

IN MEMORIAM: GEORGE A. SEAMAN, 1904–1997

RO WAUER

315 Padre Lane, Victoria, Texas 77905, USA

NATURE LOVERS LOST a good friend and colleague when George Seaman passed away on 17 September 1997 on the tiny Caribbean island of Saba. He was buried two days later at The Bottoms with only a few folks in attendance. Most of us – conservationists, ornithologists, birders, and other admirers – did not receive the bad news until it was too late. He left behind lots of friends, two sons, a daughter, and several grandchildren. But more importantly, perhaps, at least in the long-term, were his many written contributions that revealed his love of nature and perspective on West Indian conservation. These will remain long after the rest of us have followed George to our final reward.

George Seaman, born in December 1904, was deeply involved with natural resource studies and resource protection long before most of us became aware that our island resources were disappearing. For the vast majority of his lifetime, he fought to protect those resources. He lived a full and exciting life, exploring the tropics from South America to the South Seas and throughout the Caribbean. Many Caribbean biologists were present when he was honored at the seminal meeting of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology at St. Croix, 20 May 1988. That conference, which he attended, was in fact, dedicated to “George A. Seaman, Naturalist Par Excellence.”

One of the best descriptions of George comes from one of his own books, “Ay Ay — An Island Almanac,” where he wrote that he was “obsessed from earliest boyhood with the urge to investigate my surroundings and see the other side of the hill.” Elsewhere in “Ay Ay” he describes himself as “an incorrigible dreamer and romantic.” And in his book, “Sticks from the Hawk’s Nest,” he reveals his inner priority: in describing his friend Harry Beatty’s discovery of the Bridled Quail-Dove on St. Croix, he wrote, “One small thing like this can justify an entire life.”

George Seaman credited his love of nature to his stepfather, John C. DuBois. It was DuBois who introduced young George to reading, to the nightmare stars and to birds, to nature in every sense of the word. George once told me (recorded on three 90 minute taped interviews), “In all sincerity and truthfulness, I don’t believe any boy could have had a better father than I had.” Young George received his primary education on St. Croix, and at the age of 16, with only \$25 in his pocket, went to New York City to complete his education and to find work. Because of his knowledge of birds and taxidermy, he secured a job at the American Museum of Natural History re-labeling specimens from a Birds of the World display for Dr. Frank M. Chapman. He also assisted the famous African explorer Carl Ackley with taxidermy.

Upon learning that Dr. Ludlow Griscom, the most renowned ornithologist of the day, was preparing for an extensive

expedition to Panama, George asked to be included. He was first turned down, but young Seaman was finally accepted when he informed Griscom that he could speak Spanish. So, less than two years after leaving his native West Indies, he found himself in the unexplored Chirique highlands of Panama. Although the expedition began well, the Guaymis Indians misunderstood the use of binoculars (they believed binoculars could look into the mountains and find gold) and forced the Griscom party to suddenly fold camp and flee for their safety. Back in Panama City, George offered to stay in Panama with the Expedition’s guide, Rex Benson, and continued collecting birds. Griscom reluctantly agreed and George remained in Panama studying birds for the American Museum for almost a full year.

The use of arsenic in preserving bird specimens was commonplace in those days, and when George came down with a serious case of poisoning, he was forced to leave their jungle camp to seek medical help in Panama City. It was there, while he was recovering, that he learned about a British expedition to the South Seas. The British team of scientists and their three-masted barkentine – the *St. George* – were in port loading supplies.

When the *St. George* sailed a few days later, George was on board. The expedition lasted about one year and collected specimens from the Galapagos, Marquesas, Societies, and Easter islands. Upon his return to Panama, after myriad experiences, including a major typhoon off Easter Island, a message that his mother was extremely ill awaited him. George immediately returned to St. Croix, and his mother died soon afterward.

Jobs during the 1920s were scarce on St. Croix, so George sought employment elsewhere. He worked in the Dominican Republic for three years before returning to St. Croix and various management jobs. But those did not satisfy his desire to explore “the other side of the hill.” So, in 1936, when an opportunity to join the Weber Expedition to Venezuela came about, he accepted.

George Seaman fell in love with Venezuela. When the 6-week expedition came to an end, he remained in Venezuela, taking a job with Standard Oil Co. and living mainly in “wild cat” camps on the llano. In his spare time he collected bird specimens for William H. Phelps, Sr., who was then gathering his famous Venezuelan bird collection. George remained with Standard Oil for six years. “The longer I stayed the more I loved Venezuela,” he told me. “The bird life! I was on the Orinoco Delta. Couldn’t have been a need for waterbirds, including the rare Orinoco Goose and the Jabiru Stork. Ducks! I never saw ducks in my life like that. They rose up in clouds that practically covered the sun.”

