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Preserving Field Notes on Songbird Biology at Indiana University

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Wednesday, 22 June 2011

Preserving Field Notes on Songbird Biology at Indiana University

By Eric Snajdr (Science Librarian, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) and Ellen D. Ketterson (Distinguished Professor of Biology, Indiana University, Bloomington)



Val Nolan Jr. in the Philippines during World War II



Prairie warbler (Dendroica discolor)

Val Nolan Jr. (1920-2008) led an extraordinary life. As a self-taught scientist he was unrelenting in his drive to pursue bird research despite the many paths his life would take.

Val was born in Evansville, Indiana, where both his grandfathers served as mayor. He later moved to Indianapolis, where his father was appointed U.S. Attorney. Fostered by one of his teachers, Val developed a strong interest in birds during his senior year at Shortridge High School. After high school, Val attended Indiana University, where he chose to major in history. After graduating in 1941 he served as Deputy U.S. Marshall, and then in the U.S. Secret Service as a bodyguard to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He joined the U.S. Navy in 1944 and became a language specialist in Japanese and served in Intelligence in the Pacific under James Roosevelt, the

president's son.

After World War II ended Val had hoped to turn his focus on bird biology. However, a professor in this field discouraged him from this path so Val decided to pursue Law instead. After graduating first in his class from Indiana University School of Law (now the Mauer School of Law), he joined the faculty and became a highly respected and influential teacher, serving twice as Acting Dean.”

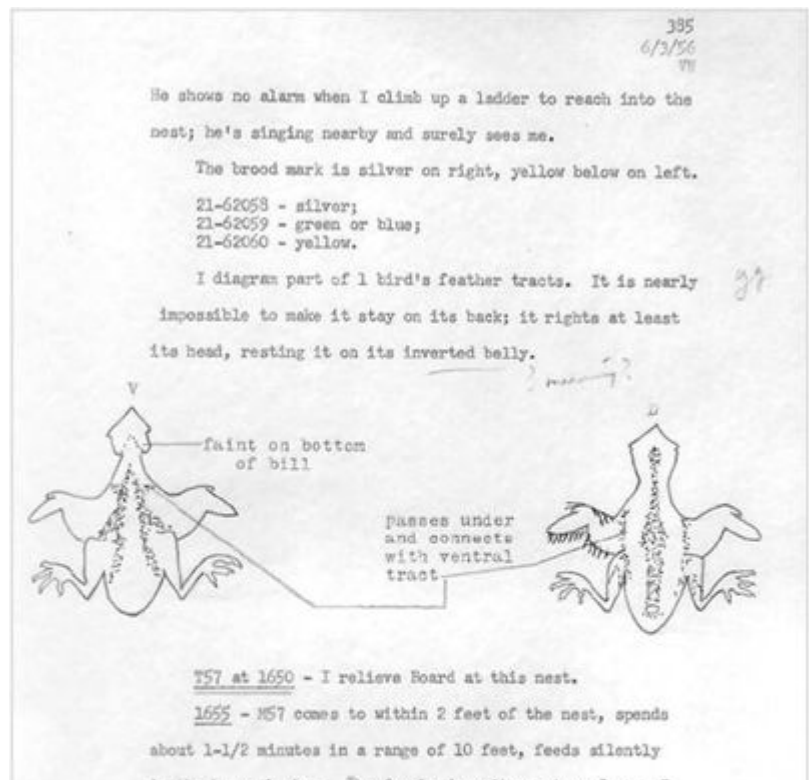
Val's enduring interest in birds ultimately led him to pursue biological research on his own accord. Between 1952 and 1965, while working as a Professor of Law, Val conducted extensive fieldwork on the prairie warbler (a migratory songbird) in Bloomington, Indiana. He was extremely dedicated to his goal of studying this single species in detail, learning as much about its life history and behavior as he possibly could. His work resulted in the publication of a monograph, the Ecology and behavior of the prairie warbler *Dendroica discolor* (595 pages), for which in 1986 he received the American Ornithologists' Union's Brewster Award (for the most meritorious work on birds of western hemisphere in the last ten years).

