

William Savage

Pioneer Iowa Bird Artist

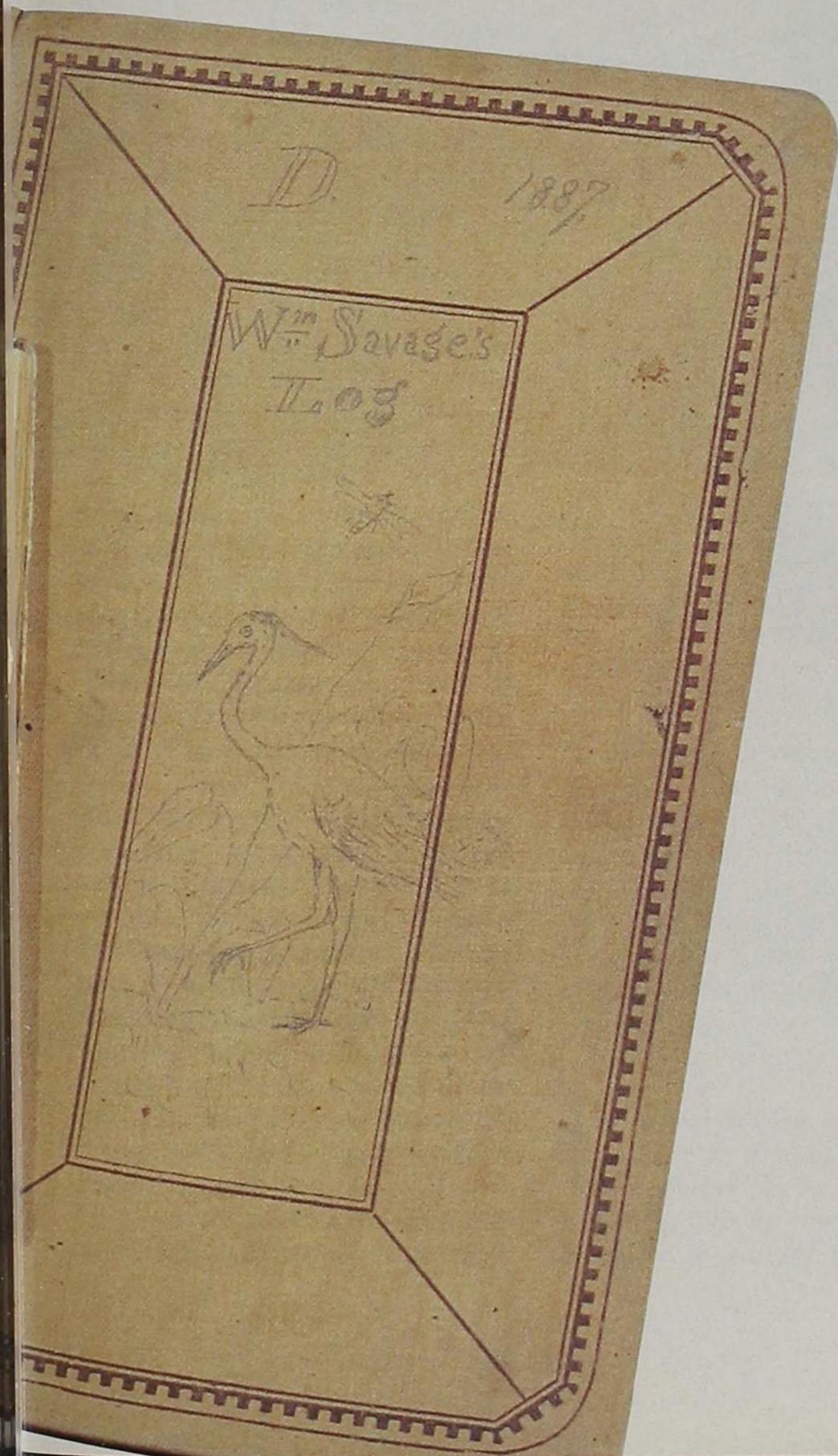


by Thomas H. Kent

William Savage, of rural Van Buren County, drew and painted birds from the time of his arrival in Iowa in 1855 until his death in 1908, making him perhaps the first resident of Iowa who both recorded and portrayed the birds he saw. He created this extensive and colorful record without training in art or ornithology, and often in spare moments on rainy days and Sundays.

