



Angelia Kumlien Main (*photograph courtesy of Hoard Historical Museum, Fort Atkinson*)

Angie Main's Bird Companions

by Michael J. Mossman

When we think of the early days of ornithology in Wisconsin, the Kumlien family comes foremost to mind. Thure Kumlien emigrated to the Lake Koshkonong area from Sweden in 1843 and collected a wealth of information on that area's birdlife over the ensuing decades (Schorger 1946). His eldest son, Ludwig, from an early age carried on this work (Schorger 1945), which culminated in *The Birds of Wisconsin* (Kumlien and Hollister 1903). The third generation of Kumliens also included an ornithologist not so well known as Thure and Ludwig.

This was Angelia Kumlien Main (1883–1952), daughter of Thure's second son, Theodore. She grew up on a farm near her grandfather's home at Lake Koshkonong, graduated from Whitewater Normal, and taught school near Albion and in Fort Atkinson and Lake Mills. In 1908 she married John Main, and for over 40 years they farmed near Fort Atkinson. Angie maintained an active interest in history, genealogy, and nature, writing for periodicals and local newspapers, and speaking to schools and organizations in southern Wisconsin. She served as

a curator and vice-president of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin almost until her death in 1952, when she was remembered by the Society as "a lover of birds and flowers and an accomplished genealogist . . . gentle, soft-spoken and firm . . . she will always be associated in our thought with Fort Atkinson and the beautiful region round about it" (Sellery 1952). More information on Main is given by Gerling (1925), State Historical Society of Wisconsin (1960), and the Jefferson County Union (14 August 1925, 2 September 1952).

Main's most significant ornithological writings (Main 1927, 1939, 1943–44, 1945) chronicled the life and work of Thure Kumlien, who documented his observations with specimens, personal notes, and letters to ornithologists, such as Thomas Brewer, but published almost nothing himself. Main conveyed many of Kumlien's notes, journals, and correspondence to the State Historical Society archives.

Main (1920, 1921, 1922, 1927, 1944) also published descriptions of her own experiences in the Koshkonong area. She was especially fasci-

nated by local wetlands with their conifer or hardwood timber, extensive beds of emergent vegetation, and abundant bird life. A visit to the same sites today shows the sort of decline that is probably typical of many southern Wisconsin wetlands and their surroundings over the past 70 years.

During her lifetime Angie Main was best known for her book, *Bird Companions: With Description and Biography of One-Hundred and Fifty Songbirds Found East of the Mississippi. Paying Especial Attention to These Birds in Wisconsin* (1925). This popular account was designed not to provide new information as much as to spark interest in bird life and its conservation. As she said in the preface,

"In writing this book, I have tried not 'to preach,' but to let the birds speak for themselves, and so teach my readers to love them for their own sakes, not for their utility alone, but for their bright songs, their beauty of form and plumage, their grace, their powers of flight, their helplessness, their skill in nest building and for the loving care and protection of their young.

"If, after reading this volume, when you are attracted by a new bird or hear a new song, you will pause to look and listen and spend some time in "Birdland" and then keep on until you have several bird companions and know the ways of 'Birdland,' my object in writing this book will have been accomplished."

