WSO: The First Fifty Years

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology has experienced tremendous growth since its founding in 1939. A retrospective view of the society's accomplishments in research, publication, education, and conservation suggests that these have been a successful fifty years.

by Samuel D. Robbins

One shelf in one of my bookcases holds a series of journals—234 of them. They are of varying thickness, but each measures 6"×9". I could have had them bound, but have chosen instead to keep them boxed, where I could refer to them again, and again and again. I have referred to them more times than I can count. Each bears the title, The Passenger Pigeon.

The first 18 issues are monthly mimeographed pages, dated January 1939 through June 1940. The next 21 are monthly printed pages, July 1940 through March 1942. Another 38 issues are quarterlies, bearing dates from April 1942 through July 1951. The last 1951 issue was labeled “winter” instead of “October.” My magazine collection includes another 152 quarterly issues, dated spring 1952 through winter 1988.

I know why the change was made from “October” to “winter.” It had long been difficult to maintain a punctual publication schedule. A seasonal title offered more flexibility than did a specific month. Every editor the journal has ever had—W. E. Scott, N. R. Barger, S. D. Robbins, E. M. Roark, N. P. Dahlstrand, C. A. Kemper, and S. A. Temple—can tell you how hard it is to maintain a publication schedule with an all-volunteer editorial staff. Not one penny has ever been paid an editor, artist, field-note compiler, manuscript contributor, envelope stuffer, or addressor in the production of this magnificent journal. As I contemplate fifty years of accomplishment by WSO members, I think of this as one of its great strengths. Amateurs and professionals—we have worked together—contributing what each of us has to offer, to advance the purposes of WSO.

GATHERING FIELD NOTES

What are these purposes? I turn to Volume 1, Number 5: “The purpose of the Society shall be to stimulate interest in and to promote the study of the birds of Wisconsin, especially in the field, and to bring together and permanently record accurate and authentic data relative thereto.”
From the beginning, *The Passenger Pigeon* published the field observations of its readers. These were seen as the raw materials for any and all further investigations that might follow. Editor Scott commented: “The ultimate aim is to accumulate as detailed information as possible on all phases of Wisconsin ornithology. Some day someone will write a state bird book. The bulletin notes help in recording data on breeding, range, abundance, arrival and departure, habitat, nesting habits, etc., for that book.” Scott wrote prophetically.

Through a succession of field-note compilers, a system evolved for gathering field notes quarterly, summarizing them in each issue of *The Passenger Pigeon*, and forwarding significant information for continent-wide consumption in *American Birds*. For 15 years I attempted for each season: (1) to send out report forms and reminders, (2) to read every report and check for accuracy of date and identification, (3) to correspond with an observer whenever additional verification seemed warranted, (4) to compile a seasonal summary for *The Passenger Pigeon*, (5) to edit details of rarities for a “By the Wayside” column, (6) to pass on to *American Birds* information about the rarer species, and (7) to copy on file cards for permanent keeping the first and last migration dates for each species in each county.

It was too much! As the number of field-note contributors grew from 20 to 80 or more, the job had to be divided. It is still a large job for an Associate Editor, four seasonal Field-note Compilers (since 1959), a five-person records Committee (since 1979), and a File Keeper who computerizes reports. Since 1972 Daryl Tessen has been keeping us supplied with forms for reporting seasonal observations, Christmas Bird Counts, May-day counts, and for providing details for the rarities we see.

In 1982 a second avenue for reporting field observations, the Wisconsin Checklist Project, was developed under the guidance of Stanley Temple. The weekly reports submitted by over 400 cooperators have proved especially helpful in determining seasonal and geographical patterns of abundance. In time the project will also detect changes in abundance and range expansions or contractions for species on the fringe of their summer and winter ranges.

**WINTER AND SUMMER BIRD COUNTS**

Participation in the annual Christmas Bird Count was encouraged from the beginning of WSO’s existence. The first issue for 1940 (2:1–11) summarized 12 counts in 1939; 42 birders found 14,074 birds of 92 species. During World War II the number of counts per year dwindled to 7, but the count results were faithfully summarized in *The Passenger Pigeon* as well as in *Bird Lore*, forerunner to *American Birds*. By fits and spurts the number of counts has risen: 28 in 1949, 36 in 1959, 65 in 1969, and 76 in 1979. In 1987 the combined efforts of 1356 observers in 79 areas produced totals of 387,307 individuals of 139 species (*Passenger Pigeon* 50:21–35).

