

Althea Sherman and the Birds of Prairie and Dooryard

A Scientist's Witness to Change

by Sharon E. Wood



YEAR AFTER YEAR, between 1918 and 1932, hundreds of people made their way to a Clayton County crossroads called National, Iowa. They braved spring mud and summer dust, traveling on rutted country roads in northeastern Iowa. There was no rail service to National; by 1918, there wasn't even a post office. But the visitors kept coming — college professors with groups of students, eminent scientists and amateur naturalists, “automobile tramps” out for fun on an afternoon drive. So many came that Althea Sherman finally gave up counting her callers.

By 1932, the year she stopped keeping track, the 79-year-old Sherman had led more than seventeen hundred visitors on the tour through her backyard laboratory. Stout, white-haired, and possessed of an encyclopedic

knowledge of her natural environment, Sherman was an object of admiration and curiosity to her visitors. She had spent more than twenty years teaching art in schools and colleges around the country. Then, shortly after the turn of the century, at an age when most people would be looking forward to retirement, Sherman began a new career as a scientist. By 1918 she had established a national reputation as a meticulous observer and interpreter of bird and animal behavior.

Sherman lacked professional scientific training, but she made up for this through rigorous self-education. Working from her home in a tiny village in northeast Iowa, Sherman subscribed to a variety of scientific journals and studied them carefully. She joined scientific organizations and corresponded with other researchers. Soon she began publishing her observations in regional journals and presenting papers at scientific meetings. In 1912, only seven years after she published her first article,

Opposite: Althea Sherman at her home in National, Iowa (pronounced *Nā'-shūn-al*). Above: Young catbirds — one of several of Sherman's drawings and oil paintings published here for the first time.

fellow ornithologists honored Sherman by electing her to the rank of "member" of the American Ornithologists' Union. Limited to one hundred persons, the "member" category was an honor bestowed on only three women before Sherman. During a career spanning nearly three decades, she published more than seventy articles and notes on ornithology, animal behavior, and natural history. Her articles appeared in some of the most prestigious scientific journals of the day — the American Ornithologists' Union's *Auk*, the National Audubon Society's *Bird-Lore*, *Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, *Journal of Mammology*, and the British *Avicultural Magazine*. By 1921, when she was nearly seventy, her reputation was such that she was selected for



Later in life, Althea Sherman applied her art education to paint landscapes and birds. Here, a thrush perches on a stalk of milkweed.

inclusion in the third edition of *American Men of Science*.

Sherman owed her success in this new career to her naturally keen powers of observation (enhanced by years of training as an artist), to disciplined study, and to her ingenuity in turning the domestic space around her home into a laboratory for research. She designed an observation blind, a variety of nesting boxes, and a remarkable 28-foot tower containing a false chimney to facilitate her study of chimney swifts — all of which were built on the acre or so surrounding the house she shared with her sister.

A daughter of the first generation of European-American settlers on the Iowa prairie, Sherman brought to her studies a sensitivity to the signs of change about her. The cycles of seasons, the life cycles of the birds whose nest lives she observed, even the cycles of crop rotation practiced by her farming neighbors all found their way into her densely written journals. And woven through these cycles are her poignant observations of the long-term changes that occurred during a lifetime of nearly ninety years: the native plant and animal species that disappeared under the pressures of agricultural development; the new species that arrived to replace them; the changing weather patterns that affected not only crops but also the birds and animals that shared the land with farmers. Sherman often regretted that members of her parents' generation had not been more careful observers of the natural world. Their help, she thought, would have made it possible to trace the changes on Iowa land from the very earliest days of settlement. Perhaps this is why she took such pains to record in journals and in art the changes to which she herself was an eyewitness.

ALTHEA SHERMAN was born in Farmersburg Township, Clayton County, Iowa in October 1853, the fourth of six children. Her parents, Mark Sherman and Melissa Clark Sherman, had settled in northeast Iowa nine years before. A New Hampshire native reared in Essex County, New York, Mark Sherman was



During Sherman's lifetime, prairie became farmland and woods became lumber. Sherman recorded these changes, through scientific observations of birds and through artistic perceptions of changing landscapes.

the son of a tanner and shoemaker. He learned those trades himself, but by the 1840s, most shoes were produced in large factories in towns like Linn, Massachusetts. Shortly after his marriage in 1842 he, like many displaced craftworkers of the period, determined to move west.

In 1844, after an unprofitable stay in Milwaukee, Mark Sherman bought land in sections 25 and 26 of Farmersburg Township. That summer, he erected a log pole house at a cost of seventy-five cents (a considerable bargain over the twenty-eight dollars, twelve and one-half cents Thoreau would spend a year later at Walden). Mark, Melissa, and their new-born daughter Emma spent nearly a year in that simple shelter before a sturdy frame house was built. For the next twenty-one years, the Sherman family lived and prospered on their prairie farm, and five more children joined Emma:

Ada, Amelia, Althea, Mark, and a daughter who died in childhood.

Mark Sherman was part of the generation that transformed the prairie into a rich agricultural resource. In doing so, he achieved considerable personal success as a farmer. Sherman bought land on a Mexican War land warrant for seventy-nine cents an acre. By 1850, the real estate was valued at \$2500, and the household included one farmhand. Six years later, the Shermans employed two hands and the wife of one of these men. On land that eleven years before had been virgin grassland, they produced 15 tons of hay, 540 bushels of spring wheat, 400 bushels of oats, 900 bushels of corn, 150 bushels of potatoes, 80 hogs for sale, 3 cattle for sale, 500 pounds of butter, and 1,000 pounds of cheese. By 1860, they were employing three farmhands to farm 267 acres (80 unimproved). The farm was

worth \$6,000, and Mark Sherman's personal estate was valued at \$10,000.