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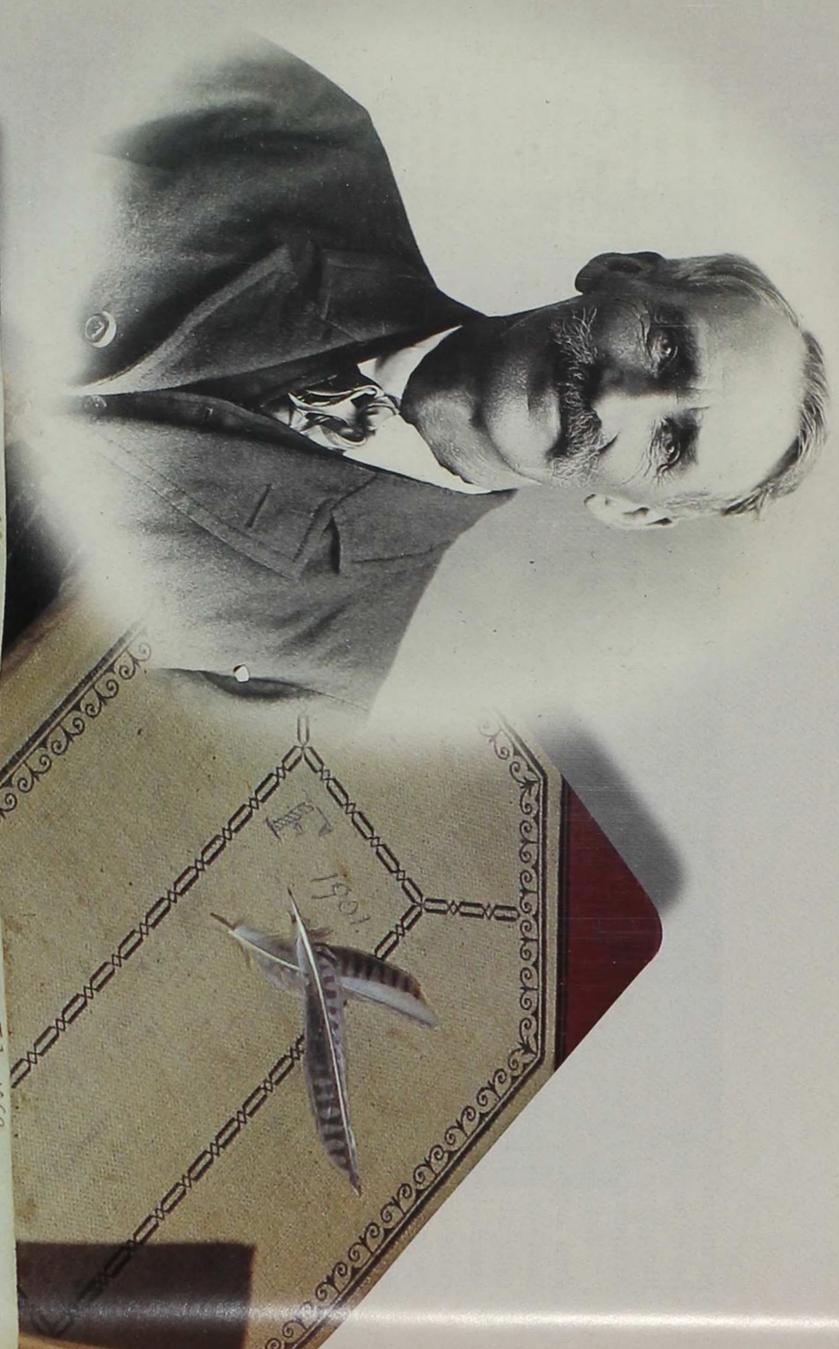
 **Yellow-breasted Chat**
William Savage's representation (above) of this rare, elusive, and colorful songbird of southeast Iowa is a bit elongated, but otherwise beautiful. Left: His diaries reveal a man who found time during his life as a farmer, tailor, trapper, and hunter to draw and paint hundreds of birds. Top left: Savage, about 1892.



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DIARIES PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS H. KENT



↑ **Great Horned Owl**
Savage painted his birds life-size, so the Great Horned Owl required two pieces of paper. This painting shows exquisite feather detail, as do many of the owls, sparrows, hawks, and woodpeckers that he painted. Diary entries in both spring 1872 and winter 1881/82 refer to “large Horned Owl” or “Great Owl.”

ing of birds was reached in 1886. By the late 19th century, ornithological associations, bird protection laws, and birding activities were gathering momentum across the nation. Meanwhile, for half a century on the same corner of Iowa farmland, William Savage observed and painted most of the birds that occurred there.

About the time that Audubon was publishing his paintings, William Savage was born at Greens Norton, Northhamptonshire, England, on September 2, 1832. His father died when he was 18 months old, and he lived with his grandmother. When he was 7, his uncle (also named William Savage) became his guardian and eventually taught him the trade of tailoring. At age 14 he immigrated with his uncle to Cayuga County, New York, in 1846. There he completed his basic schooling, worked as a farm hand, and tailored.

Although he was not formally trained in art as a youth, he later recorded that he had “rec’d some encouragement from a gentleman named Lancelot Turk in N.Y. drawing birds off . . . life size. he saw my work and advised me to get some drafting tools & take the correct measurements of my subjects. That was about 1850. that was when I first began to be exact in measurement of Birds.”

Apparently Savage was picturing more than birds; in January 1854, he drew a figure of a model grass and grain harvester for a farmer he worked for, and was paid \$1.50—equal to his wages for a day and a half of haying or threshing, and a bit more than what he earned sewing a vest and a pair of pants. Although drawing and painting would be his lifelong passion, it would never be an important source of income for him.

In 1853, he married Anna Sav-



age, who was nine years his senior and an adopted daughter of his great uncle Samuel Savage (also a tailor). Their first son, Walter Giles Savage, was born in July 1854. The family of three left New York in October 1855, arriving in the Quaker community of Salem in Henry County, Iowa, where his Uncle William had moved earlier that year. Immediately upon his arrival in Iowa, Savage began to portray the birds he saw. "October 1855 had been in Iowa about 3 days," he later wrote, "saw a Chewink, shot it & at first opportunity took bird and tools to an empty log cabin near by my Uncle William's dwelling & pictured the Chewink." (Today, the Chewink is named Eastern Towhee.)

Savage easily found work that winter as a tailor. He also bought

↑ **Henslow's Sparrow**

Savage called this a Baird's Bunting. Although Henslow's and Baird's Sparrows are quite similar in appearance, Baird's is not known to occur in Iowa. In Savage's painting, the subtle differences in markings of the feathers over the ear, the shape of the head, and the coloration fit Henslow's rather than Baird's Sparrow. Henslow's Sparrow became scarce as Iowa's prairies were plowed, but the species is now making a comeback.

80 acres of undeveloped land from Thomas Siveter, a pioneer surgeon and a Quaker. The new farm was located north of Hillsboro on Cedar Creek in Van Buren County, just across the line from Henry County. Here, the Savages' five other children would be born.

