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Oral History Number: 276-003

Interviewee: Philip L. Wright

Interviewer: Wendy Hall

Date of Interview: March 27, 1992

Project: UM Wildlife Biology Program Oral History Collection

Wendy Hall: Continuation of interview with Phil Wright on March 27, 1992 in the Biological Sciences building. Phil, what factors influenced you while you were growing up to study zoology?

Philip Wright: I want to go back to this point because we talked about it briefly. When I was a kid growing up, Nashua, New Hampshire was an industrial city. There were mills there: textile mills, shoe factories, and other factories of that kind. It was really not a very intellectual place to have grown up. Many of the kinds of things which children in the present generation grow up with...Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, and all the kind of activities which my children grew up with here in the university town, were essentially lacking in Nashua, New Hampshire when I was a kid.

When I was in high school, however, there appeared, fresh off the press, a monumental three volume work on the birds of Massachusetts by Edward Howe Forbush. These volumes appeared in sequence during the twenties and I, as a high school kid, simply devoured these volumes. Not only did the volumes have excellent information about the status of New England birds—when they arrived, when they departed, where they nested, and that sort of thing—but they had an exceptional series of colored plates painted by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. I spent many hours in the school library studying these volumes about the birds of Massachusetts. Much of what went on in my high school seemed not to be of much interest to me. I think, at that time, the general progress of education was not sufficiently advanced so that I don't think that either my parents or my teachers had any feel for the fact that I had rather special interests, which were quite different from that of the ordinary high school kid growing up in that environment. The result was that I was not a very good high school student. I may have mentioned this before, but my high school record has only one A in it and it was in solid geometry, which subject intrigued me. I gobbled it up and comprehended fully what that subject was all about, much to the amazement of my instructor because he, like all the other teachers I had in high school, thought of me as a C student. The effect of a three-volume work of that kind in high school, which probably very few of the other high school students knew was in their library or had any interest in, was really a major push in getting me going in the direction of influencing me to become interested in natural history generally.

WH: My question, going back to the two wildlife programs, the one in Zoology and Forestry... When were those merged? Do you remember the date?

PW: I can't come up with the dates, but I would say it was about 20 years ago. We can find it out very readily by assembling the series of catalogs. We would go to the library and get a

series of university catalogs and it would be very clearly shown. The university catalogs are the history of what goes on in academia. I would guess it was about 20 years ago. It might have been longer ago than that. It might have been 25 years ago.

WH: Is there anything else you would like to mention?

PW: I think that's all.

[End of Interview]