

## Iowa Birds Then and Now

It was in 1843 that John James Audubon explored the western border of Iowa while on an expedition up the Missouri River to secure material for his *Quadrupeds of North America*. His daily account of the journey has proved of great historical value as to early-day navigation, hunting, wildlife, and Indians. Of particular interest is his record of birds found in the Iowa country, since it reveals that many present species were here a century ago while others have become extinct.

The eastern goldfinch, now the ornithological symbol of Iowa, was not listed in Audubon's record for Iowa, though he saw it in the northwestern corner of Missouri. This bird was unanimously adopted as the State bird by the legislature in 1933 at the request of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union. The goldfinch is one of the most light-hearted of Iowa's permanent residents.

Audubon recorded the names of fifty-two birds sighted in the territory along the Missouri River now included in the State of Iowa. At present, it has been reliably reported that Iowa is the habitat of 289 species of birds. In addition there are fifty-six rare or accidental visitors. Nineteen



species have been added to the Iowa list recently, since they have been reported frequently in recent years. Six species have been dropped from the Iowa list as now extinct here. One hundred and thirty-five species of birds breed in Iowa according to reliable nesting records of the last twenty years.

Iowa, lying in the great triangle between the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, is favorably located on the flyways of vast numbers of migrating wild ducks, geese, and swans. Before reaching the southwest corner of Iowa Territory on May 8, 1843, Audubon noticed, besides parrakeets, a "new Finch", and many other small birds, "an abundance of Ducks, some White Pelicans," and several sandhill cranes. Four days later, near the mouth of the Little Sioux River he reported "more Geese than usual as well as Mallards and Wood Ducks." Wood ducks in years past became very uncommon, but restricted shooting has somewhat restored them.

Vast numbers of migrating water fowl are ushered north through Iowa in the spring by State and Federal game wardens, and south in the fall by the sportsmen. The mallard, blue-winged teal, wood duck, redhead, ruddy duck, shoveller, and pintail occasionally nest in Iowa, mainly in the wildlife refuges. In the fall migrations the mal-



lards are the most numerous, followed by the blue-winged teal, pintail, green-winged teal, lesser scaup, canvas-back, shoveller, redhead, baldpate, ruddy, gadwall, ring-necked, buffle-head, and hooded mergansers. Iowa is still a happy hunting ground for ducks.

On Audubon's return trip down the Missouri, he reached the mouth of the Big Sioux River on October 1st and reported "Geese very abundant", but the party stopped to shoot turkeys on the future site of Sioux City. None of the night-flying, weird-honking geese nest in Iowa. The more numerous of these birds of passage today are the blue geese, followed by the lesser snow geese, Canada, and white-fronted geese.

Audubon listed "plenty of Sandhill Cranes" as well as "two Swans, several Pelicans, and abundance of Geese and Ducks" near the mouth of the Little Sioux on October 3rd. None of the trumpeter swans and only occasionally the whistling swans now rest in Iowa on their migratory flights. The sandhill cranes still migrate through Iowa but they are rare. Since most of the marshes have been drained, native water birds have tended to disappear, but the nests of American coots can still be found. The king and Virginia rails and the gallinules pass through Iowa, occasionally nesting here.



At the site of Council Bluffs Audubon noticed two yellow-crowned night herons, which now are only accidental wanderers this far north. However, many of the picturesque non-game birds nest here, such as the belted kingfisher, least bittern, pied-billed grebe, green heron, black-crowned night heron, and great blue heron, the latter mentioned by Audubon. Increasing in their southern breeding areas, the little blue heron and the American egret are now found in Iowa on their post-breeding flight, only rarely nesting here. Ornithologists enjoy reporting the "find" of an American egret or a little blue heron in Iowa.

White pelicans, noted by Audubon along the Little Sioux River, are still seen during migrations, together with cormorants and loons. The large, circling gulls which add such beauty to Iowa lakes for a month or two in the spring are the herring, ring-billed, and Franklin's gulls, the latter being the "black-headed gulls" mentioned by Audubon. The black and Forster's terns are abundant spring and fall visitors, a few black terns probably nest here, while the common tern is rather uncommon, and the Caspian tern has but recently been included in the Iowa list. All are beautiful birds as they dip and turn in their flight.

None of the common species of shore birds was mentioned by Audubon along the Iowa border, but



he saw yellowshanks, tell-tale godwits, and solitary snipes in northwest Missouri. Only three commonly nest in Iowa — the spotted sandpiper, the killdeer, and the upland plover. The common migrating species include the lesser yellow-legs, semipalmated, solitary, pectoral, and least sandpipers. Less numerous, but perhaps more distinctive, are the black-bellied, golden, and semipalmated plovers, Wilson's snipe, American woodcock, and Wilson's phalarope. Fewer still, but therefore more exciting to find, are the greater yellow-legs, stilt sandpiper, Hudsonian and marbled godwits, sanderling, and dowitcher. Perhaps a few of these twenty shore birds might have been included in Audubon's notation on May 8th — "we saw many small birds, but nothing new or very rare."