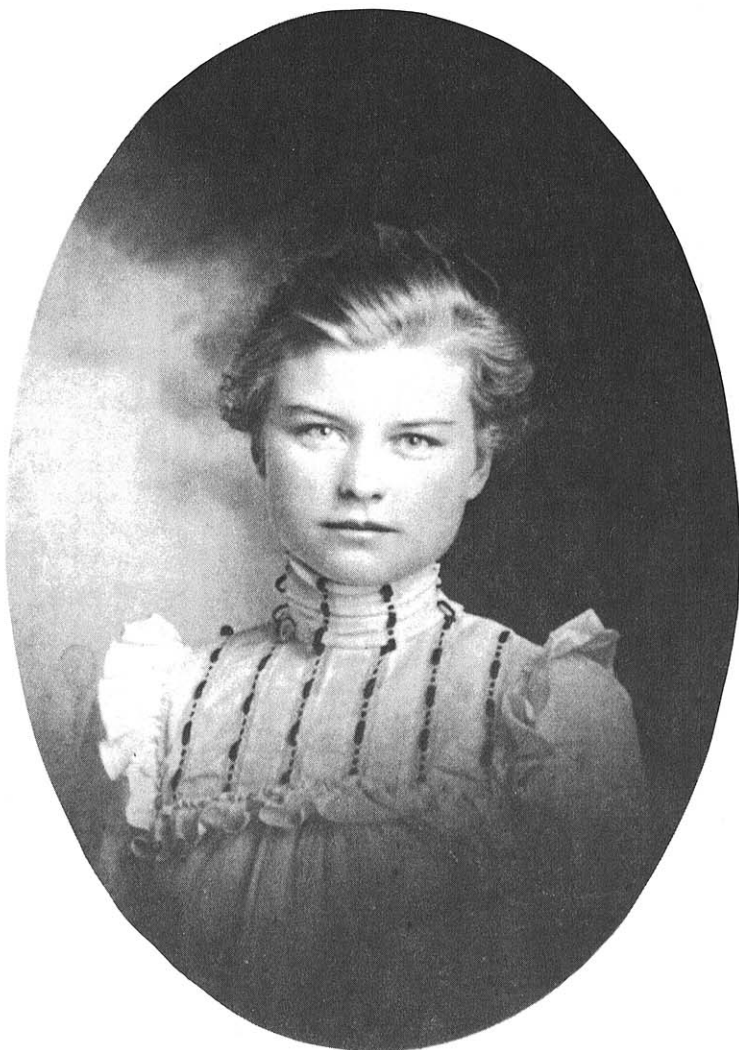
The book contains accounts of 150 songbird species and subspecies, with several black-and-white photographs, some of which she apparently took herself, and a few color illustrations, most by Bruno Ertz. There are frequent lines of verse by Main, John Burroughs, Frank Bolles, Edith Thomas, and others. An appendix contains a general-

ized "key for identification by conspicuous markings" organized by dominant plumage color. The prominent ornithologist Robert Ridgway wrote a brief introduction and interjected a few comments within the text. *Bird Companions* can be found in many libraries and can be purchased through used book shops for well under 10 dollars.

When *Bird Companions* appeared in 1925, it had been more than 20 years since a major work had been published on Wisconsin birds, and there were few outlets for publication, even though significant field work was being done by Gromme, Jackson, Stoddard, and others. So it is not surprising that this book gave Main a place as Wisconsin's foremost authority on birds (Gerling 1925), a reputation fostered by her Kumlien heritage and by Ridgway's endorsement.

Bird Companions was written in the tradition of popular authors, such as Florence Merriam (1889) and Neltje Blanchan (1897), who humanized birds and, thus, endeared them to children and general readers. This apparently served the book's purpose well. The Jefferson County Union (14 August 1925) headlined its review of the book "Birds, Hobby of Farm Woman, Have Strange Traits, Some Almost Human, Book Reveals." Gerling (1925) said "Mrs. Main does not present her material in a dry, catalog-style, but in an intensely interesting and readable manner. Appropriate verse and pleasantly intimate observations made in the swamps and wildwoods of old Koshkonong liven the pages." Here is a sample:

"The yellow-breasted chat is the imp of all birdland, possessing such a marked individuality that he is a bird of more



Angelia Kumlien Main in her youth (*photograph courtesy of Hoard Historical Museum, Fort Atkinson*)

than usual interest. How well I recall my first introduction to this bird clown, beginning an acquaintance which has lasted twenty years. It was a hot day in July, in an opening in the thick woods, where grew hazel bushes and blackberries, the latter of which I had been sent to pick. After working for some time, all the while enjoying my surroundings, I felt that I was being laughed at and barked at by a boy and his dog. . . . After some searching and much listening, I found the actor in this strange vocal performance to be his clownship, the yellow-breasted chat."

The species accounts are written mostly in terms of human traits. The Hairy Woodpecker is a "plain, industrious, useful bird citizen. . . . He works at getting his bread and butter, building his home, and raising his family." Sapsuckers are "bright, handsome, clever birds", Pileated Woodpeckers are "noble-looking", Red-headed Woodpeckers are "jolly, interesting, and handsome", and the Northern Flicker "very gay and beautiful . . . a gallant lover."

Only a few birds are judged critically. House Sparrows, are "quarrelsome nuisances . . . foreign rogues . . . vulgar, noisy hoodlums," though "quick-witted and with untiring domestic habits" worthy of emulation. And of the Brown-headed Cowbird she states: "No poet has deigned to write about these shirks, these shiftless, shameless interlopers of our bird world. We do not connect these birds with sentiment or with any tender feelings whatever; nor do they deserve any, for they are lazy, indifferent nest parasites." Moreover, they are "polygamists!"