From March 1856, when William built a first house on the 80 acres where he was to live the rest of his life, he entered his daily activities in a diary, thus creating

another kind of record of his life besides his pictures of birds—a record that reveals a great variety of activities and a close involvement with his rural community. The diary entries are short phrases of one to a few lines that describe daily tasks including farming the land, raising livestock, painting houses, and sharing work and visits with neighbors and relatives. Although sparingly written, the diary shows Savage constantly busy, clearing brush, chasing cattle, stacking oats, rendering skunk oil, and laboring at dozens of other



↑ Pileated Woodpecker
 In his diary, Savage called this a **Great Crested Wood Cock, or Indian hen.** The Pileated Woodpecker is about the size of a crow and makes a loud call and noisy drumming. It is rare for northeastern Van Buren County, even today.

From the diary

Savage's daily diary entries over five decades reveal a man working through changing seasons, trading jobs with neighbors, and always observing the natural world around him. Here is one of the longest entries, about an event that obviously impressed him.

7 [August 1869]. Sat. to Salem to Monthly Meeting then P.M. saw a TOTAL Eclipse of the sun the grandest sight I ever saw as the shadow drew over the face of the sun. The shadow of the trees appeared curdelling and a strange darkness of a Yellow hue (it appeared to me to last for 10 minutes. The birds & chickens ran about in confusion and actually went to roost) came over the face of Nature & the air became very cool. and a murkey looking cloud hung in the N.W. soon the shade began to pass off & the Roosters began to crow (in some of the stores in Salem lamps were lighted) but soon the sunshine & warmth beamed upon us as lovely as ever.

chores associated with rural 19th-century life.

Although he did not discuss religion in the diary, he was active in church-related meetings and volunteered to help the sick and elderly. He helped build a school, which was located on the edge of his property, and he was a director until someone pointed out that he was not qualified because he was not a citizen. In fact, he did not become a citizen until 1888—earlier attempts having been aborted by lack of proper papers. He attended occasional political meetings and trials. He wrote letters for neighbors and corresponded with relatives.

His diary is also a record of money earned and paid for goods and services. He continued his trade of tailoring for his family, for Thomas Siveter (perhaps in payment on the farm mortgage), and for others. He hunted, trapped, and fished, alone and with relatives and friends, for both pleasure and food. He also earned money by selling game, furs, eggs, and feathers.

In his diary, the first, brief mention of his lifelong passion appears on July 30, 1856: "Rain, paint a bird." From 1856 to 1871 he mentions painting only about two birds per year, including an elegant Pileated Woodpecker (which he called Great Crested Wood Cock or Indian hen), a bird still rarely sighted today. Certainly as he went about his day's work, he took notice of birds, especially the spring arrivals. "Saw first wild geese," he wrote on February 18, 1859. "Went to Salem with Dr.'s vest. Heard blue birds. Stayed all night."

William made his pictures from actual specimens that he trapped or shot or that were given to him. As his friend Edgar Rubey Harlan later explained: "His method of drawing was to place the dead



bird on his table, lay its body in as nearly as possible the shape it would assume in life, and in combining his remarkable visual memory with the object before him, create the 'figure' as he called it, which he outlined in pencil on the paper. He then drew the outline of each feather, line and mass."

Next, Savage "measured each dimension by an ordinary carpenter's rule or other scale, or by the point of his pencil, indicating by his right thumbnail the extreme dimensions on the object, then transferring the same to paper." By this process, which Savage called "drawing off," he captured the edges of each feather, which makes the depictions so detailed and accurate.

Finally he added color, using ordinary school watercolor paints and, as Harlan described, "he moistened the brush with his tongue, but more usually in a cup

↑ Red-bellied Woodpecker
This pair of woodpeckers is well proportioned and nicely colored. The large fly is inappropriate as a food source for this species.

of water at his elbow, then rubbed the paint lozenge he believed to be the color of the object, after testing the color on waste paper, then compared it with the object." Early on he made brushes from the fur of animals he trapped; later he bought camel-hair brushes.

The steps were often interspersed among his daily work and stretched over several days, as this series of diary entries from 1860 illustrates:

July. 4. Wed. Rufus Wells & I celebrated this day hunting & swimming. I shot an Orchard Oriole, a C Partridge & redheaded woodpecker.

5 Thu. work on rail fence. E. &

From the diary

9 [February 1872] Fri Elliott Syphers here. I cut out an over coat for him then W. & I hunt I shot a Golden Winged Woodpecker.

10 Sat. to Salem to Q. meeting. Then to Ed. Simkins. stay all night.

11 Sun. to Salem to meeting. & then home in eve. to prayer meeting. at stone school house.

12 Mon portraying a hawk Walter shot. (not finished) in eve Anna & I went to Berrys.

13 Tue very cold & high wind. cap 1 of John W. Shelmans boots 20 cts. knit some. & chore some.

14 Wed painting said hawk with a chickadee in his talons.

15 Thu. sew some on my coat & hunt some. 3 f s. & 1 red eyed woodpecker. Then to West Grove meeting. at night Ason [?] & Anna K. Simons preached. Then home.

16 Fri we open the potatoe hole. & took out 6 Boilerfulls. paid the Litton Thrashers \$3.50 then sew on E. Sypher's coat. & cut the trimmings out. shot 1. Rab

17 Sat. help Virg. Knowles set up a new stove in school house. cost \$14.00. then E. Syphers & O. Bailey look at my pictures & I sew on E.s coat.

18 Sun home & write in Book. & to pray meet. in eve.

19 Mon Wild Ducks fly over. Walter & I to John H. Watsons camp. & chop wood. I have rented said camp.

20 Tue to said camp & began a shantee.

21 Wed to Salem to Meet. trade some & to U Wm stay all night.

22 Thu to Ed Simkins' & trade David Colt to him for his old wagon. providing he is as good as I represent. then I walk home. BLUE BIRDS. appear.



