

A Legacy For All



The founders of Illinois Audubon Society stepped forward at a crucial time in history to join the struggle for bird protection

By Jeanne Townsend Handy
Photos by Tom Handy

WHEN THREE WOMEN signed the Illinois Audubon Society articles of incorporation in 1897, bird conservation efforts were at square one, ground zero. There were no laws for bird protection, no designated bird reserves, little widespread understanding about the pressures birds were facing and few ways to distribute the available knowledge to a larger population. Yet the founders of this new organization accepted these challenges. They proclaimed that birds are a legacy for all people, not merely a commodity for those causing the most harm; that bird species could be forced into extinction—and that it was happening now. At this crucial moment in time 125 years ago, the Illinois Audubon Society became one of the first bird conservation groups in the country. Hobbyists became advocates. The appreciation of birds transformed into the defense of birds.

Illinois Steps Up

In the late 1800s, there was a growing understanding of the link between human activities and the loss of birds and their habitats. The once-abundant population of a seemingly indomitable bird, the passenger pigeon, was crashing. Indiscriminate hunters and overzealous bird skin and egg collectors continued to take their toll, while the lack of bird protections became an in-your-face issue with women flaunting feather-adorned hats.

In 1886, George Bird Grinnell had organized a nationwide society under the Audubon name, but overwhelming demands and insufficient income doomed this first attempt. A groundwork was laid for later efforts. Bostonian Harriet Hemenway picked up the cause eight years later at a time when birdwatching popularity

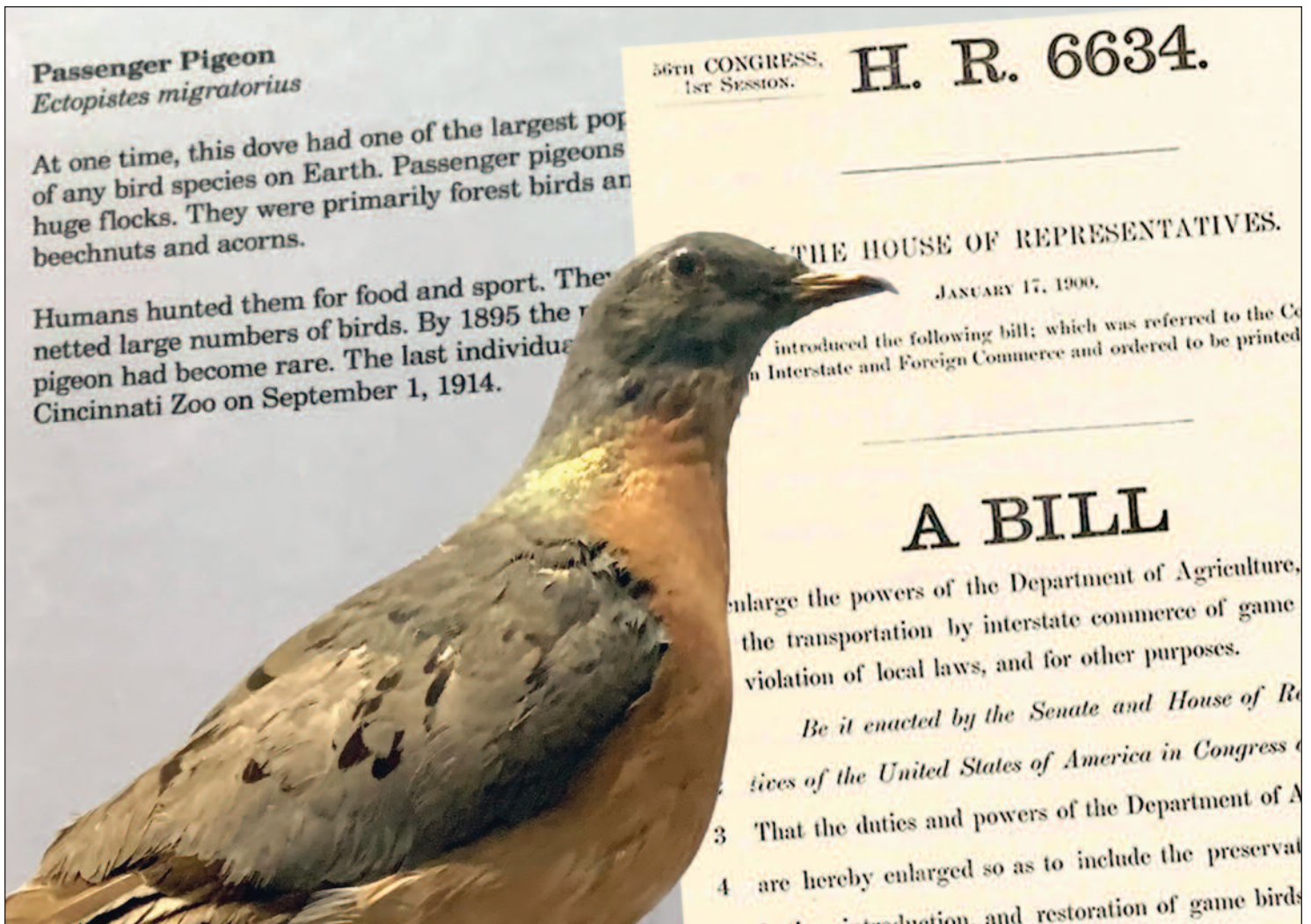
To James A. Rose, Secretary of State:

