

A History of the Des Moines Audubon Bird Club
1923-1938
Part I

On June 15, 1923 interested people met at the home Mr. and Mrs. Henry Frankel to discuss the organization of a bird club. Those present included the Frankels, Dr. and Mrs. Luther Ross of Drake, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Palas, Mr. Malone, a student at Drake and H.T. Roland.

At the second meeting, a constitution was adopted, Arthur Palas was elected President and a field trip was planned. After some discussion, it was decided that the club's purpose would be "to encourage the protection of birds, their nests and haunts."

Arthur Palas graduated from Drake University in 1907 and received his law degree from the University of Texas. He was county attorney in Clayton County before his move to Des Moines in 1921 when he began a private practice.

It was during his term of office, 1923-25, that he enlisted many new members and began a series of field trips, especially to Ashworth Park. Meetings alternated between members' homes and public places such as the public library, state historical building and Drake University. By the end of the second year, membership had grown from 30 to 80 members.

The first Christmas Bird Count was held on December 26, 1923. Five members took part including Olivia McCabe, Mrs. J.E. Stewart, Arthur Palas, Mrs. Toni Wendelburg and Phil DuMont. Areas covered included a stretch of Indianola Road and the woods along the Raccoon River, Walnut Creek and the Des Moines River north of Des Moines. Twenty seven species and 1,297 individuals were counted.

This Christmas count, one of the state's oldest, has been held continuously for the last 66 years.

Dr. Arthur Allen (professor of ornithology at Cornell University and bird popularizer), writing in *Bird Lore* in 1927, stated that from earliest time sanctuaries had existed in order that "the hunted could take refuge without fear of pursuit." Writing of past hunting excesses, he noted that even today... "all hunted creatures should have places of safety into which they can flee to ward off complete annihilation."

Further, a sanctuary provides for the "naturalist...a place where he can study wild life in a natural, undisturbed state; for the sportsman...a reservoir of game; and for the economist, a natural resource that may rebound for the common good." The idea, however, for taking productive land out of cultivation for a refuge,

had not gained widespread acceptance. Allen noted, however, that "when the sanctuary idea is combined with other civic improvements, such as reforestation and public recreation, and makes good use of lands that have ceased to be of real agricultural value, there can be little question that the purchase of private lands by government agencies from public funds is entirely legitimate."

By 1926, the city of Des Moines had acquired by gift and purchase over 200 acres of land around its waterworks and land bordering the Raccoon River. Des Moines Audubon members and especially Mrs. J.E. Stewart (President 1925-39) were able to convince Mayor Charles Sing Denman and Arie den Boer of the Water Works to keep this area as a wildlife sanctuary. Eight acres were planted with 800 native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. A small pond was enclosed with a cat-proof fence and the river was posted as a wildlife refuge.

To be able to fulfil its stated purpose of 'protecting birds, their nests and haunts' with this sanctuary and all within three years of their organization was quite an achievement.

Members of the Des Moines Audubon were instrumental in the founding of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union (IOU). In 1923, Mrs. Toni Wendelburg recalled that she and the Palases drove up to Ames with other interested persons and formed the organization. At the the 1926 IOU meeting in Atlantic, Des Moines members Arthur Palas was elected Treasurer and Ken Nelson, Secretary.

The fifth annual IOU meeting was hosted by the Des Moines Audubon, April 30-May 1, 1927. Registration took place at the Hotel Savery. The afternoon programs then were moved to the Public Library with the evening banquet at the Grant Club. Bird whistling was provided by John Woodmansee and the banquet speaker was Dr. William Hornaday, Director of the New York Zoological Garden. The following Des Moines members were elected to office: Arthur Palas, President; Ken Nelson, Secretary; and Mrs. J.E. Stewart, Board of Directors.

In December, 1929, Des Moines was the site of the meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The Wilson Ornithologist Club (WOC) held its 16th national meeting in Des Moines in conjunction with the AAAS meeting. Arthur Palas was local chairman for the Wilson club. He persuaded many Des Moines members to join the Wilson club in order that they could ^{attend} any or all of the AAAS sessions.