The success in counting birds in winter, when migration is at a minimum, led to a comparable desire to census summer populations during a period when birds are relatively stationary. What about a summer bird count, conducted between 10 and 30 June to take advantage of the summer song period, with observers covering the same territory in succeeding years? The idea seemed plausible, but skeptics noted that people were used to laying binoculars aside when the
spring migration ceased. Can they be persuaded to participate? In 1961 supporters inaugurated 29 counts. In 1965 there were 56 count areas, 22 of which had a four- or five-year history (Passenger Pigeon 28:47-62).

The Summer Bird Counts undoubtedly would have expanded in ensuing years, had it not been for the advent of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s newly organized North American Breeding Bird Survey. When I accepted the responsibility as coordinator for Wisconsin’s part in this project, I made a random selection of 70 BBS routes (4 per degree-block), and sought volunteers (largely from Summer Bird Count participants) to run each of the 70 routes in 1966 and in succeeding years. The transition from the state-wide project to the continent-wide venture went smoothly. With the exceptions of 1966 and 1968, 60 or more routes have been completed each year; 19 have a full 22-year history, and another 28 have been missed only once or twice. Summaries of the BBS have appeared in The Passenger Pigeon at approximately five-year intervals. Data concerning decreasing species have been given to the DNR Bureau of Endangered Resources.

SPECIES AND AREA STUDIES

In the pages of The Passenger Pigeon I have read of research concerning species of special interest, in which the findings of one or two writers have been augmented by data supplied by numerous WSO members. Range-and-population studies have focused on the Pine Grosbeak, Bald Eagle, European Starling, Purple Martin, Great Egret, Northern Cardinal, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Dickcissel, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, Red-tailed Hawk, Evening Grosbeak, Cliff Swallow, Great Blue Heron, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Osprey, Double-crested Cormorant, Sandhill Crane, Snowy Owl, Common Loon, and Loggerhead Shrike.


Wisconsin’s Favorite Bird Haunts began serially in The Passenger Pigeon in 1953, then expanded into book form in 1961. It was no accident that this volume described only 30 areas, 25 of which were in the southern half of the state. Most WSO members lived south of a LaCrosse-to-Green Bay line, and they had explored but little the birds of the northern half of the state. Great strides in exploring the northern counties came with the 1960s, making possible a much-needed expanded volume compiled by Daryl Tessen in 1976.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

While The Passenger Pigeon was conceived as essential to the purpose of
WSO’s existence, and got its start even before the Society’s first organizational meeting, additional publications were envisioned in the earliest years. There was an immediate need for a pocket checklist showing all but the rarest Wisconsin birds. Such checklists already existed in Madison, Waukesha, Milwaukee, and Green Bay as products of local bird clubs. The checklist developed for WSO has gone through several revisions, sold many thousands, and is still a best-seller.

There was an immediate need, too, for a more expanded checklist, listing all Wisconsin species—rarety included—and showing graphically the times of year when each species occur. I recall several of the meetings I had with Walter Scott, Norv Barger, Elton Bussewitz and Earl Loyster in the preparation of Wisconsin Birds: A Preliminary Check List With Migration Charts. The literature they consulted was old. The recent field work was sparse. They felt confident they had a correct list of species, but were less confident they had the correct timing of migration. After consulting experts like A. W. Schorger and O. J. Gromme, they published in 1942.

The booklet proved popular, and it was reprinted in 1950 with a selected bibliography of Wisconsin ornithology prepared by Schorger. Not until a third edition was prepared in 1960 by Barger, Robbins, and Roy Lound did we feel safe in dropping “preliminary” from the title. The same threesome prepared the 1975 revision, adding habitat information and replacing “charts” with “graphs” in the title. For the 1988 revision, the late Roy Lound was replaced by Stanley Temple, and the migration graphs were improved by data amassed in the “Wisconsin Checklist Project” and by computer-generated graphics.

Some articles that appeared in The Passenger Pigeon as serials were reprinted as pamphlets (Jackson’s “Summer Birds of Northwestern Wisconsin”; Schorger’s “Some Wisconsin Naturalists”). In 1947, coincident with the unveiling of the Passenger Pigeon monument in Wyalusing Park, WSO published Silent Wings, edited by Walter Scott with articles by Aldo Leopold, H. H. T. Jackson, and A. W. Schorger.