*We the Undersigned, Ellen Drummond Farwell,
Ada Rumsey Campbell, and Ada E. Sweet*

Citizens of the United States, propose to form a Corporation under an act of the General Assembly of the State of Illinois, entitled, "An Act concerning Corporations," approved April 18th, 1872, and all acts amendatory thereof, and that for the purposes of such organization we hereby state as follows, to-wit:

1. The name of such Corporation is the *The Illinois Audubon Society*
2. The object for which it is formed is *The protection and preservation of wild birds.*
3. The management of the aforesaid *Society* shall be vested in a Board of *twelve* Directors, who are to be elected *annually*
4. The following persons are hereby selected as the Directors to control and manage said Corporation for the first year of its corporate existence, viz: *Mrs. Henry W. King, Emily D. Rumsey, Emma W. Adams, Sara I. Hubbard, Ellen Drummond Farwell, Ada Rumsey Campbell, Alice Sawyer, George B. Pratt, Irene Ross, Ruth van Noane, Edward B. Clark, and Anso Sweet*
5. The location is in *Chicago* in the County of *Cook* State of Illinois.

Signed: *Ellen Drummond Farwell*
Ada Rumsey Campbell
Ada Sweet



was increasing and knowledge of the commercial egret slaughter in Florida was spreading through powerful press reports. Hemenway would gather other like-minded women, local businessmen, and ornithologists to form the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1896. They would soon contact Illinois. The first Illinois Audubon Society report explains that correspondence was sent by the Massachusetts society's secretary to Sara Hubbard of Illinois asking if "it were not possible to form an organization in this State." It was possible. Illinois would form the fourth state Audubon Society in the nation.

How difficult it must have been to know where to start. The information and actions that now seem common knowledge and common sense were nonexistent. They needed to find solutions, push for laws and humane measures, end needless slaughter and protect habi-

tat. Long before Aldo Leopold decried the dwindling crane populations or Rachel Carson spurred readers to imagine how desolate life would be without the return of birds in spring, the founders of the Illinois Audubon Society needed to find a way to portray to as many people as possible the less tangible value of birds. They needed to compel people to care and to encourage the idea that each individual could make a difference. And they needed to accomplish this with few readily available outlets for information.

Fortunately for the Illinois Audubon Society, the founders had the drive and the conscience to initiate forward-thinking measures at a time when the protection of birds required innovative concepts. One of the three signers of the articles, Ada Sweet, had already challenged set ideas when she became the first woman appointed to disburse

money for the U.S. government, serving during the administrations of four Presidents. She also organized the Columbian Ambulance Association in 1894 and was literary editor of the *Chicago Tribune* from 1886-1888. She was Illinois Audubon Society's vice president, a position she took in 1900 and held for several years. Ruthven Deane, stepping into the position of president in its second year and holding it for 16 more, helped link Illinois Audubon Society to people who are considered some of the most significant figures in the conservation and science fields.

The emergent Illinois Audubon Society members would immediately understand the importance of influencing young people and swaying legislators— invaluable tactics yet today—as noted in annual Illinois Audubon Society reports and state society summaries published in *Bird-Lore*, the "Official Organ of the



The founders of the Illinois Audubon Society understood the importance of influencing young people and legislators. One action they supported was passage of a law to protect birds and their nests and eggs. Photograph of historic egg collection.

Audubon Societies,” a magazine preceding the existence of a dedicated Illinois Audubon Society publication. In the initial 1899 issue, Ruthven Deane reported for the Illinois society that several members of Illinois Audubon Society had spoken at a meeting devoted exclusively to birds attended by over 300 schoolteachers and that he had presented “the text of a new law for the protection of birds and their nests and eggs” at the 1898 Interstate Convention.

Upon reading the annual reports of Mary Drummond, Illinois Audubon Society secretary from 1898 to 1912, one senses deep purpose as the group struggles to access the information highways – or slow lanes – available to them. By the group’s five-year anniversary Miss Drummond was reporting in *Bird-Lore* that the “dreams we have been dreaming during these five years are becoming realities.” They had acquired two traveling libraries and an illustrated lecture for use by schools and clubs; that the work of

the Society had so increased it was necessary to create a separate junior department. For the 1901 Illinois Audubon Society annual report, she notes that the group was seemingly in action everywhere, holding meetings alongside such groups as the Anti-Cruelty League as well as in schools, women’s clubs, and teachers’ and farmers’ institutes.