↑ **Broad-winged Hawk (with snake) and Sharp-shinned Hawk**

Savage called the hawk on the left a "Gray Star Buzzard," which was a name for Gray Hawk. It was once accepted to the state list based on this painting, but later determined to be an immature Broad-winged Hawk.

→ **Yellow-headed Blackbird, House Sparrow, Least Flycatcher**

Savage represented these three birds well, although he called them Yellow headed Troopial, Old World Sparrow, and Small fly catcher. Whether all three were painted at the same time is unclear.

The House (or English) Sparrow was introduced from Europe in the 1800s for insect control, but rapidly spread across the country and became a pest. By 1869 the species had reached Iowa. Savage wrote in his diary on March 10, 1882: "to Salem and to Sanford Lewis' borrowed his gun & ammunition & I shot an English Sparrow. The first in U.S," meaning the first that Savage had seen.

Anna & I went on N. side creek goose-berrying.

6 Fri. Drew O. Oriole & work on said fence. & cutting out the brush.

7 Sat. on said fence & cut a pair of pants for Mack Davis.

8 Sun painted said Oriole & went on N. side creek.

Savage's paintings vary in quality. Some seem thick and muddy whereas others have exquisite feather detail and subtle coloring. The higher quality is not limited to his later paintings, and overall, many provide excellent portrayals of the birds. His images of birds are accurate, but he was isolated as an artist and lacked sufficient training to portray three dimensions, especially when compared to Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874-1927). Yet

compared with the work of America's pioneer bird artists Alexander Wilson and John James Audubon, the details and poses of William Savage's watercolors are in some instances equal or better. With few exceptions the species of birds represented are easily identifiable from the paintings, although some of the names attached are inaccurate or misleading.

Most of the Iowa birds that Savage painted were of species common to southeast Iowa, where he lived. He painted a greater variety of Iowa warblers, sparrows, and other woodland birds, than of Iowa waterfowl, shorebirds, and gulls, probably because there were few lakes and marshes where he lived. Among the rarer species depicted were Bohemian Waxwing, Worm-eating Warbler, and what he called Sharp-tailed Finch and Painted Lark Bunting (today these are known as Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Smith's Longspur, respectively).

Not every mention of birds in Savage's diary refers to representations on paper. In fact, most of the birds mentioned in the first 25 years of the diary are game birds that he hunted, including quail, ducks, and geese, as well as common partridge (Ruffed Grouse), prairie chicken (Greater Prairie-Chicken), Wild Turkey, and Passenger Pigeon. His last mention of Passenger Pigeons was on February 10, 1882: "saw Wild Pigeons & Wild Ducks fly over." Unfortunately, there is a gap in the diary from June 1883 to January 1887, a time when Ruffed Grouse and Greater Prairie-Chicken were disappearing from southeast Iowa, and Wild Turkey and Passenger Pigeon from the entire state.

Savage hunted animals as well as birds. But by the time of his arrival in Iowa in the 1850s, large mammals were already scarce. Only occasionally did settlers still sight bear and wolf, and form hunting parties to exterminate them. Savage shot a deer on November 23, 1857, but none were mentioned after that. Judging from their frequent mention in the diary, squirrels were his favorite target.

Savage did not dwell in his diary on the disappearance of wildlife. As a provider for his family, he trapped and hunted game for food and for the fur and feathers he sold. Hunting was an integral part of early pioneer life in Iowa, and Savage's habits did not change, even when game was no longer needed for the table and even as bird protection came into vogue in the later part of the 19th century.

Like other students of birds, Savage trapped and killed birds, and sometimes skinned and stuffed them. Collecting bird specimens and eggs was done with zeal and dedication by amateur and professional ornithologists alike,



and the collections held by museums and other institutions formed the basis for study and description.

As William Savage grew older, his passion for painting birds intensified, and as his growing sons provided more help on the farm, his spare time for painting increased. He probably painted most of the birds in the last 20 years of his life. Occasionally he sold paintings to visitors or gave them to friends and relatives as gifts. One such painting is of a rabbit with this accompanying note: "For Willie R When this you see, remember me, And when you see a rabbit, Be sure to grab it. Your friend, William Savage, Hickory Grove, Dec 31, 1889." Yet he was protective of his paintings, as noted by his second cousin David L. Savage, who took a friend to see them on June 14, 1893. William was not home that day and his

door was unlocked, David later noted in his own diary, but unfortunately they could not view the paintings that day "as they were in his office under lock and key."

Savage achieved considerable notoriety from his paintings, especially in his later years. In his diary, he records 76 occasions in which a total of 209 people visited his home to view them. (These visits were first noted in 1870, but were most common after 1894.) Beginning in 1873, he also exhibited his paintings on 19 occasions, mostly at local fairs, where he often won first premium. "Anna & the girls & I went to Cedar Township FAIR," he noted on September 23, 1882. "I got first premium on my pictures had a very pleasant time there." In 1907, he sent 153 paintings to be exhibited at the Iowa State Fair.

In 1894, an anonymous correspondent writing for the "Iowa News-Letter" visited Savage and described his knowledge of birds in glowing terms. "Go with him into

the woods," the reporter wrote, "and from a far-away note of some shy warbler, he will tell you size, color, time of coming and going, place of nesting, color of eggs, in fact a single bird note is sufficient in his well trained ear to raise the whole life of its possessor. . . . He will give you more of natural history in a half day's jaunt than you can get from books in a week."

Occasionally, speeches and presentations also revealed his bird-watching skills. For a speech to be given at the Congregational Church in Salem, on November 12, 1897, he had filled four small sheets with his advice. "The most successful way to learn the habits of & watch the very interesting process of nest-building & finally the feeding of the young is a persistent watching, also paying close attention to their songs of pleasure, their notes of alarm, & also their notes of warning. for I am fully convinced that the birds have a language whereby they per-



COPY PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER

← Greater Prairie-Chicken
This is a fine rendition of a female prairie chicken, a species that decreased rapidly in the late 19th century, but nested in Iowa in small numbers into the 1950s. Its decline can be attributed to hunting and reduced grasslands. It has now been re-introduced. (This painting can be seen in the State Historical Society's museum exhibit *The Delicate Balance*.)



