NORVAL R. BARGER

WSO owes a great deal to Norval Barger. A sign painter by trade, he settled in Madison in 1934, and soon organized the Madison Bird Club (forerunner of the Madison Audubon Society). By 1938 he, Walter Scott, Mary Walker and Mrs. Arthur Koehler were talking seriously with similar bird club leaders in Racine, Waukesha, Milwaukee and Green Bay about the possibilities of a statewide bird society. The result: the formation of the “Wisconsin Society of Ornithology” in Madison on May 6–7, 1939, with 80 members present.

N. R. Barger served as the first president. He also assisted with the society’s monthly mimeographed magazine “The Passenger Pigeon” by summarizing notes of field observations submitted by keen-eyed WSO observers. Later, when the magazine had become a printed quarterly, Barger became its editor (1943–1953).

His writings also came to the fore with the Wisconsin Conservation Department (forerunner to WDNR). Between 1952 and 1974 he wrote interpretative sketches about song birds in a publication that had appealed mainly to hunters and anglers, helping to spread knowledge and appreciation of birds to a broader public.

Recognizing early on that it would be years before a full-fledged state bird book would be available, Norval helped prepare and publish a 32-page “Wiscon-
sin Birds” checklist naming all the state’s avifauna and showing the times of each species’ presence. Printed with a bright yellow cover, featuring Norv’s drawing of a goldfinch, the booklet became fondly known as the “yellow bible,” and has been in wide use since 1942.

The WSO Supply Department was another of Barger’s creations. Birders needed books. WSO needed money. So the Bargers set up a modest mail-order business in their home in 1947 and nursed it along until 1955 when it outgrew them.

How did he find time for field trips amidst these varied WSO and WCD responsibilities? Time was limited of course, but he found time for many local outings to Goose Pond, Lake Barney, Duschak’s Pond, the Mazomanie River Bottoms, etc. I am eternally grateful that in my college years when I was “without wheels,” he invited me to accompany him. He was a cautious, meticulous observer, well trained by eye and ear. One vivid memory illustrates this. On his way home from work one May afternoon, he discovered me sitting at the roadside frantically writing down details of an unfamiliar song I was hearing. Norv listened, but would not commit himself—even though I’m certain he recognized the songster from childhood days in North Carolina. “Wait here. I’ll be back with binoculars.” Only after good looks would he confirm that our stranger was a Yellow-throated Warbler, Wisconsin’s first twentieth century record. Norval then called his bird friends, and soon the wooded grove was crawling with warbler-watchers. It was his nature to share his rare finds with others whenever possible.

Although advancing age and health limitations led to retirement and lessened field activity, he made extensive use of his camera and pen. In 1991 (at age 82!) he published his one and only book: “Birds Tomorrow,” including over 300 of his photographs.

His death occurred on June 13, 1997, 88 years after his birth on December 20, 1908 in Conover, North Carolina. Following training at Concordia College, and his 1935 marriage to Clara Luebke, he raised a daughter Elaine and son Norval Jr. He and Clara teamed so beautifully in all WSO activities that when Norval received the Society’s silver passenger pigeon award in 1964, and its certificate of appreciation in 1994, many of us felt we were honoring Norval and Clara Barger together.

Sam Robbins