

# EXTREME BIRDING



## J. STOKLEY LIGON'S TRAVELS IN NEW MEXICO

**HELP WANTED:** Field assistant for the United States Biological Survey for one-month survey of migratory birds. Specifically water birds, but also all birds encountered in southern New Mexico, as far north as Santa Rosa. Reports on habits, nests, eggs, and young to be submitted to the USBS. Applicant must be skilled in photography and report writing. Good physical condition essential. Must be capable of riding horseback five to 40 miles per day. Experience caring for stock, packing, shooting, rappelling, assessing terrain, finding water sources, and camping crucial. Knowledge of local bird and mammal species necessary. Specimen samples required. Supplies for specimen preservation and reports will be provided. Traveling expenses will be reimbursed. Applicant to furnish his own photographic equipment, horse, pack animals, tack, shotgun, food, and camping gear. Salary to be negotiated based on specimen samples and experience.

Had J. Stokley Ligon replied to such an ad in the new state of New Mexico's newspapers in 1913, the hiring committee would have interviewed a young man, 34 years old, possessing good health and stamina. He was a skilled photographer, naturalist, and writer. He could also ride and pack, and he had experience exploring and camping. Furthermore, he knew birds and he knew the country around southwestern New Mexico — particularly the Jornada del Muerto, between Engle and Las Cruces, the starting point of his trek.

A native of west Texas, Ligon arrived in New Mexico in 1907 and worked in his family's well-drilling business. As a "windmiller," he climbed the towers to oil the engines at the top. In his spare time he pursued his boyhood hobby of observing birds, his interest piqued by the cards bearing descriptions of birds in Arm & Hammer baking-soda boxes.

Birders participating in this year's Christmas Bird Count, conducted by the National Audubon Society from Dec. 14 to Jan. 5, 2012, won't face the arduous conditions Ligon endured while surveying breeding birds in 1913. How many today possess the combination of skills required for the job?

By the time Ligon was appointed field assistant for the United States Biological Survey on May 31, the year following New Mexico's statehood, he was a sure shot, a seasoned hunter, and completely at ease in the wild. He could calmly work at heights. He had already collected 85 specimens and saw himself as a freelance naturalist, photographer, and writer. He owned a "Black Beauty," a 5 x 7 dry-plate view camera that produced glass-plate negatives. He also owned a single-shot, break-action 16-gauge shotgun.

In the end, the trip, thought to encompass southern New Mexico, extended as far north as the Jicarilla Apache Reservation and to Putnam, Thoreau, and Ramah in New Mexico's northwest quadrant. Ligon was on the trail for

Abiquiu

Taos

Santa Fe

Albuquerque

Santa Rosa

Roswell

Tularosa

Artesia

Carlsbad

### BIRDS BY THE NUMBERS

Repeating J. Stokley Ligon's 1913 bird survey, which yielded a count of 100 different species, would be very difficult, given the development that has occurred in the near-century since. In August 2011, 538 species representing 66 families were verified in the state, according to the New Mexico Birds Record Committee report prepared by the New Mexico Ornithological Society. The number of individual birds in New Mexico is probably in the millions, though it would vary with the seasons and population trends. A few species can be estimated in places of concentrated populations, but actual numbers for all species are impossible to determine. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that, across the nation, there are a minimum of 10 billion birds breeding annually, with that number swelling to as many as 20 billion birds during the fall migratory season. According to a report from the New Mexico Tourism Department, in 2010, wildlife viewing accounted for 7.2 percent of tourists who visited the state.

### SITES TO SEE

The National Audubon Society annually conducts the Christmas Bird Count, a count of migratory birds. This year's count takes place from Dec. 14 to Jan. 5, 2012. For information about participating in the New Mexico chapter's count, see <http://nm.audubon.org/birdcounts.html#christmas>. The Cornell University Lab of Ornithology's bird count, like the Christmas Bird count, is somewhat informal and takes place in May to count the migrant population. For more information, visit [www.birds.cornell.edu/allaboutbirds/conservation/involved/migration](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/allaboutbirds/conservation/involved/migration). And to learn about the Southwest New Mexico Birding Trail, which circles through southwestern New Mexico, see [www.wildlife.state.nm.us/recreation/birding/index.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nm.us/recreation/birding/index.htm).