It had been a long time since Kumlien and Hollister published The Birds of Wisconsin (1903). It appeared that a new state bird book was still some years away. So the editorial staff of The Passenger Pigeon made plans to reprint the Kumlien and Hollister book and asked A. W. Schorger to make comments and additions to include recent sightings. This appeared serially in our magazine between 1948 and 1951, and in book form in 1951.

In 1961, the WSO directors decided to try a monthly newsletter in addition to the quarterly journal. The first four issues came out under the by-line of Harold Liebher, with a blank masthead where a title should appear. Then Ralph Morse won a naming contest, and the Badger Birder appeared in 1962. Since 1964, the by-line has been Mary Donald’s. The Badger Birder specializes in bringing news of current and future events, sponsored either by WSO or by local bird clubs, describing hot-spots where rare birds are likely to be seen, even mentioning what rarities have been observed. At last count, Mary had edited 351 issues!

Two more recent WSO publications are Mossman and Lange’s Breeding Birds of the Baraboo Hills (1982) and Temple and Harris’ Birds of the Apostle Islands (1985). The Society also played an important role in the publication of Tem-

**The Supply Department**

The idea of stocking and selling bird books seemed like a further means of promoting WSO aims. It was in the minds of leaders like Walter Scott from earliest days, but the World War II period did not seem like an auspicious time to start. Then in April, 1947, the directors approved plans to inaugurate a Supply Department. N. R. Barger became the first manager. He and wife Clara spent untold hours ordering and selling books, keeping records, and setting up displays at each of the Society’s annual conventions.

In 1955 Harold Kruse took over the leadership, and moved a substantial book supply to his home near Loganville. Again, it required a team effort, with wife Carla giving great assistance. The team eventually included Ed Prins for the sale of binoculars, and Ed Peartree for the sale of recordings. The Kruse’s Hickory Hill Farm was headquarters for the Supply Department until 1978, when the operation was taken over by Chuck Gilmore.

For years the Supply Department chair has disseminated a catalog to the members before Christmas. Through the years, profits from book sales have helped put the Society on a solid financial footing, and have helped keep the annual membership fees low.

**Conservation Concerns**

Can people care about birds and not show concern for the environment on which birds depend? In the early 1950s the issue came to the fore with WSO members. The question was raised in 1952 when Fred and Fran Hamerstrom explained the decline of the Greater Prairie-Chicken. They had developed a plan for saving these birds on the Buena Vista Marsh in central Wisconsin that involved land purchases in a checkerboard pattern. Would WSO show the way by purchasing a 40-acre plot for $1500? The response was enthusiastic. Jerry Vogelsang, WSO Conservation Chair, wrote several articles. One issue of *The Passenger Pigeon* rang with such slogans as: “Want to save the chickens, mister? Send your gift to treasurer Frister!” The needed funds were oversubscribed. Other conservation groups responded similarly. The decline in Greater Prairie-Chickens has been arrested; but this promises to be a threatened species for the foreseeable future.

An opportunity to preserve scenic forest land within the Baraboo Hills developed in 1958. WSO members had for years harbored the hope that they could purchase an ecologically important plot and erect a nature center. Donations from members made possible the 1960 purchase of 30 acres along Honey Creek north of Leland, plus a 55-acre bog immediately thereafter. When another 40-acre plot south of the bog became available in 1962, WSO members responded generously. A gift from Harry Steenbock made possible a further 85-acre expansion, now marked with a “Steenbock Forest” sign. Continued gifts spurred additional adjacent purchases, enlarging the Honey Creek Natural Area to its present 310-acre size.

Two of the prime supporters of this venture were David and Hazel Cox, who lived close to this property. Soon after Dave’s death in 1970, plans for erecting a nature center crystallized. The new building was dedicated two years later. It now bears the name “David and Hazel
Cox Memorial Nature Center.” Many WSO supporters helped erect the center. Through annual work bees, members have assisted with property maintenance, and profited from Ed Peartree’s banding demonstrations. Since 1985 a May “bird-a-thon” and “band-a-thon” have raised funds to help pay the real estate taxes.

The increased emphasis on conservation showed up in other ways. In 1956 the statement of purpose in the Articles of Incorporation was revised to read: “The purpose of the Society shall be to stimulate interest in and promote the scientific study of birds in Wisconsin toward a better understanding of their biology and the basis of their preservation and conservation.”

