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# *The Birds of the Campus*

PREPARED FOR THE USE OF STUDENTS

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

SUMMER SESSION



CHARLES E. BROWN

STATE HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Madison, Wisconsin

1930



# *The Birds of the Campus*

Despite the noise and bustle of the daily parade of nearly nine thousand students over the campus of the University of Wisconsin over one hundred species of wild birds visit the grassy slopes, flower beds, shrubbery and trees of the University grounds, the shores and waters of University Bay, the farm fields and pastures beyond, and the woodlands of Eagle Heights. Some of these feathered folk are more or less permanent residents, building their nests in shrubs and trees, in grassy places, in sand banks and in bird houses, beneath the eaves, on the roofs and in the chimneys of buildings. The former University Bay marshlands, now drained and converted into cultivated fields, only a few years ago sheltered and provided food for many nesting water and other birds. Many songsters and game birds, nesting elsewhere in their seasons of residence, daily visit the campus and fields for insect and other food. Some make their appearance on the University grounds only during the spring and autumn northward and southward migrations. Some of the campus birds are permanent residents remaining the year round, some are spring to autumn residents, and some are winter residents. The latter are the smaller number. Some other birds are rare visitors but very seldom seen.

The purpose of this leaflet is not to describe the birds which frequent the campus and its environs but to present some random notes concerning them. Also to acquaint the bird lover with some of the interesting Wisconsin Indian and pioneer beliefs and superstitions concerning them. If it encourages a greater student interest in our bird life the writer will be pleased.

There has always been considerable interest in local bird lore. Professor F. H. King investigated and wrote of the economic value of birds. In the years 1909-1911 Dr. O. G. Libby and H. A. Winkewerder observed the flight of migrating birds by means of the University telescope. From 1909 to 1912 bird study classes conducted by local ornithologists gathered on University hill in the early morning of one day of each week in the spring and made a trip over the grounds. Their members carried opera glasses and note books. Bird banding in cooperation with the U. S. Biological Survey was begun in the year 1925. Ten thousand birds have been trapped and banded at the University to date. Many different bird species are included

in this list of captures. The majority of the birds are chimney swifts, juncos and white-throated sparrows. Professor George Wagner has directed this important work. In the museum in the Biology building there is a mounted collection of native and other birds.

## SPRING, SUMMER AND AUTUMN BIRDS

Among the birds commonly seen on the campus lawns and hill-sides during the warm months of the year are the American robin, Northern flicker, red-headed woodpecker, catbird, cowbird, blue jay, bronzed grackle (crow blackbird) and the English sparrow. In the University flower gardens ruby-throated hummingbirds are to be seen flying about gathering nectar from the blossoms. Twenty of these very active tiny birds were seen in the formal garden during several hours one summer afternoon. The bright American goldfinch also visits this and other gardens seeking plant lice, beetles and caterpillars with which to feed its young. In the vegetable gardens the kingbird or bee martin may often be found seated on a plant stake and turning its head from side to side in its eager quest for flying insects. Here we once saw also a small flock of purple finches. Although naturally woodland birds they have learned to love the vicinity of human habitations. In the University orchard one may encounter the brown thrasher, red-eyed vireo, cedar waxwing, scarlet tanager, bluebird, least flycatcher, phoebe, Baltimore oriole, orchard oriole and a number of the warblers.

The Baltimore oriole often builds his hanging nest in some of the tall elms of the upper campus. Some years ago, when a number of bird houses were erected in different parts of the University grounds they were soon occupied by house wrens, bluebirds and woodpeckers. Robins build their substantial nests in the shade and other trees. Sometimes these are so close to some University building that their house-keeping can be observed from a nearby window. English sparrows, tree swallows and purple martins all nest in harmony in convenient openings beneath the eaves of Washburn Observatory. Late in a summer afternoon they may be seen flying in and out of these abodes. Barn swallows have sometimes nested in University buildings. A few bank swallows nest in the sandy bank of the refuse pit. Rognish blue jays nest in some of the evergreen trees.

