



*Organization meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs
Amsterdam, New York, 25 Oct 1947.
Photograph by Gordon M. Meade.*

THE ORIGINS OF THE FEDERATION AND WHAT HAPPENED THEN

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Prior to World War II there were few birders and bird clubs in New York State. Contacts and communications among 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 World War II.

It would be possible to ascribe the ideas and the concept of a Federation as the brainchild of several persons, but this would be a narrow view of its genesis. The time and conditions were right for the spontaneous generation of the idea. Interest in bird watching and ornithology were burgeoning due to the release from the tensions of the war and the increase in leisure. Automobiles were increasingly available, gasoline was no longer rationed and new highways made distant travel to birding areas far afield possible in a day or two. The pressure of industrial and population increases brought enlarging threats to natural areas and wildlife with a resulting need for constant and more concerted vigilance and action.

It became inescapably self-evident that some mechanism was needed for the birders of the state to 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 meetings, the thought of a statewide organization was suggested and discussed by many.

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

Twenty-one delegates representing twelve bird clubs attended this discussion meeting, held 7 Dec 1946 at the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences. Several clubs had expressed interest but were unable to send a delegate. The clubs represented were: Buffalo Audubon Society, Buffalo Ornithological Society, Burroughs-Audubon Nature Club, Cayuga Bird Club, Eaton Bird Club, Elmira Garden Club, Genesee

Ornithological Society, Keuka Park Conservation Club, Sassafras Bird Club, Watertown Bird Club and Watkins Glen Bird Club.

It was clear that there was unanimous interest in a state organization. Suggestions as to the functions and activities 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 statewide censuses and habitat studies, service to young people, studies of New York flyways and migration routes, publishing a journal, and gathering material for a new state 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 Gordon M. Meade and Winston W. Brockner were empowered to appoint a committee to prepare a draft constitution. Thus on 25 Oct 1947, an organizational meeting (Fig. 1) was held in Amsterdam with twenty-one persons representing thirteen clubs. The principal business was to consider the constitution, of which a draft had been made in advance. It was discussed point by point. The final draft was approved for presentation to the charter clubs for final adoption. Temporary officers were identified to hold office until the constitution was adopted and regular elections could be held: President, Gordon M. Meade; Vice-President, Winston W. Brockner; Corresponding Secretary, Peter Paul Kellogg; Recording Secretary, Fred M. Hall; and Treasurer, Guy Bartlett.

From this point on the reality of the Federation was certain. Out of these 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 exploratory meeting, the first organized annual meeting was hosted by the Genesee Ornithological Society in Rochester on 12-14 Dec 1948, at the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences. 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 the Elephant Folio Audubon prints and of the skins of unusual species taken locally such as Hudsonian Godwit, Franklin's Gull, Sage Thrasher and Western Meadowlark. There were commercial exhibits by Bausch & 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 meeting since they have not been recorded elsewhere:

"Status of the Little Gull on the Niagara Frontier"	F. L. Gambrel
"Observations on the Birds of the Adirondacks"	Harold Axtell

"How Birds Find Their Way"	Peter Paul Kellogg
"The Snowy Owl Incursion in New York in 1945-46"	Gordon 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."	W. C. Vaughan
"Observation of Common Tern Colonies on 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 for the Bristle-thighed Curlew" and the finding of the nest of this elusive bird. On the field trip on Sunday morning the hosts convinced the delegates either that the Rochester area was one of the finest for rare species, or that they carefully "planted" rarities in strategic spots just ahead of the party, because successively there was a Red Phalarope which allowed the entire party to approach within fifty feet, a small flock of Purple Sandpipers feeding on a grassy shore, the first Eared Grebe for the area (which swam within 100 feet of the group) and a very tardy Great Egret was seen. Some New York birders went away muttering to themselves "How can we ever compete with this next year?" It even impressed some of the Rochesterians.

That's the way it all began! What has happened since that beginning? The combined thinking of the founders who met that October day in Amsterdam in 1947 anticipated most of the problems that the Federation would encounter in the future. And most of them have occurred. If they have not, there remains enough flexibility to allow accommodation for whatever situation arises.

For the first twenty-five years the resilience, enthusiasm, and sound thinking of the chosen leaders have kept the Federation going in the right direction. But as the years went by it became clear that the affairs which required an immediate decision were not being dealt with efficiently or promptly enough. The feeling was that some means other than the Council of Delegates, which met only once a year, should be devised to act more expeditiously. Accordingly, in 1975 an Executive Committee was established, composed of the officers plus enough other members, chosen at large by the president, to make a total of 15 persons. Every effort is made to have the geographic distribution as representative of the regions of the state as possible. This committee has been very effective in acting on questions which have come before it.

Many times the questions are asked: "What is the Federation" and "How do I join it?" To answer these queries, Richard Sloss prepared a brochure which tells what the Federation does, what the advantages

of membership are and how to join. An answer to the first question also can be given by summarizing the Federation's major accomplishments over the past 40 years.