What may have been "intensely interesting" to a general readership in 1925 may seem overly sentimental and tiresome to many of us today, as it cer-

tainly was to some ornithologists and naturalists of the 1920's. And yet this writing shows closeness between the author and her subjects, constrained as it may be by anthropomorphism. In his Introduction, Ridgway states that "It is very evident that the author has not only been a lover of birds from early childhood but was literally "brought up" in intimate companionship with them and therefore has enjoyed unusual opportunities for learning of their ways."

This companionship flourished under the influence of her family, especially grandfather Thure, who had a profound effect on her although he died when she was but five years old. She developed an abiding affection for him and for the birdlife with which he acquainted her, and she dedicated *Bird Companions* to his memory.

In *Koshkonong Naturalist* (1943-44), she recalled some of these early days:

"I recollect his taking me into his parlor down at the old farm, his raising the shades and saying, 'Aunt Sophia likes it dark in here so the sun won't fade the carpet, but I like it light.' Then he would show me the best of his collection of mounted birds and animals which he kept in this room. He once entertained me by teaching me to draw a pig. . . .

After her grandfather died,

"I called upon or visited Great-aunt Sophia Wallberg, Grandmother Kummlien's sister, at Grandfather's home several times a week. The walk down through the woods to the house was an especially beautiful one to me. After we left our yard we followed a road which ran beside a long row of Indian mounds. . . . Beautiful Lake Koshkonong was in plain sight all the way except where a small piece of woods, which we called 'the breaking,' hid our view. This piece of unpastured

woodland, with a rail fence along the side of the road, was left in its natural state to save the beautiful ferns and flowers—maidenhair ferns and yellow lady-slippers grew there in great abundance.

"When I went after the cows at night, I used to wish they would be way down by the old spring so I could stop in to see this great-aunt of mine. She used to let my older brother and me take the discarded mounted birds out of the old log house [Thure's former home] to play with, if we would put them back again. Our favorites were a pelican, a blue heron, a sand-hill crane, and a pink flamingo. They were tall and mounted in an upright position on boards that we could drag around and play horse with. The driver had to hold the lines with one hand and keep the bird right side up.

"It was always of great interest to explore the old log house. . . . The live squirrels and the chipmunks used to run around in there among the mounted ones and at our approach would sit upright, so that it was hard to tell which were alive.

"A pair of house wrens raised a family between two logs where the plaster had fallen out. The barn swallows plastered their mud homes against the walls and flew in and out of the broken windows unmindful that this was once the home of a great naturalist. . . .

"I loved to go into the big room, or loft, upstairs, where on the floor was a huge pile of letters. . . . After I was older, it was a great pleasure for me to read those letters, many of which were intensely interesting and which I took home with me. The letters I found from Edward Lee Greene, who later became a well-known botanist, were my favorites [See, Main 1929]. As I sat there on that stack of letters with the bees and hornets flying around, I was lost to the present and was following this soldier lad through the Civil War, then later over the plains and mountains of Colorado and California in his search for flowers and new plants."

Eventually Angie attended White-water State Teachers College, where some of Thure's many bird mounts were used: "At first when I became too homesick, I visited the Zoological Department and there had it out with Grandfather's birds. His name on the labels was a great comfort, and that wonderful collection seemed to belong to me."

Some of the most notable passages from *Bird Companions* are those from Main's childhood:

"One of the pleasantest memory pictures of my childhood is one seen from the west dining room window out at our old farm house. I need but to close my eyes to bring it back; an open window full of happy, wondering children, a bed of gayly-colored phlox, the air laden with their rich perfume, and humming birds, which seemed to hang in mid-air before these flowers, as they rifled them of their nectar. To this day the sight of a humming bird brings back the odor of the phlox. And then also comes to mind the sly chase we gave those birds around the petunia bed, in the hopes that we might catch one and hold it in our hands for a moment to see if it were really a bird. . . . Fortunate indeed are the children who have brothers and sisters, birds and flowers for their playmates.

"As long as I can remember a case of mounted birds with one of these beautiful [cerulean] warblers in the front sat on our parlor table. As a child, I used to look at this bird and plan that when I grew to be a big lady, I would have a fine silk party dress just the color of this plumage and trimmed with black velvet.