Years later, his daughter would write regretfully of the prairie life — both plants and animals — that vanished under the pressures of agricultural development, but Mark Sherman's success as a farmer also lay the groundwork for Althea's later career in science. He was able to pay for the best education available to a young woman of her generation, and his estate would provide financial security for her old age and money to support her research.

ALTHEA began her education in the common schools of Farmersburg Township. High schools were rare in the 1860s, so the teenaged Althea and her older sisters Amelia and Ada traveled forty-some miles to the academy at Upper Iowa University in Fayette to prepare for college. (In the nineteenth century, most colleges and universities — especially in the Midwest — operated preparatory divisions in addition to their collegiate courses.) By the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of colleges — including several in Iowa — offered degrees to both women and men, but the oldest and best of these coeducational institutions (and the model for most of the others) was Oberlin College in Ohio. After the money and effort Mark and Melissa Sherman had already invested in sending their daughters to Fayette, college was a natural next step. In 1869, the three sisters journeyed together to Ohio to enroll at Oberlin.

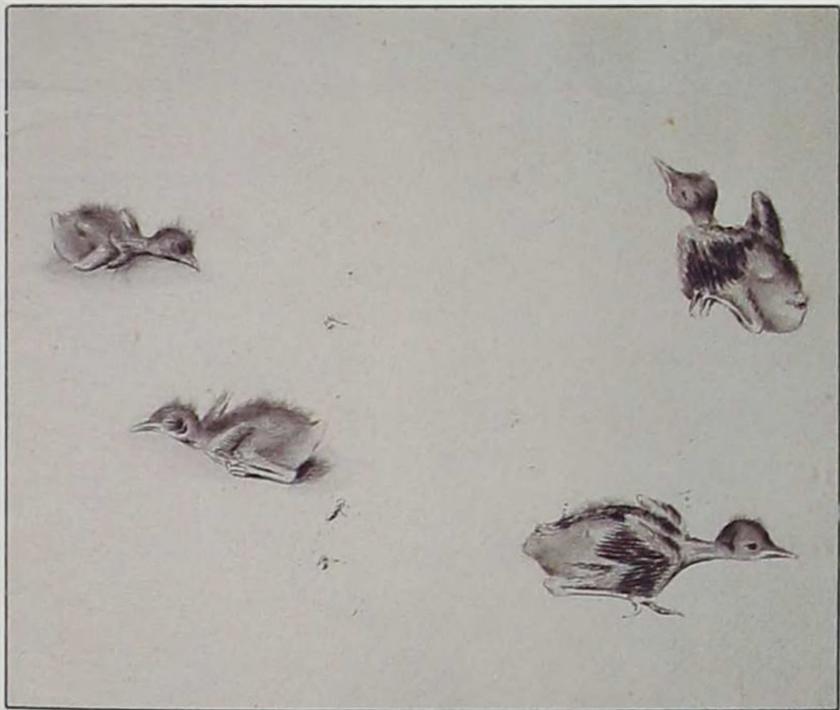
No one who knew them in college would have guessed that of the three Sherman sisters, Althea would one day be the sister honored for her contributions to scientific research. While Amelia and Ada began preparing for careers in medicine, Althea devoted herself to the study of art. Years later, she would remember her art education at Oberlin as "very bad," but as a young woman she was an enthusiastic student, saving some of the drawings and paintings from her student days throughout her life. The subjects of some of these paintings suggest that art teachers at Oberlin saw drawing and painting as genteel accomplishments. One allegorical painting showed "Winter" in the guise of a

wizened crone. A carefully drawn portrait of Lincoln honored the recently martyred president. Another portrait, depicting Eugénie of France, may have been Sherman's tribute to the empress who, while serving as regent, visited painter Rosa Bonheur in her studio and bestowed upon her the *Légion d'Honneur* — the first woman so recognized.

Althea's interest in art did not keep her from working seriously at her other studies. Oberlin was coeducational, but it maintained two separate degree tracks: a classical course and a literary course. When the college opened in 1833, administrators assumed that only men would choose the classical course, while women would confine themselves to the less rigorous literary course. But from the start, some highly motivated women had always chosen to pursue the more prestigious classical course, and Althea Sherman was one of these. More than forty years later, Sherman attributed her success as a scientist in part to the training in Latin and Greek she had received in Oberlin's classical course.

After graduating from Oberlin in 1875, Sherman taught school for a while, then returned to Oberlin to earn a master's degree in 1882. For the next few years, she alternated periods of teaching with further training as an artist. She taught at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, taking a leave of absence in 1885 to study with the Art Students' League in New York City. In 1887, she moved to Wichita, Kansas, to be near her sister, Dr. Ada Sherman St. John. There she gave private instruction in drawing until she was called back to her parents' home in National to help care for her father, who was gravely ill. A year later, she was again able to spend time studying in New York City, and in 1892 she took a position as supervisor of drawing in the Tacoma, Washington, public schools, where she remained until 1895, when she returned to Iowa once again to care for her aging father. This time, her stay was to be more or less permanent. Mark Sherman died in 1896, and Althea remained to care for her mother until Melissa Clark Sherman died in 1902. From then on, Althea remained in National, sharing the family home with her older sister, Dr. Amelia Sherman.

Amelia Sherman had been a country doctor



in National since the mid-1880s, and she continued her practice for many years to come. Althea, however, found her opportunities less satisfactory. "My professional work was the study and teaching of Art," she wrote in a 1918 letter to Oberlin College. But her tiny hometown proved "unsuitable for progress" in this field. Casting about for an activity to occupy her energetic mind, Sherman rediscovered the birds she had loved in girlhood. National may have been no place for an artist, but "its environs . . . were found very favorable for research work in some lines of Zoology." Gradually, Sherman began to redefine her profession. To the 1900 census-taker, she called herself a "teacher of art," but by 1910, she was listing her occupation as "bird study at home."