When the idea of forming a Federation was discussed at Rochester in December 1946, one of many activities considered was "How about publishing a journal?" When it was finally decided to go ahead at the third annual meeting in Watkins Glen in 1950, the question became "What shall we call it? Let's name it the Kingbird! This is the Empire State. A king is the head of an empire. Ergo, call it *The Kingbird!*" Allan Klonick became the first editor with the issue of November-December 1950. His successors have been Stephen Eaton, Gerald Rising, Minnie B. Scotland, Alice E. Ulrich, Dorothy W. McIlroy, Joseph W. Taylor, Emanuel Levine and John Farrand, and currently Paul DeBenedictis. These men and women have brought *The Kingbird* to a leading place among state ornithological publications. It has been published quarterly with articles on New York's bird life, short notes and observations, records of New York rarities, and a section on what has been seen in the state.

How were the latter observations to be gathered? This was solved by dividing the state into Regions at first eight but since 1954 into ten. They are called: Niagara Frontier, Genesee, Finger Lakes, Susquehanna, Oneida Lake Basin, St. Lawrence, Adirondack-Champlain, Hudson-Mohawk, Delaware-Hudson and Marine. Each Region is assigned an editor, who is responsible for gathering observations from that Region and writing a Regional report. Then an overall editor writes a summary, called the "Highlights of the Season," for the entire state. These Regional reports have been one of the most popular parts of *The Kingbird*. There is a long list of persons who have given many years of producing these reports. Among them are Leslie Bemont (27 years), Edward Treacy (24), Fritz Scheider (22), Sally Hoyt Spofford (19), and Frank Clinch (18). At the end of the 1987 Annual Meeting the contributions of these Regional editors were formally recognized by the Federation with presentations of complimentary copies of the Breeding Bird Atlas [see also the Editorial in the previous issue - *The Editor*]. Others who have given long service are Margaret Rusk (12), Lee Chamberlaine (12), and Dorothy McIlroy, Theodore Mack, Vivian Pitzrick, all with 10 years.

Another idea raised at the December 1946 meeting was gathering material for a new state book. Elon H. Eaton wrote his book in 1914 and it was now years out-of-date. Robert Arbib and Gordon Meade tried very hard to raise money in the 1950's for a state bird book but were unsuccessful. It was at that time that John Bull indicated that he was interested in writing a book for the Federation. Finally Dean Ama-

don was able to raise private funds to pay an author. With considerable help from members of the Federation, Bull completed *The Birds of New York State*, which was published in 1972.

While Bull's book was a real addition to the ornithological literature, it was not meant to take any account of what was happening day to day around the state. So in 1976 Maxwell Wheat, with the help of Mary Ann Sunderlin, launched a newsletter called *New York Birders*. In recent years it has been produced with the help of Constance Wilkins. Its emphasis has been on the activities of the Federation's member clubs, their members and bits of news about what they have been doing. A feature has been the publishing of poetry about birds, — a love of the editor. His long devotion to the Federation was recognized at the 1987 meeting by a special citation.

In a desire to inform birders of the state and nation where the best places to bird in the state are located, an arrangement was made to produce a Baedeker on *Where To Find Birds In New York State*. Susan Roney Drennan undertook this monumental task and produced a magnificent book, which was published in 1981. Five hundred sites are named along with maps and detailed directions on how to reach them. Many members aided Susan in this project.

To assist birders in keeping up-to-date on what is being written about the birds of New York, a bibliography committee keeps a list of all material published on that subject. This list is published yearly in *The Kingbird*. Birders should be able to keep abreast of what is being written. The committee currently consists of Allen Benton, John Belknap, Stephen Eaton, Valerie Freer, and Kenneth Parkes.

Every ten years an index of *The Kingbird* has been completed by devoted members. The first, for 1950-60, was compiled by hard-working Guy Bartlett of Schenectady. When the next decade came along, 1960-70, the work was done by Dorothy McIlroy, aided by Mildred Comar. Ever a glutton for a sticky job, Dorothy did the next one, 1970-80, as a solo performance. All have been published as supplements to *The Kingbird*. A tremendous amount of work has been done.

Past presidents have given of their time and service unselfishly without any recognition of what they have done. A way to remedy this was found at the 1986 annual meeting. All living ex-presidents were invited to come and receive an award. Each was presented with a bronze replica of the kingbird, a statuette sculpted by Miriam "Mickey" Levine. Those who were honored in order of service were: Gordon M. Meade, Winston W. Brockner, Allan S. Klonick, Robert S. Arbib, Allen H. Benton, Kenneth D. Niven, Richard A. Sloss, Stephen B. Dempsey, Martin Borko, Morgan V. Jones, Charles R. Smith, and Harriet T. Marsi. Unable to be

present were: Frances T. Irving, David B. Peakall and Edward M. Reilly, Jr. Past presidents who had died before that meeting include Eugene Eisenmann, Harold D. Mitchell, Peter Paul Kellogg, Albert W. Fudge, John J. Elliott and Warren Hastings.