“It’s a good start, but there’s plenty to do,” Mary Drummond seems to say as she concludes her report in what soon becomes clear is her trademark style, with messages that go beyond listing accomplishments to provide words of hope and motivation—and sometimes to ask a pointed question:

The Birds work for us all, some of us are trying as best we can to help save them for us all, cannot more of you hold up your hands, that we may do what lies before us in the future better than we have done what lies behind us in the past?

Importance of the Era

Within a couple years of Illinois Audubon Society’s formation, new laws would be enacted. According to Michelle Nijhuis in her book, *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*, the state Audubon societies played a vital role in advocating for protection laws, despite opposition from both the millinery industry and its patrons: “Hemenway and her Audubon allies successfully pushed for state laws restricting the feather trade, and they championed the federal Lacey Act, passed in 1900, that banned the interstate sale and transport of animals killed in violation of state laws.”

However, the Lacey Act, which was the nation’s first wildlife-protection law, would come too late for the passenger pigeon. As Republican Congressman John F. Lacey of Iowa acknowledged this upon the Act’s introduction: “We have given an awful exhibition of slaughter and destruction which may serve as a

warning to all mankind. Let us now give an example of wise conservation of what remains of the gifts of nature.” Flocks of millions had rapidly disappeared from the face of the earth. How could this happen? What more could be done?

It was a wake-up call, a cautionary tale. Suddenly it was understood that even the most abundant of creatures could not withstand indiscriminate killing and habitat loss. Stanley Temple, professor emeritus of conservation at the University of Wisconsin states that “...the pigeon’s extinction was one of the main catalysts for the emergence of the 20th century conservation movement. Many actions of the time specifically mentioned the pigeon’s loss as one of their motivations.” These events link us to new ideas and groundbreaking actions were created. Illinois Audubon Society President Ruthven Deane himself traversed such a pathway, transitioning from a youthful bird and egg collector to a defender of bird life while creating connections to prominent people during an exceptional time.

How amazing it is to see an archived 1878 letter from Deane to John Muir long before his founding of the Sierra Club in 1892; and a letter to Alfred Russell Wallace who himself corresponded with Charles Darwin and is now often called the co-founder of the theory of evolution. Wallace’s letter is now held by the British Library. And to Illinoisan Robert Ridgway who was the Smithsonian Institution’s first curator of birds. Deane’s reputation in the field of ornithology made him known even to President Theodore Roosevelt. These interactions weave threads of the early Illinois Audubon Society into the fabric of this era of ecological and scientific awakening.

While there were victories to celebrate, the plume trade responsible for millions of bird deaths a year did not come to an immediate halt. President Roosevelt in 1903 would take an important step toward bird protection by signing an executive order creating Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida—the first time the federal government had protected land specifically for the sake of wildlife. Mary Drummond reported during this same year that Illinois Audubon Society’s efforts had wielded “excellent results, many of our largest wholesale milliners agreeing not to handle the unlawful feathers.” She concluded her 1903 report by exhorting people to continue the fight:

And now, friends of the birds, what are you going to do to help us this coming year? ...Be, each one of you the man or woman or child who cares, cares enough to work a little, to give a little, even, if needs be, to sacrifice a little for our friends and benefactors, the birds.

Continuing in Their Footsteps

As the early era of bird conservation progressed, further federal Acts would follow that protected migratory birds and ultimately eliminated the feather trade. Meanwhile the state societies stood guard over the protections already in place. Scott Wiedensaul writes in *Of a Feather: A Brief History of American Birding*, “The Audubon societies were by no means the only force pressuring state and federal lawmakers on behalf of birds, but they were crucial, especially on the state level, battling hundreds of bills that would have rolled back or watered down newly enacted safeguards.”

We follow in the footsteps of these fierce protectors who created what is

now the oldest conservation organization in Illinois and were major players at a pivotal time in this country’s wildlife protection history. We can feel a kinship with them as birds face new, complex challenges. We can relate to these founders in understanding the difficulty in bringing the wonder and plight of birds to the forefront of the world’s notice. In contrast to the limited communication outlets available to the founders, we must now jump into a communications avalanche to gain attention in an overwhelming arena of information and disinformation—to continue sending the message that birds are an essential legacy for all.

As Illinois Audubon Society’s 125th year concludes, we can find significance in words offered at the close of our organization’s first ten years:

At the end of a decade it is natural to look back but it is better to look forward. We have made mistakes, that we have accomplished less than we desired, is a matter of course, but those who are working know that there has been a great change in the attitude of the country towards birds in the last ten years. May we once more urge upon our members an individual responsibility towards both the birds and the Society...When another decade dawns some of us will have laid down our work, but we want to feel that still – perhaps because we have helped a little – “From shore to shore, Somewhere the birds are singing evermore.”

— Mary Drummond, Secy. ■



BIOS

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Tom Handy spent a career in visual communication at SIU School of Medicine while occasionally freelancing as a photographer, his work most often published with his wife Jeanne Handy’s writings. His interests in photography, painting and music keep his life exciting.