

THE ORIGINS OF OUR FEDERATION

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Prior to World War II, there were relatively few bird clubs in New York state. Contacts and communications between them were sporadic, casual and almost entirely confined to club members from adjacent communities who inevitably met each other on their independent field trips. From these fortuitous meetings and acquaintances came the first thoughts of a federation. But, nothing came of these until after the close of the War.

It would be possible to ascribe the idea and concept of the Federation as the brain child of several specific persons but actually this would be a narrow view of its genesis. The time and conditions were right for spontaneous generation of the idea. Interest in bird watching and ornithology was mushrooming and new bird clubs were burgeoning due to release from the tensions of war and the increase in leisure. New highways made distant travel to birding areas far afield possible in a day or over a week-end. The pressure of industrial and population increases brought enlarging threats to natural areas and wildlife with resulting need for constant and more concerted conservation vigilance and action.

It became inescapably self-evident that some mechanism was needed whereby the birders of the state could get to know each other; to share their ideas and experiences, to jointly promote research and education in the field of ornithology, and to secure a common and stronger voice in conservation matters. In the contacts on field trips, at each others and national meetings, the thought of a state-wide ornithological organization was suggested and discussed by many.

Finally members of the Genesee Ornithological Society (Rochester) and the Buffalo Ornithological Society decided the time was opportune. A list of all the known bird clubs of the state was prepared. Invitations were issued to all known clubs to attend a meeting to discuss the desirability and feasibility of forming a state organization. Its exact character was undecided at that point.

Twenty-one delegates representing twelve bird clubs attended this discussion meeting held Dec. 7, 1946 at the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences. Several other clubs had expressed interest but were unable to send delegates. The societies represented at this exploratory gathering were Buffalo Audubon Society, Buffalo Ornithological Society, Burroughs-Audubon Nature Club (Rochester), Cayuga Bird Club (Ithaca), Eaton Bird Club (Geneva), Elmira Garden Club (Bird Section), Genesee Ornithological Society (Rochester), Keuka Park Conservation Club, Sassafras Bird Club (Amsterdam), Watertown Bird Club, and Watkins Glen Bird Club.

It was clear that there was unanimous interest in a state organization. Suggestions as to its functions and objectives were freely offered and varied. Among those proposed were assisting birders to get acquainted, exchange of ideas for club activities, unification of state conservation interests, regional and state wide census and habitat studies, service to young people, studies

of New York state flyways and migrations, combined field censuses, encouragement of ornithological research, publishing a journal and gathering material for a new state bird book.

Consideration was given to what forms state organizations had taken in other states, how they operated, and their success.

The half-day session ended on an enthusiastic note and Dr. Gordon Meade and Mr. Winston Brockner were empowered to appoint an Organization Committee to meet in 1947 to draw up a Constitution and By-Laws.

Thus on Oct. 25, 1947 an organization meeting was held in Amsterdam with twenty-one delegates representing 13 clubs. The principal business was to prepare a Constitution and By-Laws. A draft had been made in advance and was discussed carefully point by point. The final draft was approved by the delegates for presentation to the charter member clubs for individual adoption. Temporary officers were elected to hold office until the Constitution and By-Laws were adopted and regular elections held. They were — President, Gordon M. Meade, M. D.; Vice-President, Winston Brockner; Corresponding Secretary, Peter Paul Kellogg; Recording Secretary, Fred M. Hall; and Treasurer, Guy Bartlett.

From this point on the reality of a federation was certain. Out of these preliminary meetings had come widening acquaintances and friendships among birders throughout the state, mutual stimulation for personal and club projects, and a growing enthusiasm for the prospects of what could come from a unification of efforts. Two years from the date of the original exploratory meeting, the first organized annual meeting was held in Rochester on Nov. 13 and 14, 1948 at the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences with the Genesee Ornithological Society as the host. This meeting set a guidepost for the form, caliber and content of future meetings. For the enjoyment of those attending, there was a display of elephant folio Audubon prints, and of skins of unusual species taken locally such as the Sage Thrasher, Hudsonian Godwit, Franklin's Gull, and Western Meadowlark. There were commercial exhibits by Bausch and Lomb Optical Co., Eastman Kodak and Ward's Natural Science Establishment.