On his return trip in October he might have seen many upland game birds if he had taken an excursion to the Iowa prairies beyond the bluffs, for grouse and quail nested there. Large numbers of bob-white quail still find cover in the southern half of the State, and the alien ring-necked pheasants have increased rapidly in the northern half. The Hungarian partridge nests in the northwest section of Iowa, while the rare ruffed grouse is slowly increasing in the northeast section, and the once-common prairie chicken is again sighted in widely



separated areas. The regulations of the State Conservation Commission and "plantings" are credited for this increase of upland game birds.

Audubon mentioned seeing turkey buzzards, a fish hawk, and a swallow-tailed hawk here a century ago. Turkey vultures are occasionally found during the summer, and a few scattered bald eagles. Prairie falcons occur, but are rare. Among the beneficial hawks nesting in Iowa are the red-tailed, marsh, sparrow, Cooper's, broad-winged, red-shouldered, and Swainson's hawks, while the very rare duck and pigeon hawks are not increasing in numbers. The "swallow-tailed hawk" or kite listed by Audubon, sometimes called the "snake hawk", has in recent years almost entirely disappeared from the State. The "fish hawk", now called osprey, is an uncommon migrant and only a rare summer resident along Iowa's larger streams.

The mysterious nocturnal habits of the owls add interest to Iowa bird life. The most common permanent residents are the screech owls, barred owls, and great-horned owls. Not so common are the American long-eared, short-eared, and barn owls.

Nearly every Iowa pond, lake, or creek is policed by the military belted kingfisher. There also are the "red-winged starlings" and the "yellow-



headed troupials" listed by Audubon, while circling overhead are the bank, cliff, rough-winged, and "green-backed" swallows he frequently mentioned. The "raven" and "fish crow" he reported are now almost extinct here. Audubon was interested in "two magpies in a cage, that had been caught in nooses, by the legs", at the dragoon camp. "Their actions, voice, and general looks, assured me as much as ever, that they are the same species as found in Europe." Magpies are now uncommon migrants in Iowa.

Although there are several woodland nesting birds which are songless, such as the phoebe, crested, least, and alder flycatchers, and the migrating olive-sided and yellow-bellied flycatchers, Iowa is favored with numerous nesting woodland birds which sing from early spring to midsummer. Bird friends enjoy the "purity" song of the returning bluebirds, the lavish song of the song sparrow, the "sweet and low" of the tiny blue-gray gnatcatcher, the preaching red-eyed vireo, the voluble yellowthroat, the plaintive pewee, the varied warble of the redstart, the gossiping yellow-breasted chat, the "che-wink" of the towhee, the hoarse warble of the scarlet tanager, the cheery goldfinch, the ringing tones of the wood thrush, and the low, emphatic warble of the Bell's vireo which Audubon named for one of his boat companions.



May is the month of pure joy for Iowa ornithologists, for then the great wave of colorful songsters, the warblers, linger here on their northern journey. It is both a joy and a test of ear and eye to identify these active soloists. Audubon saw many of them in northern Missouri, but he soon outran most of the little migrants. First to arrive is the "yellow-rumped" (myrtle) warbler which Audubon listed as being shot by Harris, followed by the brilliant "Blackburnian warbler" and "yellow-winged warbler" which he saw near the Little Sioux River on May 12th. In addition Iowans welcome the dreamy black-throated green warbler, the large and poky black-polls, the chestnut cap and wagging tail of the palm warbler, Wilson's yellow suit and black cap, Canada's yellow dress and necklace of black beads, the chestnut-sided warbler, the mourning warbler whose songs and habits resemble our nesting northern yellowthroat, the black and white warbler with its creeper-like habits, the prothonotary's deep yellow tuxedo, the tiny elusive blue-winged warbler, the restless orange-crowned tree-top singer, the parula's lazy, sleepy song, the Nashville's "che-see", and the tardy Tennessee. When it is warbler time in Iowa the avian world reaches its climax in color and song.

There are numerous troubadours among the



migrating sparrows, often called "buntings" and "finches" by Audubon, among which are heard the morning anthem of the fox sparrow, the clear, sad cadence of the white-crowned sparrow, the "pea-bo-dy-bird" of the white-throated sparrow, the sputtering warble of the Lincoln, the insect trill of the grasshopper sparrow, the broken trill of the swamp sparrow, the squeaky song of the Leconte, the high-pitched trill of the Savannah, the happy trill of the lark sparrow, the cicada song of the clay-colored, and the whistled notes of the Harris sparrow which was named by Audubon for a boat companion. Audubon mentioned particularly field sparrows, chipping sparrows, lark and Henslow's "buntings", and Savannah and Lincoln's "finches".