On December 27, Mrs. J.E. Stewart opened the meeting and welcomed the Wilson members to Des Moines. Arthur Palas spoke to the group on "Making Bird Sanctuaries of Public Grounds" using

lantern slides taken at Water Works Park.

In the Art Gallery of the Public Library, where the WOC meetings were held, original drawings, etchings, and paintings of birds by noted artists were on exhibit, and in the assembly-room, the library staff had on display some of their notable bird books.

On the last day of the meeting, receptions for the AAAS members and speakers were held, with the Frankels serving as the hosts for the Des Moines Audubon. Many of the prominent scientists from the AAAS meeting attended the Frankel reception.

Meetings were well attended, to the satisfaction of the officers and committees, by many local people. Of the 202 persons registered, 106 were from Des Moines, the other 96 from Iowa, and 20 from other states.

The *Wilson Bulletin* stated that the "meeting was made especially enjoyable through the hospitality of the Des Moines Audubon Society and the Iowa Ornithologist Union. In many respects this meeting was the most interesting and successful one in the history of the organization."

Margo Frankel and her husband Henry, a former president and board chairman of Younkers, were founding members of the Des Moines Audubon club. In 1927, she was appointed to the State Board of Conservation by Governor John Hammill. She was the board's chairman in 1932-1933. She was the only board member appointed to the reorganized State Conservation Commission in 1934 and was its chair in 1935-1936. She resigned in 1937. While on the Commission, she opposed hunting seasons on the Bobwhite and Mourning Dove. She also sought to have the Highway Commission reduce its mowing along primary highways in order to conserve nesting habitat.

A discussion at the August, 1933 Audubon executive board meeting stated that "many nests and much food are destroyed in this way. More harm is done in one season, than four years of growth can replace. State law requires that 'all weeds along state highways be cut by July 15.' We must have this modified or restricted."

As an Audubon member, she was always one of the first members to answer calls for bird talks to schools and service organizations. Armed with books and feeders, she encouraged the planting of native trees and shrubs as bird habitat with her own grounds serving as a model.

During the years 1930-1933, Mrs. Arthur J. Palas served as President. It was in November of 1931 that the club sponsored the publication of *The Birds of Polk County, Iowa*. It was written by Philip DuMont using bird records and observations of Des Moines

Audubon members.

Historical comparisons of bird populations, early and late arrivals and locations of favorite birding sites were discussed in the 64 page book.

The review in *Iowa Bird Life* stated that the book is a "valuable addition to the lengthening list of bird catalogs of Iowa counties." "...largely sponsored by the active Des Moines Audubon Society, has made a very substantial contribution to the ornithology of the county. It is quite fitting that the Des Moines Audubon Society should publish this list of its county birds, and we hope that it will be able to give the booklet the distribution among bird people that it so well deserves."

The tenth annual meeting of the IOU was held May 13-14, 1932 in Des Moines and was sponsored by the Des Moines Audubon. The meeting opened at 9:45 a.m. Friday morning in the Venetian Room of the Hotel Savery. Arthur J. Palas introduced IOU president Dr. Roberts. Mrs. O.E. Gilcrest of the Des Moines club welcomed those in attendance.

A series of programs were presented during the day including one given by Aldo Leopold on "The Role of the Ornithologist in the Iowa Game Program." That evening the banquet was held at Younkers Tea Room with Mrs. A.J. Palas presiding. A group of songs, ably led by Mabel Moss Madden, were sung. The Goldfinch, after much discussion, was nominated to be Iowa state bird. Saturday morning field trips left for Brenton Slough, Fisher Lake, Crocker Woods, Avon Lake and Water Works Park.

From 1933-1935, Howard L. Bump served as president. He and his predecessors annually set up a booth at the State Fair. It consisted of bird skins, mounts, pictures, literature, and habitat displays of shrubs, grasses and the like. Their goal was the furtherance of wildlife protection, attracting new members in the Des Moines area and the establishment of similar organizations in other towns.

