

Harry S. Swarth's Life and Legacy

“I could not remember a time when I had not had the run of rooms where bird skins and birds' eggs were being handled; I had always had available books about natural history, and, altogether, to investigate animal life, particularly birds, seemed not merely obvious, but the inevitable course of existence.” –Harry S. Swarth

Harry Swarth was born in Chicago in 1878. As a child he developed an interest in bird watching and would visit the Chicago Field Museum, where he became aware of museum collections. When Swarth was 15 years old the family moved to Los Angeles, where his passion for birds increased tremendously as he explored the vast open spaces and diverse birdlife of southern California. Swarth roamed freely with little or no parental supervision, searching out birds and learning about their lives, an interest that was fostered by his parents and his mentor George Frean Morcom. He learned to prepare bird study skins by watching Frank Stephens, the famed California naturalist, collector, and a curator at the San Diego Natural History Museum. Fortunately, the Cooper Ornithological Club had just formed in 1893 and Swarth soon became a member. The Cooper Club was an essential organization that served to coalesce the nascent birding scene in southern California. Here, Swarth made friendships and professional connections that would last his entire life.

In 1896, at the age of 17, Swarth led a remarkable ornithological expedition with three other young men to southern Arizona to explore and study the little-known Huachuca Mountains. In February of that year, the teenagers headed east with two horses and a wagon full of camping and collecting gear—essentially walking 650 miles from Los Angeles to southern Arizona. Along the way and while camped in Ramsey Canyon, they observed 169 species of birds and collected 434 bird specimens, all of which were deposited in museums back in California. This was the start of Arizona field work that Swarth was to continue for the next 20 years. Many publications resulted, one of the first being *A Distributional List of the Birds of Arizona*, published in 1914 by the Cooper Club. In 2018, field notes from the trip were published by his grandson in *An Expedition to Ramsey Canyon: The 1896 Field Journal of Ornithologist Harry Swarth* (Swarth 2018).



Harry Swarth preparing specimens in the southern Sierra Nevada, Fresno County, California. August 1916. Photo by Joseph Dixon.

In 1908, prominent California zoologist Joseph Grinnell became the first director of the new Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at the University of California, Berkeley. Almost immediately, Grinnell hired Swarth as the museum's first Research Zoologist. In 1910, Swarth was promoted to Curator of Birds, a position he held nearly continuously until 1927.

Interestingly, Joe Grinnell and Harry Swarth married sisters—Hilda and Winifern Wood—and the two families lived only a few blocks apart in Berkeley's Elmwood

district. The Swarth boys (George and Morton) grew up playing with the Grinnell's four children, and these cousins became lifelong friends.

At MVZ, Swarth combined extensive field work, collecting, and specimen-based museum studies to investigate research questions focused on avian speciation, systematic relations in both birds and mammals, morphological variation within and between species, zoogeography, barriers to population dispersal, plumage coloration and habitat conditions, migration, and many other important topics of the day. His research was concentrated in four regions: Arizona, California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Galapagos Islands. One especially widely cited paper was a detailed monograph on the Fox Sparrow, "[Revision of the avian genus *Passerella* with special reference to the distribution and migration of the races in California](#)" (Swarth 1920), which dealt with subspecific variation, geographical distribution, and migration routes. In this he introduced the concept of what today we call "leapfrog migration". Many papers dealt with difficult or confusing species, including geese, grouse, owls, woodpeckers, jays, wrens, and sparrows. Swarth had a special interest in the avifauna of northern British Columbia and southeast Alaska, where he spent ten summers. On several trips he took his wife and sons. In the course of these field studies Harry become good friends with well-known Canadian wildlife artist Major Allan Brooks.



Harry Swarth in his office at the California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco.

In 1927, Swarth left MVZ to become Curator of the Department of Mammalogy and Ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, a position he held until his death in 1935. While there he analyzed the Academy's large collection of Galapagos Island birds (8,691 specimens), which had been collected by Rollo Beck and others on the Academy expedition of 1905–1906. Swarth also examined Stanford University's bird specimens from the Hopkins–Stanford Galapagos expeditions of 1889 and 1899. His analyses of these extensive collections were summarized in his monograph, "[The Avifauna of the Galapagos Islands](#)" (Swarth 1931). To prepare that paper, Swarth traveled to the British Museum (now the Museum of Natural History at Tring) to examine the type specimens that Charles Darwin had collected on the Galapagos Islands while on his round-the-world cruise on the *HMS Beagle*. This monograph was the first scientific paper to place Darwin's finches, so pivotal to our understanding of evolution, as well as other Galapagos species, into a modern systematic and evolutionary framework. In 1932 Swarth visited the islands as chief scientist aboard the yacht *Zaca* on the California Academy of Sciences-sponsored Templeton Crocker Expedition. Later Swarth and Robert T. Moore (of the Moore Laboratory of Zoology, Occidental College) worked together to persuade the government of Ecuador to conserve and protect the Galapagos Islands.

Over the course of his career Swarth published 220 papers and described 30 new birds (nine with Joseph Grinnell) and 11 new mammals. He was a leading ornithologist in the west and contributed in many ways to our understanding of bird and mammal natural history, yet he did not have a doctoral or even a bachelor's degree. This was unusual in his day and would be even more so today. University training is generally a prerequisite for a career in science. Ornithology, however, remains a branch of zoology where ornithologists without advanced degrees make important contributions to the field. In 2011, the Western Field Ornithologists established the *Harry S. Swarth Award in Western Field Ornithology*. To learn more about the life and legacy of Harry Swarth, and to see a list of his publications, please read the memorials published in the [Auk \(Mailliard 1937\)](#) and in the [Condor \(Lindsdale 1936\)](#).

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