"When I was a child, the phoebes returned year after year and nested above my bedroom window, which was in the second story above the porch roof. Here the birds felt secure from cats and other enemies, but they were not out of reach of small girls, who repeatedly crawled out

of the window onto the slanting porch roof to count the four to six white eggs or to see if the first little birds had left the nest and if the second brood was yet hatched. This the old birds did not mind, as we never harmed, but only admired them. The day the phoebes came back to us and began to repair the old nest or to build a new one was always a red-letter day.

"Years ago while visiting an Indian camp one winter in the heavy woods along Koshkonong Creek in company with the Indian children, we found great pleasure in watching one of these [red-bellied] woodpeckers play around a large tree trunk. He went around the trunk so fast that he looked like a ball of red and gray."

Main's observations came from a time when Wisconsin was less populous and less urban, with fewer human distractions, and where agricultural practices were friendlier toward wildlife; when many people were closer to nature on a daily basis and were more likely to learn about it in their own gardens, farms, and neighborhoods than from the various media on which we rely so much today. It's instructive to a more "sophisticated" generation of bird watchers and ornithologists to be reminded of the pleasure and intimate knowledge that a patient observer can gain by watching, listening, and living among even the common sorts of birds:

"At evening when the farm work is all done, the chickens gone to roost, the cows to their night pasture, and everything about the farm is settled and quiet, the vesper sparrow's song is a vocal expression of peace.

"One beautiful morning during the height of the May migration when nature was in her most joyous mood, the birds in the nearby woodland were having a full chorus practice. Not content to be

a back seat listener, I sauntered to the middle of the grove where I occupied a box seat in the shape of a large granite stone. In the treetops above my head and all around could be heard the joyous notes of the different birds. The silver notes of the wood thrush, the oriole's happy song, the robin's cheery lay, and the animated strain of the vireos fell upon my ears. From the meadow across the road could be heard the bobolink's tinkling fireworks and the fife-like whistle of the meadow lark, and joining in from the bushes and lower branches of trees . . . the black-throated blue warblers sang their drowsy, languid "zee, zee, zwee". Heard alone, the song is not remarkable, but it is charming in the general chorus. It possesses soothing qualities which put one at his ease and in perfect harmony with the things about him."

In the '20's it was also acceptable to keep wild pets. "A gentle little lady who lives in Lake Mills . . . and who is a great friend of the birds, has a pet blue jay. When she sits out on the porch with her sewing, he alights on her lap and pulls the thread out of her needle, then he alights on her head and pulls the hairpins out of her hair."

Those too were the days before common names of birds were standardized. As with so many things, our concern with efficiency has sacrificed some of the richness of older ways. Not that we should return to that confusion, which argued the necessity of scientific bird names, but these colloquial names often convey more of the character and haunts of a bird species than the "lowest common denominators" that have since become standard. The alternate names mentioned in *Bird Companions* include "bull-bat," "summer yellow bird," "log-cock," "bee martin," "snowflake," "Harry wicker," "tit-lark," and my favorite (for the Hermit Thrush) "swamp angel."

True to the standard of her day, Main preached the usefulness of birds (even the despicable cowbird), particularly their consumption of harmful insects and weed seeds. The advance of clean farming, with its reliance on potent pesticides and herbicides seems to have rendered these arguments for bird conservation less pertinent, while at the same time magnifying the threat to bird populations. Conservation's more recent rallying cry of "biological diversity" still argues for usefulness, but like Main we are largely driven by a subjective desire to protect the richness of the natural world and our "companions" in it.

Unfortunately, *Bird Companions* presents little historical information about the distribution, abundance, and habits of Wisconsin birds, other than what was drawn (with no citation whatsoever) from Kumlien and Hollister (1903). As with the latter publication, *Bird Companions* gives rather scant treatment to northern Wisconsin birds, and it repeats several of that work's oversights (e.g., that Mourning Warblers do not breed in Wisconsin) and dubious statements (e.g., that White-crowned Sparrows and Orange-crowned Warblers breed here). In some cases it's impossible to know whether Main's descriptions of nesting habits, for example, refer to her own Wisconsin experience or are simply paraphrased from other texts. More convincing is her description of several Blue Grosbeak sightings in Jefferson County.