In October, 1932 the Midwest Horticulture Exhibit in Marshalltown requested that the club set up a display on bird sanctuaries. Ari den Boer, chairman of the Exhibit Committee, reported at the November meeting that the club had captured second place and \$10.00. He commented that the club took only second place because it had "too many weeds in their display to be accorded first place."

The minutes of the May 22, 1933 meeting stated that "Miss Kate La Mar, our retiring treasurer, had been elected secretary treasurer of the IOU (the week before at Fairfield). She thanked Miss

was thanked
La Mar for her efficient work, and the amount left in the treasury."

Dr. George Hendrickson of Ames reported to the club at the January, 1934 meeting that Dr. Arthur Allen would speak in Ames on March 7th. It was estimated that he could be persuaded to speak in Des Moines for \$200.00, a prohibitive cost. A committee was formed to study the feasibility of having him speak. The committee decided that he would be invited if costs could be contained. Tickets would cost .50 for adults and .25 for students. News releases would be sent to newspapers within a 75 mile area.

Dr. Allen's lecture was a huge success with an attendance of over 200. Dr. Allen's fee was \$100.00. After expenses were paid, a balance of \$36.92 remained.

At the September, 1934 meeting, Phil DuMont reported on the progress of the Starling coming to central Iowa.

Members of the club were saddened in November, 1934 to hear that Mrs. A. J. Palas, founding member and past president, had died of malaria contracted during a pleasure trip to Florida the previous week.)

Born in Osage in 1885, she was educated in the Des Moines schools. She entered Drake University and graduated in 1907. She then became a member of the university staff teaching languages. She married in 1909 and in 1911 moved with Mr. Palas to Elkader where they lived until 1921 when they returned to Des Moines.

Writing in *Iowa Bird Life* in 1935, Kate La Mar spoke of Logan Bennett's talk "Waterfowl Management in the Prairie Region" given to the joint IOU and Nebraska Ornithologists' Union meeting in Sioux City in May, 1935. He spoke of game birds and shorebirds being exterminated not by hunters but by lack of nesting cover and food supply. By fencing wetlands 14-28' from the shoreline, he stated that there would be sufficient cover for the birds to nest and raise their young.

Des Moines Audubon members, eager to participate in such a project, discussed the possibility of fencing Brenton Slough, located one mile south of Granger in Polk County. After conferring with the owner, Clyde Brenton, twenty acres were chosen for the project. The fencing was erected by Conservation Commission employees under the direction of Logan Bennett with the Des Moines Audubon expending \$100.00 for all the fencing materials. The club now had a second sanctuary.

Following the establishment of the Brenton Sanctuary, Kate La Mar continued interest in the slough by conducting a three-year study of the area's flora and fauna.

Mrs. W.G. DuMont served as president during the 1935-1936

year. During 1936, Arthur Palas founding member and the club's only field trip leader moved to Postville. As Olivia McCabe wrote "we were sorry to lose him. He had not only made beginners eager to belong to our society, but he 'knew birds.' He made us feel that bird study was worthwhile and pointed out, with kindness and patience, how we might be wrong! He never turned 'an eye of dretful scorn' on us, if we saw a wren in January!"

Other charter members, Mr. and Mrs. John E. Stewart and Mr. and Mrs. Luther Ross moved in 1936. Dr. Ross was honored with a silver watchfob in the shape of a bird. When these long time members left, active newcomers arrived to fill their shoes. Mrs. Ross Thornburg and Gladys Haskell joined at this time.

Kate La Mar (president 1936-1938) was raised in Missouri and graduated from Warrensburg State Teachers College. She taught in the Des Moines school system for 18 years and served as Principal at Clarkson school. She was a member of the Des Moines Audubon club for over twenty years serving as treasurer, president and a number of committee chairs. In 1936, she attended the Audubon Nature Camp at Muscongus Bay, Maine, as a representative of the Des Moines Audubon and the Des Moines Garden Club. From 1933 to 1940 she served as secretary-treasurer of the IOU. She married Noah Blosser in June, 1940 and moved to Patterson, Iowa. She died suddenly in February, 1944 from a lung ailment.