Sherman attributed some of her success as an ornithologist to her "painstaking" drawing lessons at Oberlin. Upper left: Birds, at one, two, five, and six days old. Lower left: Young flickers, drawn in 1910. Below: Typically detailed entries from record books: "June 25 Same old heat. Early, as I was watching the swallow's nest, I notice[d] one young Kingbird out of the nest about two feet from it while three stood in the nest. The one outside returned to nest once or twice while I was making observations. One parent (presumably the male) seemed to be on guard while the other did the feeding. Food was brought at 5.43—5.48—5.53—5.55—6.00 6.05½ About once every five minutes."

TEMPERATURE ABOVE NORMAL! EXCEEDINGLY HOT! ON TWO DAYS SHOWERS IN MOST OF IOWA

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Kingbirds



IT IS TEMPTING to look upon Sherman's first career as an artist and teacher as the typically genteel occupation of a middle-class lady. If this were true her later decision to pursue a scientific career might seem a fairly dramatic break with the past. But while drawing and painting were certainly part of the ornamental education offered to young ladies in the nineteenth century, by the time Althea Sherman was studying and teaching, training in art — particularly drawing — had become more than just a sign of culture and taste. It had become a valuable skill.

In the late nineteenth century, a working class trained in drawing was considered an asset to American industry. "Drawing is the language of mechanics and the ability to use the pencil freely lies at the foundation of success in many mechanical pursuits," wrote Isaac Clarke in a government pamphlet called *Art and Industry* (1885). "Without such education the



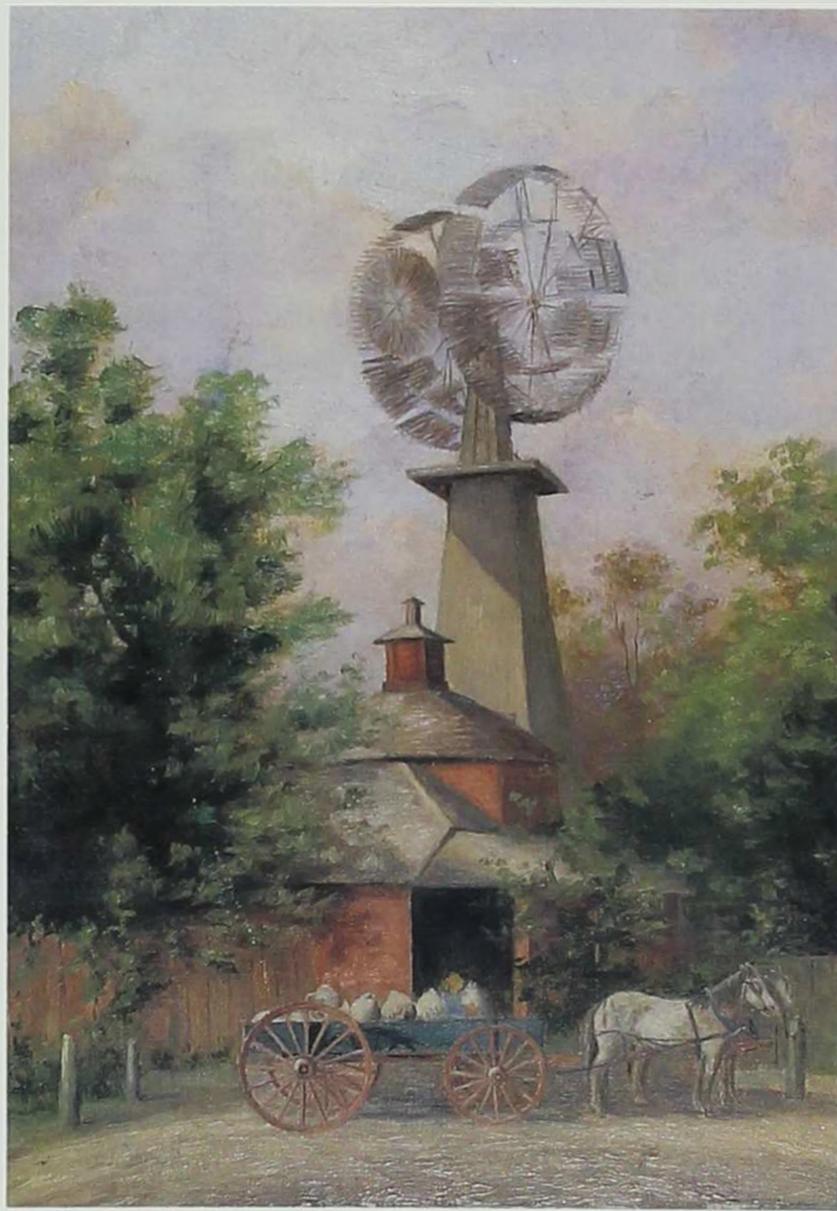
Sherman: "This is a sketch of the brook to the south of our house as it was about 1890." By 1895, Sherman's teaching career would be over. The area around National, Iowa, would serve as both laboratory and artistic inspiration.

American artisan must gradually descend in the scale of industry and content himself with a menial scale in life." Among the trades that acknowledged the need for such training were "carriage makers, taxidermists, sign writers, marble cutters, machinists, upholsterers, dyers, paperhangers, designers, and teachers." Drawing was no longer just one of the ornamental branches of education; and it was usually as a teacher of drawing, not painting or art, that Althea Sherman found employment.

Especially during her years as supervisor of drawing instruction in the Tacoma public schools, Sherman would have been emphasizing the mechanical, practical aspects of drawing as a craft, as a tool to facilitate other kinds of work. In a period before high-speed cameras, one of the kinds of work with which artists regularly assisted was the recording of visual phenomena for scientists. The development of high-quality wood-engraving, photoengraving, and chromolithography created a demand for artists who could meticulously illustrate the plants, animals, and fossils, as well as experiments and observations, discussed in scientific publications. Her own training might have emphasized the genteel side of drawing and painting, but Sherman's work as a teacher would have acquainted her with these areas in which art and science merged.

