

## **A Biographical Sketch of Robert Ridgway**

Robert Ridgway was born on July 2, 1850 in Mount Carmel, Illinois to David and Harriet Ridgway. By the age of fourteen Ridgway had been sent away to work for an uncle, and some of the earliest letters in the collection date from this time period. Even at this early age, Robert's correspondence reveals his keen interest in the scientific study of birds. This interest in ornithology, coupled with an additional interest in illustration, is evident in the letters that Robert wrote to Spencer Baird, chief ornithologist, and second in command of the Smithsonian Institution. By 1865 the two of them had developed a lively correspondence that revolved around their mutual interest in birds.

This early correspondence with Baird led to an invitation for Ridgway to serve as a member of the United States Geological Survey of the Fortieth Parallel in 1867. At the tender age of seventeen Robert joined the expedition as a zoologist under the supervision of survey director Clarence King. The expedition was staffed by men in their mid-twenties and thirties, so a seventeen year old was an oddity, even among this group of young professionals. Due to Ridgway's age and his boyish enthusiasm, the thirteen letters that the young ornithologist wrote home during the two-year survey offer an extraordinary point of view regarding the American West and survey.

The experience that Ridgway gained on this expedition became the starting point for an extremely successful career as a naturalist. Robert returned to Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1868 and went to work for the Smithsonian Institution. His primary duty was to prepare a report on his fieldwork. In 1869 he returned to the West to rejoin the expedition at Salt Lake City, Utah. He spent the summer of 1869 working on specimen collection around the Great Salt Lake and in the Wasatch Mountains.

In subsequent years Ridgway authored a number of articles and books on ornithology (many of which drew upon his experiences with the Fortieth Parallel Survey) with several of them becoming classics in the field. Historians have described him as being America's foremost professional ornithologist during the period from the 1890s to the 1920s. Ridgway died in 1929.