Although he observed that "Robins are very scarce", he saw some of their cousins, the thrushes. The Wilson's, gray-cheeked, olive-backed, hermit, and wood thrushes are said to be the most beautiful singers in the avian choir. The best songster of the group, the wood thrush, remains in Iowa throughout the summer.

Iowa is favored with many roadside carolers nesting in nearby fields, meadows, and bushes, greeting the passerby with their songs. First is heard the prairie horned lark's bubbling warble on soaring wings, followed by the "spring-o'-the-year" song of the eastern meadowlark, which is



thinner and less musical than the western meadow-lark's wild, clear whistle — both heard in Iowa. A few bobolinks are heard singing about "Robert of Lincoln", while our State bird is one of the happiest of roadside singers. Then arrive the brown thrashers, the first among the mockers, and two birds mentioned by Audubon — the brown-capped chipping sparrows singing in their rapid monotone, and the pink-billed field sparrows with their plaintive song. After the lively notes of the song sparrow, the vesper sparrow offers his soft, sweet version of the same melody. The Henslow's weak notes are lost in the piercing rounds of the yellow warbler and in the inquiries of the northern yellowthroat with his black mask asking "Which way sir? Which is it?"

Inspired by these songs the eastern kingbirds and the encroaching Arkansas kingbirds add their piping notes, while the bronzed grackles and the cowbirds (the latter mentioned by Audubon) try to do likewise. The innumerable dickcissels and the indigo buntings give a continuous performance from the telegraph wires. Migrant shrikes serve as highway patrolmen of the air in summer and the northwestern shrikes take charge during the winter months.

English sparrows and starlings have not yet driven out the song birds nesting about our homes



and orchards. The bluebirds with their mellow warble, the mourning doves with their plaintive notes, the black-billed and yellow-billed cuckoos with their predictions of the weather, the military warble of the robins, the whistling carol of the rose-breasted grosbeak, the busy wrens, and brilliant Baltimore orioles contribute to the charm of Iowa towns and country. Audubon declared that the woods a few miles above the Missouri boundary were "fairly alive with House Wrens" on May 9th, and he noticed also some martins, grosbeaks, a bluebird, and a northern titmouse. The orioles he had left behind in Missouri. Iowans now enjoy also the brilliant song of the cardinals, the twittering notes of the barn swallows, the mockery of the catbirds, and the sweet trill of the warbling vireos.

Iowa's winter landscape is made interesting by the numerous woodpeckers and the little brown creepers spiraling up the trees. The hairy and downy woodpeckers remain with us, and many of the red-headed and red-bellied woodpeckers and northern flickers prefer Iowa winters, while the red-shafted flicker and yellow-bellied sapsucker are rarely found here. Audubon mentioned the pileated woodpecker, an uncommon bird in Iowa for years, but now rapidly increasing its range in the woods along our streams.



The Iowa Ornithologists' Union members have identified from forty to seventy-five permanent resident birds on their Christmas bird census hikes. Nearly always included in these lists are the red-tailed, sharp-shinned, and sparrow hawks, the bob-white quail, ring-necked pheasant, mourning doves, the long-eared, short-eared, barred, and screech owls, the red-headed, red-bellied, hairy, and downy woodpeckers, and flickers. Winter days in Iowa are enlivened with the rollicking songs and antics of the black-capped chickadee, the "yank, yank, yank" of the white and red-breasted nuthatches, and the scream of the gangster blue jay.

Iowa receives a few winter callers which nest near the Arctic circle and migrate south for the winter, among which are flocks of tree sparrows, slate-colored juncos, fluffy redpolls, the elegant Bohemian waxwing tramps, and the gypsying Lapland longspurs. A few northern shrikes, American rough-legged hawks, goshawks, saw-whet owls, and snowy owls drop down to call during the winter months. Among erratic visitors during cold weather are Carolina wrens, winter wrens, and purple finches, while occasionally flocks of red crossbills and pine siskins come to feed in our coniferous trees, paying with their songs as they circle in flight.



Audubon spent only seven days in May and six in October along the western border of Iowa over a hundred years ago. His observations were very limited and his records incomplete, but the birds he mentioned constitute an important list in the ornithological history of Iowa. Like any amateur, this famous naturalist was excited over each discovery. Perhaps his greatest thrill in Iowa occurred on May 10th while he was sitting in front of Captain J. H. K. Burgwin's tent on the present site of Council Bluffs. Hearing a strange bird call from a tree overhead, he "looked up and saw the first Yellow-headed Troupial alive that ever came across my own migrations." He observed the habits of these blackbirds with interest and collected several specimens. They are still found mainly on the Missouri slope. But the parrakeets and turkeys he saw there are gone.

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