Years later, Sherman acknowledged that the skills she learned as an artist served her well in her second career as an ornithologist. In a 1918 letter to Oberlin encouraging the college to add entomology to its curriculum, Sherman wrote, "That my work in these lines [zoology] has been such as has received the hearty approval of scientists I believe is due . . . [to] Drawing under the instruction of Miss Wyatt (which from an *art standpoint* was very bad, but was painstaking; How often the word "painstaking" has been used in press comments on my work is interesting to note.)" Training as an artist helped give Sherman patience and an eye for detail — indispensable talents for the student of animal behavior.

The paintings and drawings now held by the State Historical Society of Iowa reveal that Sherman herself was far more skilled in the use of the pencil than the brush. She painted many landscapes and was an admirer and perhaps a



Sherman's depiction of a mill, Fayette, Iowa. Daughter of a successful farmer, Sherman regretted that abundant harvests required the loss of natural habitats.

student of New York landscape artist George Smillie (several of her paintings have notes identifying them as copies of Smillie's work), but her use of color in these paintings remains clumsy and amateurish. Much more satisfying are drawings of the birds she loved and studied so carefully.

Drawing became a tool Sherman used in her own research on birds. She not only prepared finished studies of her bird-subjects, but also made quick sketches in her notebooks to help her remember visual details. The margins of her early journals often feature thumbnail drawings of new birds observed near her home, with notations about colors and arrows to point out identifying features. After she had identified the bird, she would record its species next to the sketch. Similar sketches helped her remember feeding postures, nest positions, and the size of family groups. One notebook contains a detailed drawing of a bat,

noting its resting posture and wing structure.

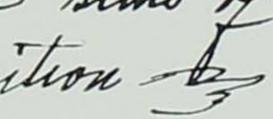
Drawing was a useful skill for an independent ornithologist, but Althea Sherman was not opposed to more modern methods of research. She learned to use a camera as well, and her journals record some comical moments attempting to photograph birds who simply would not pose for the camera. Unfortunately, her photographs seem not to have been preserved.

SHERMAN'S WORK and training as an artist may have provided fertile soil for her late-blooming scientific career, but the seeds had been sown much earlier. It is not hard to imagine how a girl growing up in the 1850s and 1860s, in a region just undergoing the transition from prairie to farmland, would have found in the wildlife that

abounded all around her home a source of endless fascination. Later, as a young teacher right out of college, Althea took pleasure in sharing her own wonder with children. A former student recalled, "There was never another teacher like her. She took us into the woods a few rods away, showed us how flowers grow; how seeds ripen; how leaves are constructed and how they breathe; how to know trees by the bark." Even her interest in birds and their habits had its childhood origins. Althea was one of several neighborhood children who gathered two hundred prairie-chicken eggs and hatched them under domestic hens, hoping to tame them. The experiment was a failure; every chick eventually wandered off and died.

Prairie chickens and wild turkeys — for which the nearby Turkey River had been named — were only two of the many ground-nesting species common to the open prairie

July 17

The bats were in windows
Nos 1 & 5. The one in No 5
I found out on the slats of
blind in this position 
Full stretch 3 inches.

This shows it with middle
of "tail" extended. Most of
the time the end was bent
over as a hook, = A. The
membrane that terminates in
this hook is transparent with
a heavy muscle through the center showing
the blood red color a little, the two "hind



Sherman did not limit her observations to birds. Above: description and drawing of a bat from her July 1915 journal.

near Sherman's childhood home. Both cliff and barn swallows nested in the barnyard, and Althea remembered them as "the chief bird joys of our childhood," skimming the air in scores. "A lack of trees and telephone poles accounted for the absence of the Northern Flicker and Red-headed Woodpecker now so abundant," Sherman later wrote. While the flicker — Sherman's favorite bird in later years — was uncommon, other tree- and hole-dwelling birds found a habitat in woodlands not far from her childhood home.

When Althea's father had retired from farming in 1866, he moved from the home where Althea spent her childhood to a newly built house at the south end of National's Main Street. Only three years later, Althea and her sisters left for Oberlin, and the years that passed until she returned to care for her aging parents made their own changes on the land. Originally, the space surrounding the house was "open prairie devoid of tree or shrub." But when the family moved in, the acre or so around the house began to be transformed from prairie to domestic space. Elm, maple, and cedar trees were planted, and an orchard with plum and apple trees, and gooseberries, mulberries, raspberries, and elderberries. A barn was built close to the house. When Sherman began to study birds, she found that these alterations, combined with the natural habitats provided by the land, gave her the raw materials she needed to transform her dooryard into a laboratory for bird study. She spent the next decades devising structures to transform these raw materials into a space for science.

In the unused barn and elsewhere around the acre, Sherman placed nesting boxes of her own design. The first of these were devised for flickers, but it took a year or so of experimentation before she arrived at a design that suited both her needs and those of the flickers. The successful boxes were made of soap crates, nailed up inside the barn against holes drilled in the barn wall by the flickers themselves. Each box had a peephole in the top and a hand-hole near the bottom, closed by a trapdoor and "large enough to withdraw the hand while it held a well-grown nestling." These boxes enabled her to note with great accuracy the incubation period of eggs, the feeding habits of



"Those the Cats Love Die Young." Sherman sometimes set scientific objectivity aside when she wrote about her love of birds and her sadness as some species decreased.

parents, and the weights of eggs and nestlings, among other things. They also made it possible for her to draw accurately the postures of birds within the nesting space, recording this information without greatly disturbing the birds.

Her studies of rails, marsh wrens, screech owls, and sparrow hawks were aided by another structure, a wooden blind erected in 1907 in the marshy ravine on the west edge of the lot. The blind was forty-six inches square, with a door on one side and one window on each of the other sides. It was elevated on posts. Originally intended only for observation of migrating birds, it eventually became the site of a nesting box that attracted two species of predators. First screech owls, then sparrow hawks made use of this box, allowing Sherman to become the first person to publish first-hand observations of the nest lives of these species.