From the diary

Mar 1 [1881] Tue. shot an Oregon snow-bird. They associate with the common snowbirds. & about the same size. but are differently marked. P.M. portray said bird.

2 Wed. went to Wilsonville store took 3 ⁹/₁₆ lb butter & trade it all out. Then home & Seth & I chop wood. & drag it up with Nip trap 2 birds

3 Thu. Mend Mats shoe. very stormy I went to Vega P.O. & to Wood Haleys & from there to David Colletts. to pray meeting. stay there all night.

4 Fri storming yet. we had Joes team & sled. & haul 2 load wood 1 of hay & 1 of fodder. & Sam went to mill & got our grist.

5 Sat. paint some in Ellens Album. & wrote

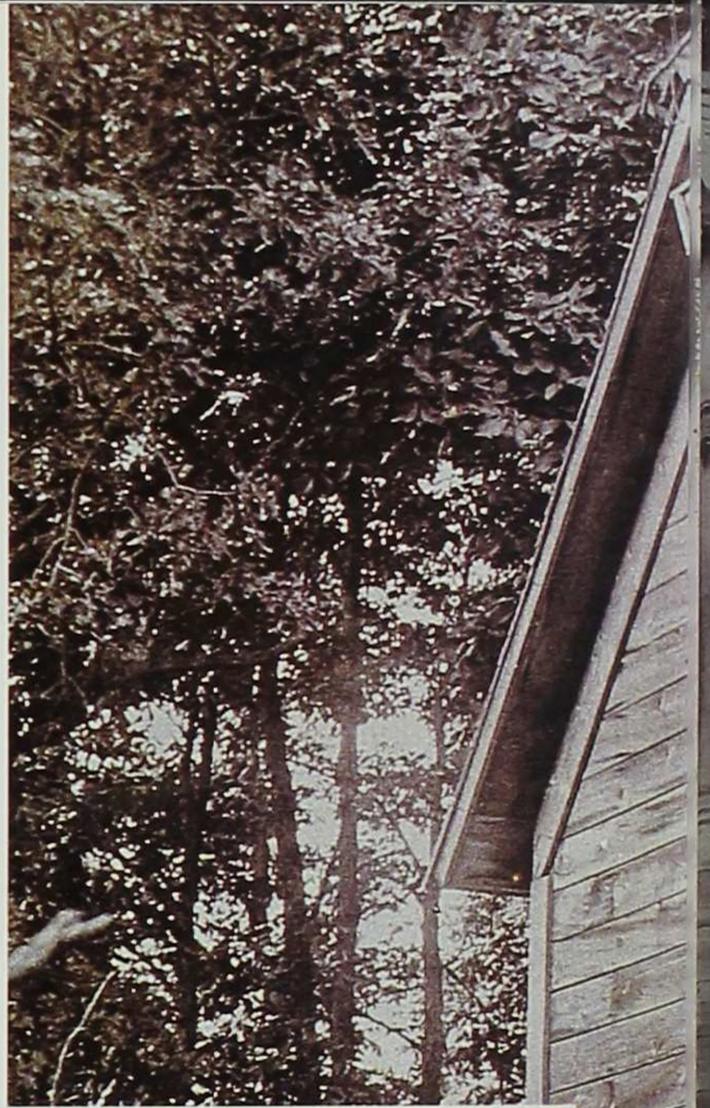
a piece of a letter to Walter. hunt rab. & trap 1 rab. & hunt for a small woodpecker.

6 Sun to West Grove Meeting & to John Cooks & then rode to the fingerboard [road sign] with Theodore Spray & then home (a very warm thawing day & the snow has melted very fast. Trap 1 rab.

7 Mon went to Salem with Joe. Runyon. bot some tincture of Arnica to put on Lucys foot. trade some in Salem & home. & stop at our school Meeting. Virg Knowles Elected subdirector. snow 5 in deep. trap 4 birds

8 Tue. hunt for Downey Woodpecker. shot 1 & began to portray it under a Hawk. thawing today.

↑ **Passenger Pigeon**
Savage labeled this painting "Wild Pigeon." Passenger Pigeons, once the most abundant bird in North America, migrated in large flocks and were killed by the barrelful. They rapidly declined in the late 1800s. According to his diary, Savage shot many Passenger Pigeons. The first is noted in 1860; the last on February 10, 1882.





OFFICE EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR, SHSI (DES MOINES), ORIGINALS COURTESY OF LEWIS D. SAVAGE

↑ Savage with his gun outside his “office,” where he painted and stored specimens. Note the birdhouse under the roof gable, and the painting of squirrels tacked to the right of the door (the same painting that appears here).

↖ Although Savage hunted and painted more squirrels than any other mammals, there are relatively few diary entries about painting them. This grouping of three may have been done in the fall and winter of 1896, when eight entries refer to portraying squirrels.

↖ Inside his office, with a box of specimens propped against the wall and a desk covered with papers and books.



OFFICE EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR: SHIRI (DEB) MONESI; ORIGINALS COURTESY OF LEWIS D. SAVAGE

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- Inside his office, with a box of specimens propped against the wall and a desk covered with papers and books.



← **Worm-eating Warbler**

Rare and secretive, the Worm-eating Warbler makes a buzzing sound and lives in the deep woods. An account of this difficult-to-find songbird was published in *The Oologist* by David L. Savage, William's second cousin.

