighted, and well ventilated," he pointed out proudly, "the direct result of (the late) Dr. Willis Stovall's thoughtful planning. This is one of the really fine museums of the southwest, and the range right now can be compared with the best in the country."

Sutton explains that the museum can serve as a central repository for state bird records. Already, the museum (or range) holds the first specimens in the state of the Groove-billed Ani, Baird's Sparrow, Bonaparte's Gull and the Mexican Cormorant.

This past summer when Sutton returned to the arctic, this time under the sponsorship of the Arctic Institute of North America, he was accompanied by one of his graduate students, David F. Parmelee of Iron Mountain, Michigan. The U. S. Air Force base at the head of Frobisher Bay served as their headquarters.

The expedition collected a fine series of such birds as the Rock Ptarmigan, the Greenland Wheatear, and the little-known Purple Sandpiper.

Sutton and Parmelee set a probable record in banding Snowy Owls, with the discovery of 11 nests of the great birds and the banding of some 40 young. "It was the queerest ornithology I've ever encountered," said Sutton shaking his head. "We had to use as much ammunition to protect ourselves as in collecting specimens."

It seems the old owls were fierce in defense of their home-grounds, and especially so since the young had started wandering around the tundra in flightless condition.

"Finding these young," Dr. Sutton noted, "involved a game of 'hot and cold' in which attacks increased in fury as we drew closer, and subsided as we withdrew.

"The old birds had a way of combining their talents. One would attack, throw us off guard momentarily, then the other would swing in and deal a really bad blow on the head, back or shoulders. And when a 5-pound bit of fury hits you, you certainly know it," he said emphatically, chuckling to himself.

"They had a way, too, of circling directly between us and the brilliant sun in such a way as to make themselves virtually unseeable," he continued. "About the time we lost track of them, down they'd come. When our scalps had been properly bloodied two or three times, we took to shooting, not directly at them, of course (for this would defeat the purpose of banding), but close enough to let them know that we, too, meant business."

Just recently, Sutton received a miniature set of Snowy Owls, carved out of soapstone by an Eskimo whose work he had admired at Frobisher Bay. In an accompanying letter, Constable Robert Van Norman, a Canadian Mountie, wrote, "We hope these won't scalp you."

Sutton's work has had its moments of pain, and on occasion his enthusiasm and intense scientific interest have led him into serious trouble. Early in the spring of 1929, while he was State Ornithologist of Pennsylvania, a climb to the nest of a raven nearly ended in disaster.

As he climbed to within a few feet of the nest, located on a precarious ledge of a cliff, the large rock which his right hand was gripping, suddenly gave way.

He is not sure how long it took him to fall to the base of that 50-foot cliff, but a vine he caught on the way down probably saved his life. As it was, X-ray photographs revealed "merely" fractures of six or seven ribs, ribs torn loose from the spine, sides of the vertebrae crushed, collar bones sprung, and many cuts and bruises on his head, arms and legs.

These injuries hardly slowed him, however, for as has been mentioned, in less than a year he already was walrus hunting with the Eskimos on Southampton Island where there were five white men: two priests, two traders and George Miksch Sutton.

Kraft Salute . . .

when the majority felt that the school should be represented first and the student second.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to athletics came in the controversy recently over