By far the best-known piece of Sherman's laboratory equipment — and the one that drew



OBERLIN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

so many of her curious visitors — was the tower she had built in 1915 to aid her study of chimney swifts. Before she designed the tower, the only way she and the ornithologists with whom she corresponded had been able to observe the nest habits of the chimney swift was “by standing on a box placed on a chair” and using “a hand-mirror thrust through a stove-pipe hole into a chimney.” The obvious inconvenience of this method meant that much about the swift — a prime example of the kind of bird that came west with European-American settlement — remained unknown. To remedy this, Sherman had the tower built in the yard behind her home. Nine feet square and twenty-eight feet tall, the tower contained an artificial chimney two feet square that ran “down the center of the tower to a depth of 14 feet.” Below the “chimney” were two low-ceilinged stories: a bottom room used for the storage of items related to bird study, and an

upper room that gave access to the base of the chimney, where there was a zinc pan to catch rainwater (and, as Sherman soon discovered, bird excrement, enabling her to know whether swifts had roosted in the chimney overnight). A flight of stairs wound around the “chimney,” and peepholes and windows gave views of the interior of the chimney, where the swifts nested. Sherman was especially pleased with her design for the windows. Instead of being flat glass surfaces flush with the chimney wall, they were made of two panes of glass meeting in a wide “V” shape that jutted into the chimney. She could put her head into this opening and look “to the bottom or to the top of the chimney . . . without unduly frightening the birds.”

Sherman found the tower ideal for studying the swifts. She could shade one of the windows looking into the chimney with paper and place a lamp there, casting just enough light for her to watch the swifts’ activities at night. The swifts themselves obligingly built their first nest just below one of her observation windows. This made it possible for her to look right down into the swifts’ nest — something impossible using the old technique of looking in a hand mirror thrust into a stove-pipe hole. Sherman made a sketch of the swift’s position on the nest to share this information with other ornithologists.

She used the tower for other kinds of observations as well. The outside windows, which looked out on the trees and shrubbery behind her house, gave her an excellent, elevated vantage point from which to view birds. One year, a mourning dove built its nest in a tree branch about ten feet from a tower window. Her description of how she watched that nest reveals a good deal about how she made her observations—and about the way she combined her scientific work with her domestic obligations. “I rose early and at about five o’clock in the morning arrived at the watchout with an armful of sewing, expecting to spend the entire day there,” she wrote. “The watching of a Mourning Dove’s nest is a dreary task, unless one can do something besides watch. If one knits, that is a good occupation, for the eyes must be lifted to the nest at least once a minute, since the exchange of place on the nest



Opposite: An artificial “chimney” ran through the center of this tower, allowing Sherman to observe and sketch chimney swifts in their natural, albeit awkward-appearing, nesting position (above).



Ground-nesting species disappeared as farmers plowed up the prairie and rotated crops, requiring new nesting sites.

is done so quickly and quietly it easily escapes detection.”

Sherman's casual assumption that the “one” to whom she was giving advice about making scientific observations would also be one who sewed or knitted was probably startling — or amusing — to most of her readers. Only a handful of women were pursuing serious work in ornithology at that time. But her description also suggests how domestic labor intruded on her time in ways a male ornithologist would never have had to confront. Indeed, this mingling of bird observation with domestic tasks occurs more than a few times in her writing: she cannot maintain a perfect watch on her bird tower because she must take time to get supper, and she jokingly compares the “food cards” of seed and suet she prepares for winter bird feeding to the “food cards” (rationing pledge cards) women used during World War I.

These casual references point up one more important source of Althea Sherman's success in scientific research. At a time when most women pursuing scientific research struggled for access to the laboratories and observatories they needed to do their work, Sherman could literally work at home. She could combine some domestic chores with her scientific labors, and she did not have to confront the expectation that she would work all day at the laboratory and manage a home on her “leisure” time. But even more important than this was the fact that Sherman did not have to break any barriers to gain access to her laboratory. She was conscious of discrimination against women in the professional societies to which she belonged; but in her own lab, she had to be neither admitted nor hired, she had only to work and to write. By working as an independent, she offered no threat of job competition to “men of science.”

DURING her own lifetime, Sherman achieved recognition by her colleagues as a thorough, competent researcher. But in recent years, her work has been all but forgotten. The few who have noted it have tended to dismiss it as naive and of little importance. By some measures, this is true — especially when only her published work is considered. Although Sherman published more than seventy articles and notes during her career, most of them were produced during the first fifteen years of her work as an ornithologist. And many of her earliest published notes simply recorded observations, offering little interpretation. Over fifty when she began this second career, she spent years in reading and observation before she began to produce the kind of carefully argued and documented interpretations of animal behavior that make a real contribution to scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, just as her mind was at its keenest, her body began to betray her. She was unable to complete and publish many of her studies.

Often sick, Sherman lacked the energy to keep up a rigorous schedule of writing. Arthritis made writing by hand painful and often impossible. She began using a typewriter for correspondence and eventually limited herself to one letter a year to each friend, but field notes still had to be kept by hand. These began to diminish in number and thoroughness as the years went by. "I am old and am very slow, yet within a year I manage to do considerable work," she wrote in 1921 to Margaret Morse

Nice, a young ornithologist in whose work she had taken an interest. "I must keep abreast [of] the times in world affairs and read the scientific magazines that come to me, so I read while combing my hair, when eating, and when resting, but I have written nothing on my bird histories since early last spring."