The winter 1957 issue of The Passenger Pigeon was devoted entirely to the use and misuse of pesticides. An additional 200 copies were printed and distributed to legislators, foresters, and chemical sprayers. Additional efforts contributed to the sequence of events that led to the banning of DDT in 1969.

When the DNR first prepared a list of endangered and threatened species in 1972, WSO offered encouragement and advice. With each succeeding revision of this list, WSO has supplied helpful data and recommendations.

The various conservation chairs have approached many other issues by writing letters, making telephone calls, and attending public hearings. Members have passed resolutions at annual meetings. Included among the issues have been: keeping the Mourning Dove on the protected list; placing all hawks and owls on the protected list; protesting goose-hunting on the Horicon National Wildlife Refuge; supporting ORAP; opposing Project Sanguine; opposing poletrapping of raptors; saving the Sister Is-

lands in Door County; supporting the plan to identify natural areas worthy of preservation, helping to census the bird life in many of these parcels; and supporting the Lower Wisconsin State Riverway plan.

EDUCATION AND PUBLICITY ACTIVITIES

Long before the Board of Directors established an Education Committee, individual members were giving public lectures and talks to school children. When an education-and-publicity committee was established in 1947 it began by initiating field trips and summer campouts, introducing members to new birds and teaching identification skills. The practice continues today, with ten or more trips scheduled each year, in addition to the trips incorporated into the annual meeting programs.

A second thrust was the collection of colored slides for education programs. At first slides were loaned out. Eventually an 80-slide set was produced, together with two scripts—one for adults, one for children. The slide sets have been produced by the hundred, and sold both to schools and to interested individuals. The time needed to promote these ventures adequately led to the establishment of three committees (education, field trips, slide sales), where one position used to suffice.

The serious decline of the Eastern Bluebird led to additional educational work. First the Paul Romigs and then the Vince Bauldrys took the lead within the Green Bay Bird Club. WSO then helped publish a Bluebird Trails Guide, giving adults and members of youth groups specific directions for making, erecting, and monitoring nest boxes. In 1962 WSO assumed state leadership for
the nest box program, hoping to establish bluebird trails in every agricultural county. For a while it seemed too little too late, as bluebirds continued to decline. Breeding Bird Survey figures showed the decline continuing through 1979. Hundreds, thousands of nest boxes continued to be erected, and a new statewide group, the Bluebird Restoration Association of Wisconsin was organized. An encouraging increase in the state population finally became evident in 1985.

When Dixie Larkin was Education Chair in the early 1950s, she helped raise funds for the establishment of a new Audubon camp near Sarona. The camp opened in 1955, and for 30 years provided a valuable learning experience for hundreds of school teachers and community youth leaders.

I wonder how many of the state’s local bird clubs owe their existence in a large part to WSO influence. No deliberate promotional efforts have been made to spawn new clubs. But, active WSO members were usually at the forefront of each new organization, be it a new chapter of the National Audubon Society or an independent group. At various times WSO conventions have been hosted by the Benjamin F. Goss Bird Club (Waukesha), the Ned Hollister Bird Club (Beloit), the Hoy Nature Club (Racine), the Oshkosh Bird Club, the Green Bay Bird Club, the Owen J. Gromme Ornithological Society (Fond du Lac), the S. Paul Jones Bird Club (Oconomowoc), the Chippewa Wildlife Society (Chippewa Falls), the Chequamegon Bird Club (Medford), and Audubon chapters at Milwaukee, Madison, LaCrosse, Fond du Lac, and Green Bay. For several years the Society has had a booth at the Milwaukee Sentinel sports show.

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

In a sense, every Christmas Bird Count, every Breeding Bird Survey, every field-note report, every completed documentation of a rare bird sighting is a research activity. Each contributes toward WSO’s stated purpose. Howard Young’s 1964 summary (Passenger Pigeon 26:22–25) told of the Society’s first cooperative range-and-population studies, and the eventual formation of a Research Committee in 1948. For some projects of a historical nature, WSO members made valuable contributions; in other instances, member input was minimal.

Increasingly the encouragement for research has taken the form of identifying research-oriented individuals—college students and others—and helping them select workable projects. Happily funds have become available for this purpose. At the time of WSO’s 25th anniversary, Harry Steenbock made a substantial donation, part of which was set aside as a scholarship fund. The first Steenbock Scholarship was awarded in 1966, and it has been followed by numerous others in succeeding years.