After the death of John J. Elliott, who was an active birder and researcher, a number of his friends and admirers created the Elliott Award. This award was to be given annually for the best paper published in *The Kingbird*. One of the most enthusiastic and active members of the Federation was Lillian Stoner. In her will she left \$1,000 to be used to pay the expenses of a worthy high school senior or college student to attend the annual meeting. He or she is to be nominated by their club and selected by a committee of the Federation. Since the award was begun in 1945, a number of its recipients have gone into the field of ornithology or ecology.

As other members have grown older and passed away, a question began to bother the Executive Committee. What should be done with the gifts and bequests that are left to the Federation? It was decided recently that all such future gifts and bequests shall be placed in a single account to be known as the "Bequest Fund."

Workshops which add so much to the annual meeting were tried for the first time in 1975 and have been continued ever since. They are now an expected pleasure. They give speakers a chance to describe what they are doing, and an opportunity for the audience to hear what's going on in the field and to ask questions. A sample of the subjects which have been discussed are: identification of shorebirds, gulls, raptors and fall warblers; how to take meaningful field notes; discussion of opportunities for cooperative field research. The workshop leaders have been outstanding in their field.

In December 1975, Richard Sloss proposed that we initiate a system of "Permanent Representatives." These would be persons to whom communications of the Federation could be sent and not get lost. Previously if a letter were sent to the president or secretary of a member club, it might not reach the attention of that club's membership because that officer had been replaced by another person. Sending all communications to the same person, a "Permanent Representative," should increase the chance of their being passed on to the rest of the club's membership. It also became evident that the Federation needed a way to identify itself and its members. An arm patch was designed, to be followed by a decalcomania.

When the Federation offered pelagic trips out of Montauk Point under the leadership of Thomas Davis, Stephen Dempsey and Barbara Spencer, the enthusiasm was very high. Many who had never before

given it a try came back for more. They thrilled to see skuas, shearwaters and storm-petrels. After adding these to their life lists, the novelty began to fade. After seven or eight years interest fell off until there were not enough persons to fill a cruise boat. It was time to drop these trips. Perhaps with a new generation of birders there will be a renewed demand.

To enable it to provide data on waterfowl population trends, the Federation began to sponsor an annual midwinter survey of waterfowl throughout the state in the winter 1972-73. It takes a dedicated, hard-core birder to remain a waterfowl counter, ticking them off on a wintry day, but Federation members have been making counts faithfully every mid January in each Region since 1973. The total number of birds statewide varies with the weather conditions. Birds that have shown a real increase over the years are the Brant and Canada Geese, while decreases have been seen in Wigeon, Canvasback, Redhead, and all 3 scoters. The results of the waterfowl census are looked forward to each year when they are published in *The Kingbird*.

After much discussion of a proposal first suggested by Paul DeBenedictis, the New York State Avian Records Committee was approved by the member clubs in 1977-78. This committee is meant to be the group to whom all reports of accidental, rare or unusual species should be sent for review and, perhaps as importantly, who provide for the permanent storage of the documentation for such records. It has taken some time for members of the Federation to realize that they could possibly be mistaken or be in error, and some have resented having their records reviewed by third parties. Gradually the committee has come to be accepted. Records are reviewed with all supporting documentation supplied to committee members, who are keenly aware of the possibilities for error. To date the most common failing in reports which are not found acceptable has been that insufficient details were supplied by the observer to identify a bird without question. Most states now have a similar committee which has to accept a report before a new bird is allowed on that state's list.

After years of accomplishment in education of its members through *The Kingbird*, *New York Birders*, the yearly bibliography, the waterfowl count, the Baedeker, the state bird book, and its brochure, the Federation reached a new height with a decision to embark on the production of an atlas of the breeding birds of New York State. First mentioned as something we might do in 1975, it was not until 1979 that it was given serious thought. Robert Arbib laid out a proposal which was presented to the member clubs and the idea was accepted. Gordon Meade was asked to chair a Steering Committee for the Atlas. The intent was to

determine exactly where in the state that the various species of bird breed. Accomplishing this task meant dividing the state into a grid of 5335 five by five km blocks for survey purposes. A regional coordinator, who recruited the field workers, was chosen from each of *The Kingbird's* ten reporting Regions. The field workers then went into the field to observe nesting birds, using preassigned criteria to classify the certainty that a bird nested within an atlas block as either Possible, Probable or Confirmed. The original plan was to complete the field work in five years but it was found necessary to extend it to six. At the end of six years 99.7% of the blocks had been given some coverage. The final count of nesting species was 238 species plus three hybrids. These included five newcomers to the state: Forster's Tern, Boat-tailed Grackle, Blue Grosbeak, Palm Warbler and Yellow-throated Warbler. The results of this effort are now being published by the Cornell University Press as *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State*. The species accounts have been written by various authors. Illustrations were drawn by Karen Allaben-Confer, William Dilger, Cynthia Page and David Sibley. The editors were Robert F. Andrle and Janet R. Carroll. Real assistance was given by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. Not only was major help given by the DEC staff, but money from the "Return A Gift To Wildlife" fund was granted to pay for some field work, incidental expenses, illustrators, and the editors.

This is the final accomplishment of the Federation — until the next one!

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