Another drain on Althea Sherman's time and energy was the daily burden of housework. Sherman often complained bitterly of the amount of sheer labor this entailed, and the steady stream of visitors who came to see her laboratory only added to the load. The Sherman household had few "modern" conveniences to ease the load. In 1943, at the time of Althea's death, water was still drawn from an open well with windlass, rope, and bucket — the last of its kind in the neighborhood. Margaret Nice apparently encouraged her to hire domestic help, but Sherman's letters protest that there was none to be had in their neighborhood. The letters also hint darkly that sister Amelia was too miserly to spend money on help or modernization.

In the end, one of Althea Sherman's most important contributions to ornithology may have been Margaret Morse Nice herself. Like Sherman, Nice was an independent, largely self-trained ornithologist, who studied birds from her own home — first in Oklahoma, later in Columbus, Ohio. She was also thirty years younger than her mentor. Nice had originally written to Sherman with questions about an article Sherman had published, but their correspondence quickly developed into a cross-country friendship. Sherman provided Nice with advice, support, and encouragement. She cautioned her not to let a lack of professional recognition cause her to doubt her own abilities as a scientist, and she could be positively sarcastic about the treatment women received in the scientific organizations to which both she and Nice belonged. "When women receive any honors, they may accept same thankfully," she wrote in 1925. "I have said and I believe it, that no woman will ever be made a Fellow [the highest rank in the American Ornithologists' Union]. . . . Man's nature must change before a woman is a Fellow." She warned Nice against the dangers of letting household responsibilities drain time and



"Screech owl, ten days old." When screech owls nested in Sherman's bird blind, her subsequent observations of their nest lives were the first published in her field.



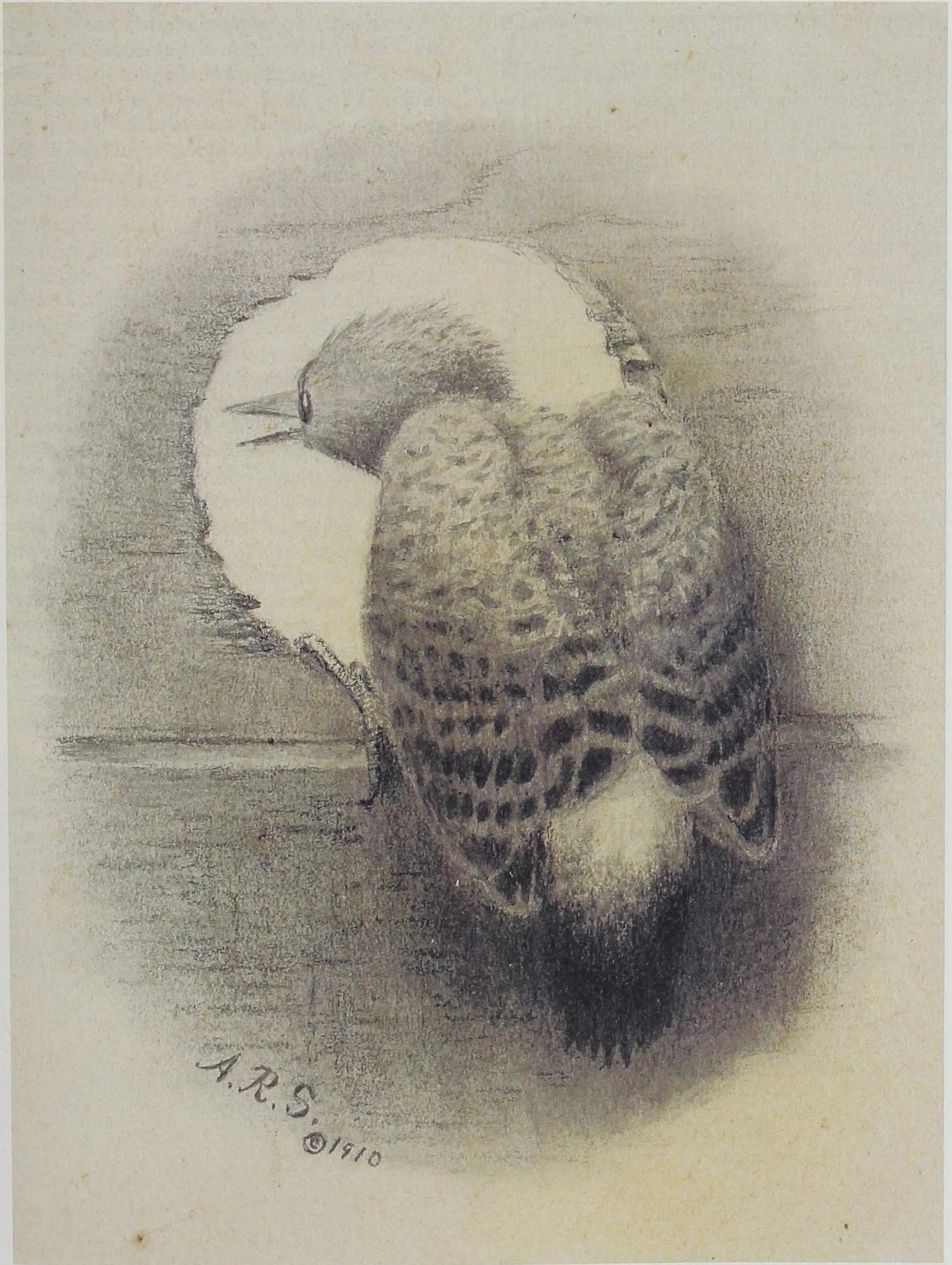
Above: Sherman's note: "A Bird Thoroughfare: Scene on the Volga River Near Fayette, Iowa, sketched in 1897 under Mrs. C. B. Coman transcribed in 1906." Opposite: 1910 drawing of a flicker: "Hurling a Derisive Yelp."

energy from scientific study. And she provided a model of scholarship that may have helped set the direction for the younger woman's work.