Chimney swifts reside in large numbers in the Chemistry and Dairy building chimneys. We have seen a "cloud" of them circling about the top of the latter chimney in their remarkable evolutions on many a summer evening. Between fifteen and sixteen hundred of these very active swallows have been trapped and banded at the Chemistry building chimney. The nighthawk sometimes nests on the gravel-strewn roof of the State Historical Library building. One laid its eggs here during the spring of the year 1928 rearing two young. Occasionally seen on the trunks of campus trees is the downy woodpecker. Here he forages for insect food. Crows and red-winged black birds do some slight damage in the University corn fields. The crow pays for his depredations by killing numbers of mice and destructive insects. The clear and mellow call of the bob-white or quail may often be heard in the farm fields. Here one may also see the meadowlark in the pasture fields where this bird conceals its nest in the tall grass. Its refrain is a clear and cheerful one. On a summer evening, after dusk, the weird but melodious call of the whip-poor-will may be heard along the University Bay shore.

Along the marshy shore of Picnic Point the red-winged blackbird and the playful bobolink disport themselves on a summer afternoon. On one or two occasions yellow-headed blackbirds have also appeared here. On this Bay shore a belted kingfisher is now and then seen on the stub of a willow limb preparing to dive into the water after some luckless fish. The elegant great blue heron now and then appears in this part of University Bay. Sometimes two of these birds fish from the same sandbar. The American bittern also comes to this bar. In the year 1920 a white pelican was seen in this bay. Others were seen on the lake.

The old University Bay Marsh beyond the Willow Drive was in former years the nesting place of red-winged blackbirds, marsh wrens, grebes, rails, bitterns, marsh hawks and ducks. The conversion of the marsh into cultivated fields has deprived them of a home.

Mourning doves are not uncommon visitors on the campus. Their mournful cooing is at times very disturbing. In an early day flights of the now extinct passenger pigeon were observed from the top of Observatory Hill.

Occasionally, or rarely, seen on the campus and its environs are the Northern shrike, golden-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, veery,

towhee, song sparrow, chipping sparrow, yellow-billed cuckoo, cardinal, saw-whet owl, Cooper's hawk (chicken hawk), red-tailed hawk and the barn owl. On several occasions the bald eagle has been seen soaring over the University campus high in the heavens. These birds are quite frequently seen in the western part of Dane County.\*

## WINTER BIRDS

Winter birds which are occasionally or frequently seen on the University grounds are the chickadee, slate-colored junco, brown creeper, snow bunting, tufted titmouse, lapland longspur, horned lark and Bohemian waxwing. Up to recent years small numbers of Canada geese found their way into the University corn fields. Blue jays, red-headed woodpeckers remain through the winter as sometimes also do the cardinal, song sparrow, brown thrasher and the bluebird. The woodpecker has been observed to store acorns for winter provisions in crevices of the bark of local oaks. The redpoll, pine grosbeak and American and white-winged crossbills are said to prefer the cones of the European larch of which there are a number of trees on the University grounds.

## WATER BIRDS

Many species of water birds frequent or visit the waters of Lake Mendota. Some of these are occasionally seen in University Bay. Among the species of swans, geese and ducks there have been recorded the whistling swan, Canada goose, blue goose, canvasback, red-head, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, golden-eye, scaup duck, lesser scaup duck, ring-necked duck, buffle-head, black duck, baldpate, pintail, shoveller, wood duck, old squaw, white-winged scoter, ruddy duck, merganser, red-breasted merganser and hooded merganser. A flock of forty blue geese were seen on the lake in December 1927. In January 1914 a raft of two thousand canvasback ducks were in the water between Picnic and Second Points. Grebes frequenting the lake are Holboell's grebe, the horned grebe and the pied-billed grebe. Other lake birds are the herring gull, common tern, Bonaparte's gull, black tern, Caspian tern, king rail, Virginia rail, sora rail, Florida gallinule, coot or "mudhen", green heron, white pelican, and probably the double-crested cormorant.