↓ **Smith's Longspur**

On March 19, 1893, Savage wrote in his diary: "I skin a Painted Lark Bunting I shot in wheat stubble yesterday eve." Savage correctly identified this rare songbird as a Painted Lark Bunting, according to earlier bird books. Birds of this species migrate through Iowa in March and April on their way to the Arctic, and are often seen in stubble or grassy fields. Few historical records of this bird are known, perhaps because they are so difficult to see—they hide in the grass and fly up quickly.



fectly understand each others expressions."

Of William and Anna Savage's six children, only the eldest, Walter, apparently showed an interest in painting and documenting birds. But in David Lewis Savage, a second cousin, William found a kindred spirit. Born in 1877 to William's cousin John, David developed a keen interest in ornithology and drew inspiration from William. David lived about five miles east of "Cousin William" (as he was known), separated by Cedar Creek. In late March 1897, William wrote in his diary:

27 Fri. to trap catch 1 skunk. & met John & David Savage at Coltrane Bridge then visit & look at the birds all day. John went home in eve. David stay all night.

28 Sat. to trap. then I mend 2 pair shoes for Millard Watson. chd. 40. Davids horse broke loose & went home. then I went part way home with David shot a Meadow Lark. & showed D. how to skin it. . . .

David's account in his diary for the same two days shows he had found a mentor in his 58-year-old cousin, William. David wrote:

Mch. 27th. Friday. Father and I went to Cousin Wm.'s to see his paintings, I had not seen them since I could remember. They are fine. I do not expect any other man in Iowa has paintings near as fine as Cousin Wm.

Mch. 28th. Saturday. Still at C.W. he showed me how to skin a bird, he shot and skinned a meadow lark, this is the first time I ever saw any one skin a bird. . . . He gave me the following directions for a preser-

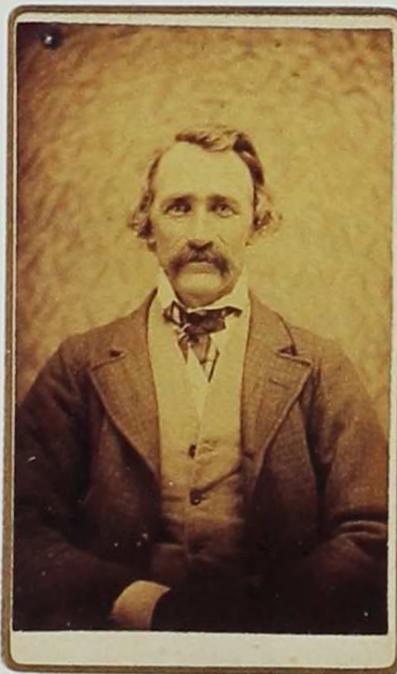
vative; 1 oz. Corrosive Sublimate. 1 oz Alcohol. ¼ oz. Camphor. Today we might say I first received the determination to become a bird student, it was here that I first felt the desire to learn of the feathered friends.

Already, the quality of the younger Savage's education and his attention to detail were quite evident at the age of 14. Three years later in 1894, at age 17, David would become the editor of Iowa's first bird journal, *The Iowa Ornithologist*, and secretary of the first birding organization in the state, the Iowa Ornithological Association.

David and William continued to share their interest. The second issue of *The Iowa Ornithologist* contained William Savage's only publication, a well-written one-page description titled "The American Woodcock," which was much more expansive than any of the material in his diary and likely exhibits a touch of David's editorial talent.

In August 1895, at the first meeting of the Iowa Ornithological Association in Iowa City, David exhibited William's painting of a Ruffed Grouse, which had been specifically made for that occasion. In 1896, they both described in their diaries a long trip by horse and buggy to exhibit the paintings at the second annual meeting of the association in Mount Vernon, which was attended by nine members besides the Savages. William also made pen and ink drawings for David's series of articles on birds in the 1897 *Midland Monthly Illustrated*.

Despite his involvement through David with the Iowa Ornithological Association, William Savage was mostly standing still as the world of ornithology developed around him. He indicated that he had seen the elegant scientific works by Spencer Fullerton Baird



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Savage, in 1881.

From the diary

12 Mon. [October 1891] dig some potatoes P.M. to Vega. P.O. & at night Evi Sharpless gave a lecture on the discovery. & the history of Jamaica at Hickory Grove.

13 Tue. dig some potatoes. (rain'd) went to trap.

14 Wed. to trap catch 1 Musk rat, then dig potatoes

15 Thu. finish digging potatoes. P.M. to creek & set said 3 trap for M. rat.

16 Fri. caught 1. rat mend Wm Runyons shoes. pd 5¢ mend 1 shoe for Mary Watson ch 5¢ then began to mend my shoe. (skin & board, rat.

17 Sat. finish Mending my shoe. then to Thos Siveters timber & pick up some Walnuts. & caught 10 sunfish.

18 Sun. to West Grove Meeting. to Ables & then to Hickory Grove. S.S.

19 Mon. to trap & to John Coltranes to look at Nannie Frazier's painting on velvet. then from there to our school house. then home & then back to school house Nannie having some painting there. P.M. began to paint a rose on velvet for Mary Watson. on a stand scarf.

20 Tue. A M. paint. Golden rod on the other end of scarf. P.M. finish mending my shoe mend my pants. skin a king fisher No. 2. I found on creek dying.

21 Wed Billey Stanley here with his team & we hauld manure out of cowyard & S. end of west field.

in 1881, Elliott Coues in 1887, and Robert Ridgway in 1906, yet the names of birds that he applied to his paintings do not indicate that he made much use of these nationally recognized authorities. His names were often incorrect, obscure, or based on outdated sources. In his early years, for instance, his naming of birds appears to follow Alexander Wilson's work (published between 1808 and 1814), although Savage never showed any awareness of Wilson or his contemporaries Audubon and Nuttall. In fact, Savage never even mentioned using so basic a bird-watching tool as a binocular, or "field glass," as it was called in that day.

