

Cairns, John Simpson ^[1]

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by Marcus B. Simpson, Jr., 1979

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10 Feb. 1862–10 June 1895

John Simpson Cairns, ornithologist, was born in Lawrence, Mass., the son of John and Agnes Simpson Cairns. In 1855 his parents moved from Scotland to the United States, where the elder John Cairns served as foreman of various textile mills in New England. In 1870 the family purchased Reems Creek Woolen Mills and moved to Weaverville, N.C., where Cairns attended public schools and Weaver College ^[2]. He served as secretary and business manager of Reems Creek Mills from 1882 until his death.

From early childhood, Cairns was interested in natural history, and by age eight he had begun exploring the unspoiled wilderness country of the Great Craggy and Black Mountains. Although earlier naturalists had visited these mountain ranges, Cairns was the first to conduct systematic, year-round ornithological research in the southern Appalachians ^[3]. His observations provided the best available description of the avifauna of the North Carolina mountains before extensive disruption of the original forests by human activities. He added over a dozen bird species to the state list and corresponded with many of the world's eminent zoologists, providing them with documentary specimens and important data. Many of his four thousand bird and egg specimens were added to the zoological collections of Harvard ^[4] and Duke ^[5] Universities, the North Carolina State Museum, and the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences ^[6], while a large portion of his collection was purchased by Dr. F. A. Sondley ^[7] and eventually acquired by the city of Asheville ^[8].

From 1890 to 1895, Cairns worked with Samuel B. Ladd of West Chester, Pa., in preparing a book on the birds of the southern Appalachians. Cairns's untimely death abruptly terminated the project, and consequently, many of his observations were never published. His extant material includes two annotated checklists of the birds of Buncombe County ^[9], published in 1887 and 1889 in the *Ornithologist and Oologist*, and a similar list published privately in 1891 and included by F. A. Sondley in his *History of Buncombe County, N. C.* ^[10] in 1930. Cairns's study of *Dendroica caerulescens* ^[11] appeared in *Papers Presented to the World's Congress on Ornithology* ^[12] in 1896, but a manuscript on the birds of Western North Carolina ^[13] remains unpublished. Many of his observations are contained in a series of letters written from 1885 to 1895 to William Brewster ^[14] of Harvard, and Cairns's extensive migration data were sent to the U.S. Biological Survey.

In 1889, Cairns was elected an associate member of the American Ornithologists' Union ^[15], and in 1894–95 he served on the advisory council of the World's Congress on Ornithology ^[16]. Cairns was a close friend of Zebulon Weaver ^[17], who later served as congressman from the Eleventh Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives; Cairns's early influence was crucial in Weaver's enthusiastic legislative support of and lobbying for the establishment of Great Smoky Mountains National Park ^[18]. In 1897, Dr. Elliott Coues honored Cairns—the only North Carolina resident ever to receive this distinction—by naming in his memory the Cairns Warbler, *Dendroica caerulescens cairnsi*.

Cairns was married on 16 Oct. 1888 to Lena Creasman at Haw Creek Episcopal Church, of which he was an active member. At the age of thirty-three he was killed by his own gun in a hunting accident near Balsam Gap in the Black Mountains. He was buried in Weaverville Cemetery. There is a portrait in the William Brewster Collection at the Archives Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, ^[19] Harvard University.

References:

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Auk 13 (1895).

T. G. Pearson et al., *Birds of North Carolina* (1919).

N. Pickens, *Dry Ridge* (1962).

Additional Resources:

John S. Cairns, ornithologist. By William Kenneth Boyd: <https://www.worldcat.org/title/john-s-cairns-ornithologist/oclc/044848894> ^[20]

Smithwick, John Washington Pearce. *Ornithology of North Carolina : A list of the birds of North Carolina, with notes of each species*. [Raleigh]. 1897. <https://archive.org/details/ornithologyofnor00smit> ^[21] (accessed April 12, 2013).

Mountain Passages: Natural And Cultural History of Western North Carolina And the Great Smoky Mountains:
http://books.google.com/books?id=78KZyCQl6zEC&dq=john+cairns+ornithologist&source=gbs_navlinks_s [22]

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