Shore birds which patrol the shores of lake and marshes seeking a variety of food are killdeer, snipe, plovers, sandpipers and yellowlegs of several species. Rare visitors have been the ruddy turnstone, western willet and sanderling.\*

## BIRD BELIEFS OF THE PIONEERS

The pioneer settlers of the Middle West had many interesting superstitions about bird life. Some of these are of a rather gloomy character, forebodings of good or ill were seen in the migrations of birds. Some of these beliefs persist among their descendants.

If you see a flock of birds make a wish. Do not look at them again. If you find an empty bird's nest you will never marry. If it contains an egg you will marry within one year. To dream of catching a bird means that you will have bad luck. If a bird flies into a house the one that first sees it will wed before the year has flown. When birds flock on the ground there will be a snow fall. If a bird calls when it is cold it will be colder. You will have bad luck if a bird lights in your path. Never leave any of your discarded hair where birds can get it for nest building. You will have a headache, you will go insane or you will die before spring. If a bird flies against your window pane you will receive a message. A bird flying into a house is a sign of death in the family. It is very bad luck to have one fly into a sick room. If one lights on the stove the house will burn. Birds flying around is a sign that visitors will come. If you put salt on a bird's tail you will marry the man you desire. You will have bad luck if you break a bird's egg. If you throw a feather over a house you will find a sack of gold where it falls.

To injure a robin brings the worst of bad luck. Cross your fingers and make a wish when you see one drawing a worm out of the sod. It will come true. Robins nesting in a fruit tree means a bountiful fruit yield. If you see a bluebird make a wish before it flies away. A bluebird nesting near a house brings good luck to the settler. A bluebird perched on a mailbox indicates that some person will receive a love letter.

A woodpecker pecking on a tree near a house announces a caller. Some say it foretells a death. If one pecks on a roof there will be illness or death in the home. One never sees a blue jay on Friday be-

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\*See A. W. Schorger, Birds of Dane County.

cause these gay birds "carry sand to the Devil on that day." Yellow-birds predict that you "will have gold in your sock." Learn good house-keeping from the busy wren. One nesting near a home brings health and happiness to the farmer's family.

Chimney swifts introduce bedbugs into houses. If bob-white calls "Bob" only once there will be rain. If he repeats his call several times the weather will be fair. A wish made when the first whip-poor-will is seen in the spring, if kept a secret, will come true. If one calls in a tree near the house trouble or death will follow. When the meadowlarks sing sweetly a wedding is near. A martin house near a home brings prosperity. The souls of old folks depart with the migrating swallows in the fall of the year. Hummingbirds were dreaded by some people. If a cardinal flies past your door an unexpected visitor is coming. If you see one on Saturday your sweetheart is on his way to see you. If one flies in front of you you will receive a letter. If he crosses in front of you flying to the right you will have good luck, if to the left, bad luck. If one flies into the house it will catch fire. If turtle doves coo on the first day of the year the crops will be good. If one flies over a house or sits on the roof there will be a death. If you hear one calling when you are climbing a hill you will have bad luck the rest of the year.

Make a wish when you see a crow. If he does not flap his wings before he disappears you will have it. Never tell a secret when crows are near, they will hear it and spread the news. A crow's cry indicates fair weather that day. If one drinks at a stream near your home it will rain the next day. A large flock foretells a weather change. Crows are servants of the Evil One.

If you hear a hawk calling your sweetheart is near. A horseshoe under the doorstep and one in the fire will keep hawks away from the chickens. Throw a horseshoe at a hawk and he will never return. Put horseshoe nails in the stove, they will prevent their mischief. Owls are birds of bad omen. They are associated with witches. Their hooting always brings bad luck. Tie a knot in your dress or remove your shoes and cross them when you hear one. Eagles carry away children. Mothers were anxious when one was seen flying overhead. Herons and cranes bring the babies, fishing them out of the water. If ducks fly high the weather will be clear, if low, wet or stormy weather will follow. If it thunders while ducks are setting the eggs will not hatch. If one comes into your kitchen you will

never starve. Cold weather is approaching when the geese fly south. Rub warts with goose quills to remove them. Put a piece of web from a goose's foot into a girl's pocket and she will become your sweetheart.