Cousin David, however, re-

corded in his diary that he received Wilson's *American Ornithology* (costing \$5.00) and a field glass (\$2.50) on May 1, 1891, by mail order from Chicago. David Savage, in a very short time, developed birding skills that would be admired today: daily lists, recording details of specimens, descriptions of birds' habits and nests, and correct names for birds based on *The American Ornithologists' Union Checklist of North American Birds*, first published in 1886 and revised in 1895. David, along with William's son Walter, also contributed much data to Iowa's first major book on birds, Rudolph M. Anderson's *The Birds of Iowa* (1907). David was just one of several young Iowa bird

students who must have been stimulated by the number of publications and additional leisure time compared to that available to previous generations. In fact, a number of his contemporaries left Iowa and became major contributors to the developing natural sciences. David pursued a successful career as a farmer and later developed a large library of nature books and became a student of botany.

In contrast, the knowledge of Iowa birds that William Savage must have acquired went mostly unrecorded, except for that revealed in his paintings. Fortu-





SHSI (DES MOINES)

↑ Charles Aldrich (in hat) visited William Savage on his farm in July 1903. They shared an interest in ornithology, and Aldrich, as head of the state's historical department, quickly realized the importance of Savage's paintings. (Note the birdhouse on the pole behind the men.)

← Orchard Oriole
This colorful songbird was labeled as "young" by Savage, and indeed, it is an immature male. On May 20, 1860, he wrote in his diary: "I portrayed a black-throated orchard oriole."

nately, 245 of his paintings have been preserved by the State Historical Society of Iowa for decades.

Perhaps the thought of the sale of the pictures to the State of Iowa was seeded on July 15, 1903. That day, Savage jotted in his diary: "Mr. Ed Harlan of Keosauqua & Mr. Aldrich from Des Moines here to look at Bird pictures."

Edgar Rubey Harlan was a native of nearby Keosauqua and practiced law there from 1896 to 1907 before joining Iowa's Historical Department. His records show that "in the summer of 1903 Charles Aldrich, Founder of the Histori-

cal Department of Iowa, in a tour of Van Buren County with this writer, met and formed an intimate acquaintance with William Savage, of Cedar Township, that county."

Aldrich, himself a lover of birds and a charter member of the American Ornithologists' Union, recognized the importance of the paintings. Interviewed by the *Des Moines Register and Leader*, he described the meeting at the house of "William Savage, a farmer, who makes a specialty of painting birds in water colors." Aldrich said, "He has a remarkable collection of 300 to 400 Iowa birds that seem to me

→ Long-eared Owl

This winter owl is captured in exceptional detail. Savage penciled in each of the features and then painted them with his watercolors.



to be as good as those of John James Audubon. Savage is 60 years old, and knows as much of woodcraft as Thoreau or John Burroughs. His collection is one that the state certainly ought to own."

Negotiations got under way. On May 6, 1905, Savage wrote in his diary: "Ed R. Harlan here & we talk & write some about disposing of my pictures, curios & relics." The variety of birds pictured was extensive. By this time, he had painted all the birds he had seen except for Wild Turkey, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Double-crested Cormorant, Bald Eagle, Osprey, and Vulture (he would later paint a Vulture).

When Charles Aldrich died on March 8, 1908, Edgar Harlan succeeded him as head of the Historical Department. Negotiations for the sale of the paintings must have been continuing, as Professor J. H. Paarmann from the Davenport Academy of Sciences was enlisted to evaluate them in late May. Paarmann "thought they were very good," Savage noted.

According to the department's notes, Paarmann had also indicated that "said birds are accurately done. Most sitting on Iowa plants. Landscape backgrounds are poor. Some unrelated birds in groupings. True color—done from freshly killed birds." Aware that museum specimens often lost their color, Paarmann advised that "pictures should be protected from fading," and he "recommended purchase by state of Iowa."

William Savage started June 1, 1908, a Monday, this way: "painting some & read." He painted more on the next few days, a picture of a Wood duck, snipe, and Red-headed Woodpecker, and throughout that month he pursued conversations about selling his paintings to the state, as well as selling a few

individual paintings to acquaintances. On the 11th he recorded: "I wrote a P. card to E. R. Harlan Des Moines Iowa" and the next day, he mowed and "shot 2 old Jay Birds they were troubling the Baltimore Orioles that have a nest S. of house." As the month went on he felt ill ("very dumpish," he called it), but recovered enough to visit neighbors and, as he wrote on the 24th, to "mow some & read & hunt for rab." Three weeks later, on July 8, Savage died, at age 75.

The paintings, acquired by his son John, were finally sold in 1917 to the Iowa Historical Department (now the State Historical Society of Iowa) for \$400. Many were exhibited for more than a decade, and a few are now displayed in a current State Historical Society museum exhibit, *The Delicate Balance: Human Values and Iowa's Natural Resources*. Their appearance on these pages in color marks the first time they have been published.

In the October 1908 *Annals of Iowa*, Edgar Harlan eulogized William Savage in simple, respectful terms. "He followed his trade [of tailoring] until that vanished as a country custom," Harlan wrote. "He farmed and painted houses and trapped for furs. He kept a diary of domestic and neighborhood affairs and especially of natural history phenomena. His passion for recording his observations was most peculiarly evidenced in the record he made in water-color of every bird, save two, he observed in Iowa, and many he received from elsewhere. . . . He did his work without desire for and he never received the attention of scientists. He was modest, honest, sober and always lived close to nature. His records may or

From the diary

9 Sat. [May 1908] trim big peas tree

10 Sun walk to Millard Nichol's & visit with them all day. home in eve.

11 Mon. stick the peas in garden. & read

12 Tue. went down to John A.s rain in eve hunt some shot 1 rab. stay at johns all night rain all night. I found I left my keys at home in door.