Nevertheless, a comparison of Main's observations with Kumlien and Hollister (1903), other historical sources, and current knowledge does help us recognize trends in a few species. For example, neither Kumlien and Hollister

(1903) nor King (1883) found Wood Thrushes nesting in towns, although this had been noted in eastern states (King 1883, Baird et al. 1874). Main says that "Years ago the wood thrush was considered to be an inhabitant only of the deep, shadowy woods, but of late years he has changed his haunts somewhat, and has gained enough confidence in people so that he is seen along shaded village streets and on lawns which contain trees and shrubbery." It seems since to have abandoned villages and farmsteads as breeding habitat.

Main's information on Yellow-headed Blackbirds is also original (see also, Main 1927) and proves that their decline on Lake Koshkonong (where only a few breed today) has occurred since the 1920's:

"These birds are friendly and will walk about in dooryards if there happen to be any near their chosen habitat. After rainstorms, great flocks of them have been seen feeding on bugs and insects off the lawn around the club house on Black Hawk Island in Lake Koshkonong. They breed in great numbers around this lake."

The Northern Cardinal, common throughout southern Wisconsin today, was just beginning to spread into our state during Main's time:

"Of late years they have been frequently seen as far north as Wisconsin in the winter time and very often in the spring and summer where they are now permanent residents. It is hoped that in time they will become as common here as they are in the East."

The Red-winged Blackbird today is widespread during the nesting season in upland hayfields and oldfields; but during the 1920's it had yet to expand

from its original wetland breeding habitats:

“With a sailor’s fondness for water, the red-winged, or swamp blackbirds will surely be found near it. Their chosen haunts are low meadows, marshes, and reedy margins of ponds and lakes and running water. . . Owing to their partiality for low, wet ground for breeding places, they are somewhat local in their distribution.”

Today, we would be hard pressed to duplicate Main’s experience with Bank Swallows, which have certainly declined since then:

“The sociable little bank swallows are seen in immense flocks after the young are raised. Near Rock River in southern Wisconsin, a flock containing between two and three thousand were counted this July (1924). Hundreds of them would fly from the fences and telegraph wires, where they were resting, and sail off into the air to feed, and then again light and rest for a time. . . . It was an impressive sight and sound, . . . thousands of these graceful birds sailing, skimming, hovering above, around, and about us like a dense cloud, until they seemed to darken the landscape. . . .

“In the aforesaid neighborhood there were high sand banks where these happy birds nested in colonies. Some of the banks rose from the river, while others were high hills with roads cut through, thus forming steep banks which served admirably as homes for the swallows. On one side of the road I counted one hundred and fifty holes that had been excavated by them.”

Although Kumlien and Hollister (1903) found Lark Sparrows decreasing in southern Wisconsin after the breaking of the prairie sod, Main apparently saw them still in “wooded pastures, roadsides, [and] hay fields“, and

recalled from childhood a nest in a Jefferson County hayfield. This species has since become quite uncommon except in the western counties. Orchard Orioles, too, were apparently more widespread then: “Here in southern Wisconsin they are fairly common, even nesting in orchards on the edges of towns.”

It was not only orioles that frequented orchards in the early 1900’s, for of all the habitats to which Main refers, it is orchards that seem most surprisingly rich in birdlife. Among their breeding birds she includes Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Great Crested Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Cedar Waxwing, and others, along with a host of migrants. The breeding avifauna of this habitat has become rather meager since then, probably because of the loss of “home” orchards and the increased efficiency of commercial operations (Graber and Graber 1963, Mossman and Lange 1982).

Angie Main wrote at a time when native bird species were more accessible in everyday life, when natural habitats were less fragmented, and when agricultural and urban habitats were richer in birdlife. She found her bird companions close by, without the benefit of today’s sophisticated field guides, checklists, optics, and audio tapes. Today, these aids and our greater mobility compensate somewhat for more depauperate landscapes, yet these factors tend to preoccupy us and sometimes encourage us to rush along and “miss the forest for the trees.” Simple, firsthand encounters with birds, no matter how common the species, can yield satisfying associations among birds, places, and feelings, and an intimate awareness of the character

of birds. It is the quality rather than the sheer quantity of encounters that matters, for such an awareness does not result from a long checklist any more than a long list of people we "know" can substitute for any set of true friends.

Angie Main understood this, and we would do well to accept her challenge to "put on your rubber boots and get into this old scow with me and we will paddle around to that clump of tall rushes", and to "come with me, in memory, please, to the orchard out back of the old farm home."

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