Ernst Mayr, the German biologist, has written that Nice "almost single-handedly, initiated a new era in American ornithology" by emphasizing the "study of bird *individuals* because this is the only method to get reliable life history data." The importance of closely observing individual birds was something Althea Sherman had argued for in her letters to Nice, and it was characteristic of Sherman's best work. In one early letter to Nice, Sherman sneered at the laxity of some published research. "Speaking confidentially," she wrote of a study of mourning doves, "[this project] seems to me more like a dream than a study. I regard the *study* of one hundred and eleven Mourning Dove nests as a good-sized job for forty or fifty years." Nice carried the principle of limited study of bird individuals much further than Sherman, experimenting with banding and other techniques to mark particular birds. Sherman, writing from her Iowa home, applauded these innovations.

"**T**RUTH and hard work are the exactions of science," Althea Sherman once wrote. Spending countless tedious hours observing her subjects and many more studying scientific journals, Sherman held both herself and others to high standards. She had little patience for self-proclaimed "bird-lovers" who "dabble a little in bird-lore so they can gabble about birds." But her scorn for "bird-lovers" should not mask the fact that she herself was first and always a lover of birds. She never lost her delight in the darting flight of the cliff swallow or the "brilliant combination of colors" afforded by the sight of a red-headed woodpecker feeding alongside two Baltimore orioles. It was with great sadness that she noted in the mid-1920s a clear decline in the number and variety of birds to be seen around National. In a letter to Margaret Nice in 1928, Sherman wrote, "I was greatly depressed by the reduced number of birds. . . . I did not see a Phoebe a half dozen times in the whole season. Brown Thrashers were scarce. My daily averages dropped by one more figure." A year later, the news was still bad: "I am heartsick over their diminishing numbers," she wrote.

Sherman was not alone in noting that birds that had once been numerous seemed, as the



year," permitting the birds to nest in peace.

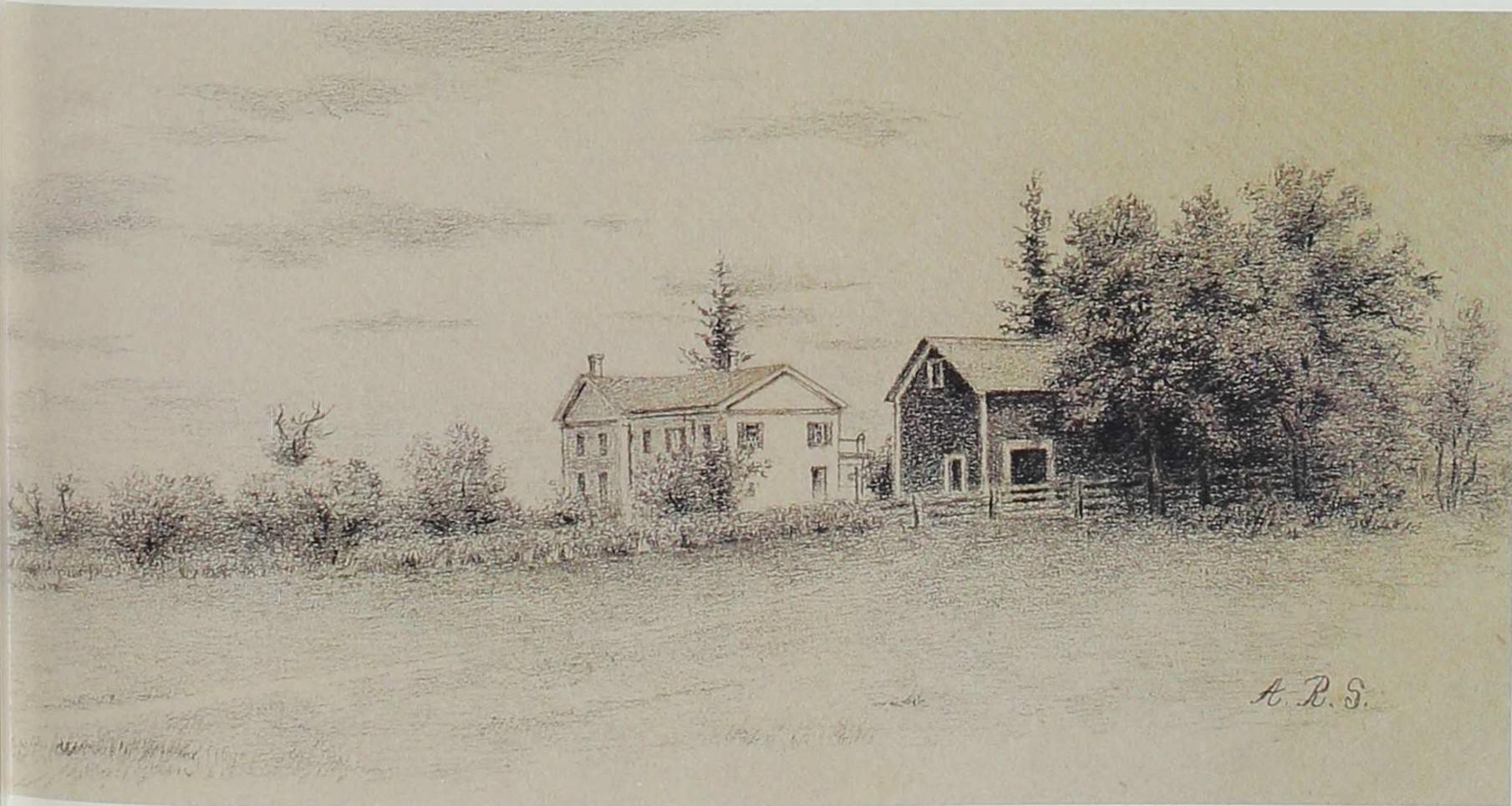
Other farming activities changed the bird populations as well. The planting of evergreen windbreaks, which began in the last decades of the nineteenth century, greatly increased the number of bronzed grackles in the Midwest. "The farmers like to see the grackle following the plow, picking up the larvae of the May beetle, known as the white grub worm, which destroys their corn," observed Sherman. But the cordiality that marked relations between farmers and grackles did not hold true in the grackles' relations with other birds. As the number of grackles increased, native species that shared their nesting sites, like kingbirds and chipping sparrows, began to vanish.