13 Wed. rain some I came home. found keys all right dreadful hot (about done me up.

14 Thu. read and rest feel fairly well shot 1 rab.

15 Fri. read and rest

16 Sat. shot 1 F. s. and fix garden fence some.

17 Sun. home all day folks went to Willie Standleys Ralph Harter here left an order for me to paint for him Wood Duck Snipe & red headed Woodpecker.

18 Mon. began to clean up my E. shop,

19 Tue. working in shop.

20 Wed. work in shop & began to sketch on wood duck.

21 Thu. draw some on duck.

22 Fri. on said duck.

23 Sat. sleep & read.

24 Sun. sleep & read.

25 Mon. wrote letter E.R. Harlan & 1 to our Sam in Kansas & put them in M. box rain.

26 Tue. tinker in shop

27 Wed. put breast pocket in my black vest & sew the buttons on it & my black coat

may not be of service to the world."

Perhaps uncertain of the scientific importance of Savage's records, Harlan did recognize the value of the man's life. Harlan's obituary of Savage was among 18 "Notable Deaths" in that issue of the *Annals of Iowa*. The other 17 obituaries honored politicians, attorneys, bankers, business leaders, and prominent landowners.

Savage's life bridged great change in the American public's use and appreciation of birds. When he had first arrived in Iowa, his daily chores and jaunts took him into the forests and fields where birds abounded. He hunted and trapped them for food and income, and over the years he drew and painted them as avidly as other or-

nithologists collected specimens and eggs. As the years passed, the nationwide movement to protect birds developed, including bird protection laws, Christmas Bird Counts as a replacement for Christmas bird hunting, public sentiment against using feathers in women's hats, and professional calls to end the collection of birds and their eggs. In Iowa, David L. Savage covered the subject nicely in his article "Bird Protection" in *The Iowa Ornithologist* in 1898, and Congressman John Lacey from Oskaloosa, was instrumental in passing the first federal game law—the "Lacey Act"—which made interstate transportation of wild game taken illegally a federal offense and marked the end of mar-

ket hunting of birds. (A park in Van Buren County was named in Lacey's honor in 1926.)

Yet it was not until eight years after Willam Savage's death, through the 1916 Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada and the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, that the federal government began to regulate the killing of all bird species. Within his lifetime, however, Savage had indicated an awareness of the need to limit the shooting of birds. In a talk he gave at the Congregational Church in Salem on November 12, 1897, he advised: "If it be a new or strange bird to you, in the mind of your unworthy servant, you are excusable, if you bring the slaughtering gun to bear & capture the prize." Then he





← Evening Grosbeak

This colorful songbird is a rare winter visitor, so it is not surprising that Savage made note of it in his diary. Between January 29 and February 17, 1895, Savage writes of "Evening Grossbeaks," (as he spelled it) seven times, including these entries:

Feb. 11: "Seth brought home 7 Evening Grosbeaks him & John shot in C. Bottom"

Feb 14: "paint some ♀ Evening grossbeak"

Feb. 17: "sketch & paint some buckberrie twigs under ♂ & ♀ Evening Grosbeaks. for Wm Edwards"

It is not always possible to match diary entries and paintings. Very few of the paintings are dated; this one, on the back, says "copied 1899." Whether this is the painting noted in the diary in February 1895, or a copy of it, made in 1899, is unclear. What is clear is that by the 1890s Savage wrote far more often in his diary about painting birds than in the earlier years.

↑ Blue-winged Teal and Scarlet Tanager

Savage created an odd combination here, posing a colorful, male, and peculiarly shaped Blue-winged Teal with a male Scarlet Tanager, which he did not identify, perched on a weed. Scarlet Tanagers live in the deep woods, and teal are marsh birds.

The only clue in the diary, though its connection to this particular painting is speculative, appears on September 23, 1898: "look over pictures. & select some I can add a small bird to. & sketch Blackwinged Red bird with Blue winged Teal."



added: "But one friendly desire, as well as these instructions. After you have slain one beauty, permit the remainder to enjoy life, for this is the course followed by your Bird loving friend William Savage."

Savage lived a simple life. His transportation may have been mostly on foot, for his diary makes little mention of riding horseback or using wagons or taking trains. His 80-acre farm kept him self-sufficient, but he died with very few savings (\$462—about \$8,000 in today's dollars). In the early years, his busy life as a pioneer farmer did not provide much spare time. Later his sons assumed more of the labor, leaving him more time for hunting and trapping and for painting birds. As he once explained, "Birds and Nature

was my Ideal, Birds and Flowers was my delight to paint."

By modern standards, Savage's birds are a bit stiff and some are poorly posed, but Audubon had these faults, too. The Savage paintings' quality and detail are surprisingly good, and their breadth impressive. His paintings that have survived represent about 196 species from Iowa. (By comparison, in 1907, Rudolph Anderson listed 353 species for the entire state, and as of year 2000 there are 404 species.)

A pioneer farmer who seldom traveled, who lived in an area with little habitat for water birds, and who worked long hours year-round, he nevertheless painted most of the birds that could be expected to have occurred there. For the most part, William Savage, with his young cousin David, studied the same birds that Iowans see today. Most surprising is that a

↑ Whip-poor-will
Technically, this painting is one of Savage's best. It shows very nice detail of a nocturnal species that is rarely seen. Its song, of course, is easily recognized.

pioneer farmer was so dedicated and skillful to paint them at a time when very little had been researched or written about Iowa's birds. ❖

Thomas H. Kent, M.D., has been birding for over 50 years and holds the record for the most species seen in Iowa. He and his father, Fred Kent, photographed birds extensively and coauthored a book on eastern Iowa birds. He is also the co-author of two definitive books on Iowa ornithology.