Chickens ruffle their feathers before a rain. Their cackling during a rain is a sign of fair weather to follow. Tin or wooden cocks were formerly in use as weather vanes. The crowing of a rooster at night is a very bad sign. A crowing hen was a sign of misfortune. Whistling girls and crowing hens both come to bad ends. Peacocks are bad-luck birds. Never bring a peacock feather into the house or wear one. A dire calamity will happen to you. There were numerous other beliefs about birds.

### INDIAN BIRD LORE

"The Winnebago Indians and other tribes allude to the birds as "those with wings" or "the people with wings." They regard them as related to the Thunderers who exist and move in the air and heavens. In their sacred rites the Thunderers and the birds are addressed as "the people of above" or "those of above." By the Indians all creatures are spoken of as intimate friends.\* They have rights which must be regarded. To injure them needlessly brings sorrow and trouble.

The eagle is the monarch of the skies. He ranks next in importance to the powerful mythical thunderbird. The bald eagle presides in a sacred realm. From a lofty perch he guards the lakes and streams. Only warriors distinguished for their bravery and valor were permitted to wear eagle feathers. The manner of wearing them indicated the nature of the deed for which they were awarded. The hawk was the emblem of the hawk or warrior clan of the tribe. Hawk feathers and skins are found in nearly every war bundle. The owl is not especially noted for his wisdom. He is frequently spoken of as an old man. The hooting of a screech owl near a wigwam indicates a death in the family. Because of his predatory habits the crow is not highly esteemed. Gluttons are likened to the crow.

The loons are medicine birds, they can remain under water for a long time. They are the messengers for the spirits of the lower world. The migrations of geese and ducks indicates a change in the

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\*Bird Lore and Bird Songs.

weather. When redheads and mergansers appear a storm is sure to follow. The woodpecker is an interpreter for the gods, and especially for the Thunderers. His red markings indicate his connection with fire-making. He can also bring rain. The flicker is a sacred bird. His feathers may only be worn by the members of a certain fraternity. The blue jay is a jester. Once he had a beautiful voice as well as a beautiful coat. He became so vain of his fine voice and costume that he would not work and stole food from other birds. So the Great Spirit took away his melodious voice, which is now harsh and unmusical. He delights to play pranks on other feathered folk and on people.

The whip-poor-will is called "gagominak" meaning "sits that way." His appearance is a sure sign that danger of frost is past. The Indian woman may now plant her corn. The quail is the "whistle bird." Indians on the warpath repeated his call to locate each other. Indian babies were hushed by his voice. The oriole song is "hochunk-ra-haj-rena", meaning "the Winnebago have come." The bluebird is "a part of the sky." To harm him or his nest is to bring disaster. The hummingbird is called by a name which means "feeds on tobacco blossoms." He is a very swift flyer. A warrior was once transformed into a humming bird and was thereby enabled to approach the enemy and to detect their number and movements at a great distance. The hummingbird recovered from the witches the seeds of the sacred tobacco plant, which they had stolen from the Indians. He thus brought back health and peace to the tribes.

The little chickadee was the first to record the passing moons for the redman, which he did by notching his tongue. The feathers and skin of the tanager were used in witchcraft proceedings. The swallow is a messenger carrying messages from the upper world spirits to the Indians.

The merry meadowlark is highly regarded. Once when the Indians were starving two spirit men came and told them where to find game. These men became meadowlarks singing songs of good cheer in the grass lands. The Indians never harm one. The horned lark is an oracle and weather prophet. His song changes with the weather.

The wren hears the slightest sound. If you have a secret beware of him. The robin knows the secrets of fire-making which he has been taught by the Thunderers.

All of our Wisconsin Indian tribes have similar beliefs and customs connected with bird life. Among the Chippewa the bald eagle is considered a war bird. His flight is rapid and high. His black and white feathers are highly prized.

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