The WSO endowment fund, begun in a small way in 1942, rose to $28,000 in 1986. This made possible additional scholarship funding. Since 1983 the Society has offered a $200–400 scholarship each year to a potential researcher.

Frances Hamerstrom stressed the need for non-professional researchers when she wrote (Passenger Pigeon 45:111–112): “Where are the housewives? the factory workers? the kids down the street? Aren’t any of these people engaged in bird projects of their own anymore?... I look upon WSO grants in part as a talent search—an opportunity to find newcomers.” In a similar
vein, as a result of preparing *Wisconsin Birdlife* for publication, I jotted down a list of 89 topics—big and small—that cry out for further investigation (*Passenger Pigeon* 50:187–191). The “Wisconsin Checklist Project” began in 1982 as a giant research project involving over 400 members; it will hopefully gather more momentum each year.

Significant research possibilities exist in the archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point library, thanks in part to the WSO Historials and Record-keepers. These repositories have field notebooks from such ornithologists as O. J. Gromme, S. P. Jones, A. W. Schorger, and W. E. Snyder, containing valuable unpublished information.

**In Summary**

How can I best summarize the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology’s accomplishments at this 50-year milestone? Shall I point to my bookshelf and its 234 issues of *The Passenger Pigeon*, and to another shelf containing the other WSO publications?


Should I list the people who have given leadership in various capacities to bring about the Society’s accomplishments? Walter Scott did this admirably in 1964 for the 1939–1964 period (*Passenger Pigeon* 26:34, 47). The following list covers the 1964–1989 span.

**Elected Officers**


**Vice-President.**—Arol Epple (1965),

**Secretary.**—Hazel Cox (1965–1972), Caryl Hayssen (1972–1989).


**COMMITTEE CHAIRS**


**Scholarships and Grants.**—Fred and Fran Hamerstrom (1979–1989).


Badger Birder.—Mary Donald (1965–1989).


STAFF OF The Passenger Pigeon


The list is long and impressive. It includes college professors, laborers, Department of Natural Resources professionals, and farmers.

RECIPIENTS OF AWARDS

Eight individuals have earned the Golden Passenger Pigeon award (honorary life membership): Wallace Grange, Owen Gromme, Joseph Hickey, John Emlen, Chandler Robbins, Frances Hamerstrom, Frederick Hamerstrom, and Samuel Robbins. This award also went to nine others who have since died: Herbert Stoddard, William Schorger, Leon Cole, Aldo Leopold, Hartley Jackson, George Wagner, Alexander Wetmore, Carl Welty, and Carl Richter.

CONCLUSIONS

The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology has, for 50 years, done an outstanding job of achieving its objectives of research, education, conservation, and publication. The society’s continued growth and vigor suggests that many future accomplishments will be added to its already impressive list of credits.

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50 Years Ago in The Passenger Pigeon

Excerpts from Volume 1 (1939)

Bird records have been published in The Passenger Pigeon from its beginning as a monthly bulletin in January 1939. The following items are excerpts from The Passenger Pigeon, Volume 1, Number 2.

From Milwaukee area, "Jung reported a meadowlark on the 1st and Deusing saw 7 of them later. Mueller found a Pine Grosbeak and a Ruffed Grouse at the Cedarburg swamp." From Green Bay area, "A total of 29 species were recorded on the January list of the Green Bay Bird Club." From Racine area, "There were two Mockingbirds seen at the Horlick Dam and at 'Cedar Bend' several times during the month. Great numbers of Rough-legged Hawks invaded the county in the second week of January, 40 being counted during a 30 mile trip on January 15." From Madison area, (from records of Feeney and Sperry for the University Arboretum), "A census of game birds taken on the 27th, showed about 200 pheasants and 100 bobwhites. Their notes include the Kingfisher, Northern Shrike, about 20 Long-eared Owls, several Rusties, the Song Sparrow, Robin, and Wilson Snipe." From Waukesha area, "Schwarting reported 2 Purple Finches and three Cardinals. The latter are unusual in Waukesha. Last summer, Cardinals nested here for the first time to our knowledge." (Compiled by Noel J. Cutright.)
Cedar Waxwing by Tim Schultz