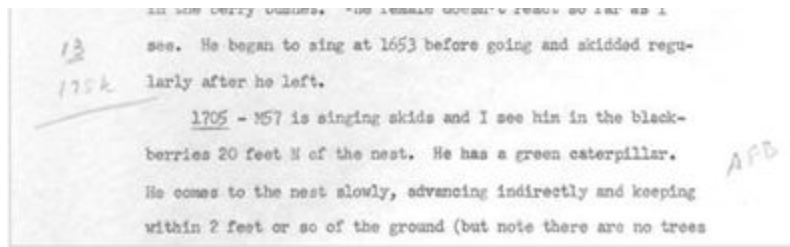


Bound volumes of Val's "Prairie Warbler Notes" Indiana

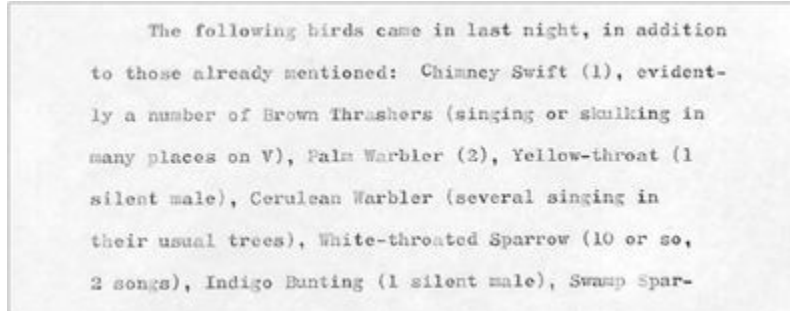
In 1957-1958, Val received a Guggenheim Fellowship for two projects (one legal and one biological). He became a research scholar in Zoology and ultimately Professor of both Biology and Law from 1966-1985 at Indiana University, continuing work as professor emeritus 1985-2008. In Biology he trained 22 Ph.D. students and authored more than 100 scientific papers.

His many years of research on the prairie warbler generated nineteen bound volumes of field notes (approximately 200 to 350 pages per volume). He was meticulous, highly organized in his note taking, and had the foresight to have the notes typed and bound so that others could easily read and make use of his data.





The notes contain not only a rich documentation of prairie warbler behavior during the breeding season, but also include general observations about natural history. For example, his notes include details of daily weather, the timing of the emergence of leaves and flowers of plant species in the spring, as well as observations of a variety of animal species including arrival dates and behavior of bird species during spring migration.



April 20, 1957 excerpt from "Prairie warbler field notes 1957 Bloomington, Indiana"

Val's volumes of field notes on the prairie warbler were digitized by the Indiana University Digital Library group and mounted alongside the work of other university-affiliated scholars into IUScholarWorks, Indiana University's online repository. Because his notes were typed, the digitized versions could be processed using OCR (Optical Character Recognition) making the text searchable and thus allowing a reader to find particular words or phrases throughout the volumes.

His notes are not only a rich source of information, they also document the research process, how systematic fieldwork on a single species can be conducted and translated into a body of scientific discovery. The original (paper) copies of his notes are privately owned and, therefore, were not readily discoverable or accessible by others. Making them available through the IUScholarWorks digital repository ensures that they are available to the entire scientific community and beyond so others, like Val Nolan, can pursue their own driving interests in nature and learn more about the natural world and the processes of biodiversity research.

About the authors:

Eric Snajdr worked for many years as a research associate with Val Nolan Jr. and Dr. Ellen D. Ketterson before becoming a science librarian.

Dr. Ellen D. Ketterson was Val Nolan Jr.'s wife and research partner.

Nolan, V. Jr. 1978. Ecology and behavior of the prairie warbler *Dendroica discolor*. *American Ornithologists' Union. Ornithological Monographs* 26:1-595

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