World War II shut down the oil business in South America. But it rekindled the need to obtain rubber from native plants,

and so after a brief return to St. Croix in 1942, he joined several of his Venezuelan companions who went to work for the Rubber Development Corporation in Brazil. All during the war he traveled the Amazon Basin, supplying 13 stations by air. "We used enormous Catalinas," he told me. "They could fly from Brazil to Miami without refueling, taking 5 tons of rubber with them. At least once a week I visited one of these stations."

In 1949, George again returned to the Virgin Islands. Although his visit was intended to be a short one, the Virgin Islands Government enticed him to accept a position of Wildlife Supervisor for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. So, on May 16, 1949, at 45 years of age, he began a new career. First stationed on St. Thomas, he moved to St. Croix a year later, where he was provided an office at the Agricultural Station by his friend, Dr. Richard Bond, a well-known scientist in his own right. George and Bond became close friends and companions.

George Seaman remained with the Virgin Islands Fish and Wildlife until he retired in 1969. For 20 years he was the only government spokesman for wildlife and their essential habitats. Few others cared enough about the deer, doves and pigeons, quail, and other wildlife to study their populations, document the results, and make recommendations on what the government must do to protect those valuable resources.

George's official reports included a diversity of topics: life history studies of White-crowned Pigeons and Zenaida Doves, as well as food habits of pigeons, doves, and Bridled Quail-Doves. From 1950 to 1960, he banded 1,271 White-crowned Pigeon chicks at Krause Lagoon. His white-tailed deer studies resulted in an important paper titled "Short history of deer of St. Croix." George produced numerous reports on the introduced small Indian mongoose, which included information on its life history and threat to native animals. He also reported on the life history of the Pearly-eyed Thrasher, a deer-cattle fever-tick study, and the actual and potential stocking programs of various huntable species, such as guineafowl, chachalacas, White-winged Doves, and quail. In 1958, George published the first "Check-list of Birds of the American Virgin Islands." This document has proved quite valuable in assessing changes in the Virgin Islands' birdlife since then.

In 1966, he authored a special report: "Conservation Master Plan for the U. S. Virgin Islands." This document was the first of several "land use master plans" written but never

approved for the Virgin Islands. George wrote: "We must lay aside suitable areas now for the protection of the native flora and fauna if tomorrow's population is to have and enjoy it. Our countryside can be urbanized out of all beauty and recreational value in an astoundingly short time. One look around and it is alarmingly evident that the scenic beauty of all islands is at stake."

George left the Virgin Islands government with frustration. "During the 20-odd years that I had with the local government, in the field in which I worked, I didn't get to first base," he told me. "It was very unsatisfactory from the standpoint of having built a feeling among the people of the islands relative to conservation...I did everything possible...I never got to first base. They were not interested."

Although George may not have "got to first base" during the years that he struggled as the lone government voice for resource protection, many of his recommendations have since come to pass. St. Croix's Sandy Point has been set aside as a national wildlife refuge to protect nesting leatherback sea turtles. Green Cay, off St. Croix's north shore, was established as a national wildlife refuge to protect the last remnants of the endangered St. Croix Ground-Lizard. Many of the small Cays around St. Thomas have been given special legal protection because of their importance to nesting seabirds. And the Virgin Island Legislature passed a Territorial Parks Act in 1973 to protect other places of biological importance.

But George was not finished after retirement. He then began to write about nature for the people. His first book, "Sticks from the Hawk's Nest," was published in 1973. "Ay Ay — An Island Almanac," 12 chapters about the changing seasons, appeared in 1980 and was republished by Macmillan in 1989. In 1988, "Sadly Cries the Plover," a series of poems about the jungles and llanos of Venezuela, appeared. And most recently, "Every Shadow is a Man: A Journey Back into Birds and Time," was published in 1993. Although my personal favorite is "Ay Ay," each offers something special; each deserves reading by anyone with an interest in the West Indies.

George Seaman understood, as no one else, what the islands were like before commercial developments and habitat degradation began. His perspective on the islands that he loved so much offers rare insights that are unavailable elsewhere. We are richer because of those writings and his years of conservation. He will be sorely missed!