As a matter of record, it is worth noting the papers presented at that first program since they have not been permanently recorded elsewhere.

"Status of the Little Gull on the Niagara Frontier"

—Harold D. Mitchell

"Bird Activities on the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge"

—F. L. Gambrell

"Observations on Birds of the Adirondacks"—Harold Axtell

"How Birds Find Their Way"—Peter Paul Kellogg

"The Snowy Owl Incursion of 1945-46 in New York State"—Gordon M. Meade

"Northward Extension of the Range of Certain Species into the Hudson Valley"—Robert F. Deed

"Changing Distribution and Abundance of Certain Passerine Birds in Western New York in Recent Years"—W. E. Vaughan

"Observations of Common Tern Colonies in Oneida Lake"—Hazel R. Ellis

"Birds Can Be Missionaries"—Walter Elwood

At the first annual dinner, the speaker was Dr. Arthur A. Allen who spoke of "The Quest of the Bristle-thighed Curlew" and the finding of the nesting site of this elusive species. On the field trip on Sunday morning, the host society convinced the delegates either that the Rochester area was one of the country's finest birding areas for rare species, or that they had carefully "planted" rarities in strategic spots just ahead of the field party because successively there was a Red Phalarope which unconcernedly allowed the entire party to approach within fifty feet; a small flock of Purple Sandpipers feeding on a grassy shore; the first recorded Eared Grebe for the area which swam by within 100 feet; and a November 14th American Egret. Some of the New York City birders went away muttering to themselves — "How can we ever compete with this next year?" It even impressed the Rochesterians.

It was at this meeting that the Conservation Committee under Mr. Walter Elwood was organized, given its charge and its functions outlined, and that serious thought was first given to development by the Federation of a new New York State bird book. It had been mentioned even at the first discussion meeting in Rochester in 1946.

There were now 16 member clubs of which 15 were represented at this meeting by 101 delegates, members and guests. An invitation to hold the second annual meeting in New York was accepted. The temporary officers were elected officially except for the replacement of Mr. Fred Hall, who was leaving the state, by Mr. Jack Wolff as Recording Secretary.

Because of the desire to have spring field trips in which all delegates could participate, the next meeting was held May 28 and 29, 1959 in New York City. The host society was The Linnaean Society of New York, and the meeting place the American Museum of Natural History. Thus a special feature of the meeting was a tour of the splendid newly completed bird halls of the museum conducted by Dean Amadon and C. K. Nichols.

The papers presented at this meeting were —

"Auditory Receptors of the Barn Owl"—Irving Kassoy

"Bird Associations at a Balsam-Hemlock Bog"—E. L. Seeber

"The September Migration Tragedy"—Arthur Aronoff

"Homemaking for Cliff Swallows"—Carleton Sturdevant

"Status of the Purple Sandpiper on the Great Lakes"

—Gordon M. Meade

"Breeding Gadwalls of Jones Beach"—Walter Sedwitz

"Origin and Status of the House Finch in the East"

—Robert S. Arbib

"Past and Present Status of the European Goldfinch"

—John J. Elliott

The annual dinner was held at the Men's Faculty Club of Columbia University with Richard H. Pough, Curator of Conservation of the American Museum of Natural History, speaking on "The Federation's Role in New York State Conservation." A guest of honor was Carl Buchheister, Vice-President of National Audubon Society.

On Sunday, a field trip to Long Island yielded life birds for many — White-eyed Vireo, Blue-winged Warbler, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, European Goldfinch, Gadwall, Piping Plover and Black Skimmer.

Fifteen of the seventeen member clubs were represented by delegates. In all, 99 delegates, members and guests attended the meeting.

The major business of this meeting was to further define the functions and operation of the Conservation Committee; to further plan for a journal; to authorize appointment of a state book committee; and to appoint a constitution revision committee.

Now the Federation was out of its infancy, growing healthily, and looking to a solid future. What the years since have brought is known to most and recorded in the Kingbird. Many of the aspirations and plans of the beginnings have been realized, some have not. Perhaps the time has come for a re-assessment. What does the Federation need, and want to accomplish from here on?

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