Sometimes even the intentional activities of "bird-lovers" could have devastating effects on the bird population. Sherman was famous — or infamous — for her campaign against house-wren boxes, calling the teachers who encouraged their students to build and install the boxes "criminal." While her rhetoric could be inflammatory, Sherman's reasoning was sound. House wrens are among the most territorial of common birds. When a pair chooses a nesting site, they systematically search out all other nests nearby and destroy the eggs by piercing them or tossing them from the nest.

Chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, bluebirds, other wren species, vireos, and other small songbirds are the usual victims of wren aggression, and the arrival of large numbers of house wrens can be devastating to these birds. House-wren boxes, with small holes to protect the occupants from their natural enemies, encouraged a disproportionate number of wrens to breed, rapidly displacing other species. Only the goldfinch, which nests later than the other birds, seemed relatively immune to attacks.

Sherman's monthly tallies of the bird population confirmed her observation that wrens had driven many other birds from her dooryard, and she feared the long-range consequences for native species. A late freeze in 1907 had killed, by some estimates, millions of

Below: Althea Sherman's dooryard, 1906. In Chapter 1 of her *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard* (posthumously published in 1952), she cites 162 species identified "either on our place [the dooryard and her surrounding lots] or in the air overhead." Sherman insisted her "dooryard" was not a cultivated garden but an acre of outbuildings, a few vegetables and flowers, and an orchard. "A large part of the trees . . . are plum trees, bearing harvests mainly of birds' nests. There is toleration for plum trees for several reasons: They take care of themselves and are thorny and brushy about their trunks, thereby offering desirable sites for bird nests."





OBERLIN COLLEGE ARCHIVES

Binoculars in hand, Sherman watches for birds. (Photo taken in 1923.) The acre around her home in National gradually turned from open prairie to a mix of shade trees, berry bushes, and fruit trees — attracting different species of birds, which Sherman diligently recorded with pencil and paintbrush.

warblers, vireos, and flycatchers throughout the Midwest. “It was a bereavement for bird students to have the beautiful family of warblers come so near extinction,” Sherman wrote. At the time of the freeze, most ornithologists took comfort in the knowledge that natural increase would eventually restore the number of warblers. But Sherman’s observations showed that this never happened. After twenty years, the number of warblers, by Sherman’s count, was decreasing — not increasing. House wrens had taken their place. Bluebirds, too, had suffered inordinately. Sherman’s early bird counts showed bluebirds in her neighborhood more than one hundred days a year. In 1926, she saw bluebirds on just four days; in 1927, on eleven days. “What does this mean?” she wrote angrily. “Nothing less than that I am being wronged, defrauded, cheated out of my rights to the pursuit of happiness by the maintainers of wren boxes to the north of me.”

BY 1943, the year of Sherman’s death, the village of National had all but vanished. It had been declining for years, and as their neighbors died or moved away, Althea Sherman and her sister had purchased many of the houses, so that “the birds in an unmolested state tenanted the deserted homes of man.” In 1937, Althea added the abandoned Congregational church to her collection — to prevent its being turned into a tavern. (The Methodist church had already become a barn.) Gradually, Althea Sherman came to own many parcels of property around the acre that had been her home and laboratory for half a century.

In her will, she laid out her plans for her now extensive holdings. Designating the National

The chipping sparrow (opposite) and kingbird lost nesting sites to the bronzed grackle, which thrived in the Midwest as farmers planted evergreen windbreaks and plowed up grub worms.



Cemetery Association her heir, or if they refused the conditions, the State of Iowa, Sherman willed "that the old Sherman homestead together with the 'mill-lot' be kept in a condition attractive to birds much as it has been during my lifetime. That the House Wren not be allowed to breed there, nor the Screech Owl, nor other conditions allowed that will unfit it to be a bird sanctuary." She also made provisions for the preservation of her notebooks, drawings, and paintings by the state, and endowed a professorship at Oberlin College, "to be occupied by a Professor who shall each year give some special instruction in the study of birds." Sherman's notes and drawings were preserved, and Oberlin received its endowment, but the bird sanctuary she envisioned in National never materialized. Sherman's heirs refused her conditions, and the land was eventually sold off.

Visitors to northeast Iowa can still stop in

Opposite: The wildrose and goldfinch, Iowa's state flower and bird, painted in 1936. Below: bluejays.

National today, though they won't find it on most state highway maps. The marshy brook where Sherman studied sora rails from her blind has vanished, a victim of modern drainage systems. The church, her home, and virtually all the other houses that once stood in National are long gone, replaced by a modern motel and a handful of houses of recent vintage. The county fairgrounds and the cemetery remain, but these, once the last preserves of bobolinks and native prairie wildflowers, are now neatly mowed. Near Althea Sherman's grave, a single mound of birdfoot trefoil — a yellow-blossomed immigrant from Europe — breaks the smooth expanse of green. And the air is silent, save the whirring of insects and the rusty voice of a crow, high above, in the evergreen grove nearby. □



NOTE ON SOURCES

The primary sources for this article are Althea R. Sherman's posthumously published book, *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard* (1952); letters in the Margaret Morse Nice Papers, Cornell University Archives; letters and other materials in the Oberlin College Archives; Althea Sherman's will and inventories, Clayton County Clerk's Office; and letters, journals, field notes, drawings, and paintings in the Althea Sherman Collection, SHSI-Des Moines. *Portrait and Biographical Record of Dubuque, Jones, and Clayton Counties* (1894) and *History of Clayton County, Iowa*, vols. 1, 2 (1916) provided historical material on the Sherman family, as did U.S. Census for Iowa, Garnavillo

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A. R. Sherman
1936