73 days and wasn't paid for many of them. Initially he walked, driving his two pack burros Albert and Smokey before him. A week or more into the trip he acquired a horse he called Gila Red. Together they covered 1,200 miles. More significantly, he traveled alone.

Obtaining specimens involved wading in as much as four feet of water, "chilling one for hours" in the upper elevations, and swinging off a cliff on a rope tied to a stout bush to collect eggs, generally located at "dazzling heights."

He wrote letters and reports by the light of a lantern, camping alone under the skies in all weathers. The stopper in his ink bottle was lost, mice infested his flour, and rats ate his saddle strings. His horse kicked him one time, and on another occasion Gila Red wandered off in the night. He confessed he'd rather be bitten by a rattlesnake than sprayed by a skunk.

He heard the "constant chirp, twitter and quack" of the birds around him, and at Stinking Lake on the Jicarilla Reservation, the colony of 600 (by Ligon's estimate) nesting eared grebes kept up "constant Racket day and night." His canoe frightened ruddy ducks, and two very small young spotted sandpipers "ran about the gravel" trying to hide from him.

"In a sense [the trip] was a vision quest for the young Texan," writes author Harley G. Shaw in *Twelve Hundred Miles by Horse and Burro: J. Stokley Ligon and New Mexico's First Breeding Bird Survey*, published in October by University of Arizona Press. The trip expanded Ligon's "geographic horizons; testing his self-reliance, biological knowledge, and communication skills." He also acquired the interpersonal skills needed to cope with the emerging federal bureaucracy.

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J. Stokley Ligon, photo courtesy New Mexico Department of Game and Fish; top, Ligon with his horse, Gila Red, and his burros, Albert and Smokey, 1913; opposite page, map of Ligon's route by Tom Jonas/Southwest Explorations



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Ligon's camp and equipment, 1912; left, Ligon's "Black Beauty" camera, along with some of his publications and a net he used to capture chickens; courtesy New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

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Shaw's construction renders the book engaging and informative. His purpose was never to write Ligon's biography but — aided by researcher Mara E. Weisenberger, who is credited as co-author — to tell the story of the wildlife biologist's first job, its back story, and how the survey was conducted. By dissecting the bird breeding report, using dated entries, area descriptions, and diary entries, Shaw assembled an annotated chronology of the trip, and listed Ligon's bird species accounts in appendices. He also explored usages of certain words (such as *habitat*) that Ligon adopted for usage in wildlife reporting. The book is valuable for birders, along with those curious about Ligon, environmental history, and New Mexico's wildlife. It's an adventure story, and an edifying one.

Shaw's narrative cites his early awareness of Ligon's work and the dearth of information about the man. He followed Ligon's trail 90-some years later, visiting some of the same spots, enjoying far greater comfort than the early-20th-century wildlife biologist. The narrative contextualizes and explicates Ligon's survey. Shaw corrects Ligon's mistakes reporting flora and fauna and differentiates between today's landscape and what Ligon saw.

Most important, this book finally brings Ligon's story to the fore, placing him beside Elliott Barker and Homer Pickens, two other New Mexican wildlife biologists, both of whom knew Ligon, whose considerable work was conducted in the background. The author's tone echoes the modesty and quiet competence Ligon embodied. He was eulogized as "the gentlest of mountain men."

Ligon's 1913 survey resonates today. It established his reputation as a wildlife biologist, led to professional wildlife management positions, the publication of four books, an award for game protection, and an honorary Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico in 1952. "Lovers of Nature are numbered among the happiest people," Ligon wrote in 1927. "They get the most out of life and usually live to an active old age." His longevity proves his rule. He was past 40 when he married. In retirement he wrote and raised quail, dying at the age of 82. ◀