



The Redstart

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THE FIRST FOUR YEARS OF THE BROOKS BIRD CLUB

by
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Minutes of the Brooks Bird Club fix the year of its organization as 1932. Events which began five years before that date, however, actually brought about the organization of the Club and properly belong in any recital of its history.

In 1927 and at the request of the executors of the Earle W. Oglebay estate, the Agricultural Extension Division of West Virginia University assumed the planning and guidance of a program of recreation and adult education based upon Waddington Farm. The Farm was a 750-acre, "Million-dollar" property of the late Col. Oglebay and upon his death in 1926, this country estate was found to have been bequeathed to the City of Wheeling by its late owner.

Executors of the Oglebay Estate, anxious to present a convincing demonstration of the potential public value of the property, invited the Agricultural Extension Service of the University to plan and direct a program at Waddington. Dr. Nat T. Frame, then Director of the Extension service, agreed to the plan and immediately took steps which resulted in an effective demonstration of a "new use" for a potential urban park.

The fact that the elements, the essentials of that sound early program still are incorporated in what became the program of Oglebay Institute constitutes another story. Of significance in connection with the Brooks Bird Club is the fact that an active nature study program for the public began in early 1928.

In the Spring of 1928 a committee was formed to plan and sponsor a school for the instruction of adults in the essentials of nature study leadership. The 10-day school, directed by Dr. Bertha Chapman Cady, of New York, proved highly successful and was the first of an uninterrupted series of a dozen such "Nature Leaders Training Schools" which have occurred annually without a break. Mr. A. B. Brooks, director of the last eleven schools of this series, was an instructor in that of 1928 and, as "park naturalist," was leader of a public nature field trip on Sunday morning during the time of the first school at Oglebay Park. This walk began another uninterrupted series -- this one of public field trips for nature study at Oglebay Park.

Upon the success of the first, or 1928, leadership training school, the sponsoring committee organized permanently as the "West Virginia Nature Association," elected officers, collected dues and otherwise began the normal, official functions of a non-profit corporation dedicated to the encouragement and promotion of nature study and nature appreciation.

The nature training schools and the continued public field trips, lectures by the naturalist and by visiting scientists -- all these things gradually attracted a nucleus of "regulars" who could be counted upon to be present for virtually all these events with an outdoors atmosphere. In other words, a comparatively few of the thousands contacted by the nature study program in the course of its beginning years, evinced more than casual interest in these nature activities.

Naturally enough, many of these regular participants in the program developed special interests. Some, for example, became reasonably competent students of bird life. These individuals bought or borrowed ornithological texts, began to realize that the ability to name birds in the field was not, by any means, an end in itself but only a means to an end. Their curiosity about birds demanded an outlet and opportunities afforded by the weekly public field trips or even by the nature training schools proved inadequate. It was entirely natural, then, that these people should exhibit immediate interest when it was proposed, in the summer of 1932, to organize a club for amateur ornithologists.

The opportunity presented itself at a dinner and meeting of the then flourishing West Virginia Nature Association on September 22, 1932. After dinner and a brief general program in the camp dining hall at Oglebay Park, it was announced that interested individuals would meet in the camp lounge to form "special interest" groups.

One of these groups, especially interested in bird study, included Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Brooks, Misses Rene Wagner, Alex Caldwell, Dorothy Cunningham, Marjorie and Sarah Hine, and Messrs. C. J. Doepken, Harold Bergner, Charles Conrad, Russell West and John W. Handlan. James Handlan, jr. and Clyde B. Upton, both absent at school, had previously announced that they wished to be included in the group.

John Handlan was selected as temporary chairman of the group and Miss Sarah Hine was named temporary secretary. September 27 was set as a date for an organization meeting.

At the meeting on the latter date, the temporary officers of the group, which was as yet unnamed, were chosen as officers for the ensuing year. In addition to the group which met at the Park on September 22, Dr. and Mrs. M. F. Zubak were present to be included in the "charter membership." A club field trip, first in the history of the organization, was set for October 2, 1932, in the Niles and Youngstown, Ohio, region. Charles Conrad was appointed first chairman of the club's field trip committee. At this meeting, incidentally, the club's first paper was read by the chairman, who had been suggested by Mr. Brooks to prepare and read a paper on "bird migration." Mr. Brooks and Mr. West presented brief papers in discussion of the assigned topic.

The name "Brooks Bird Club" was adopted at the organization's meeting on October 28. It was suggested by Dr. Zubak, the name a tribute to Naturalist A. B. Brooks, and was unanimously accepted by the membership. It was decided to meet monthly, the last Friday of the month being chosen as a regular meeting date and at the December 28 meeting in 1932 dues of 10 cents monthly were decided upon. The club's first bird Christmas census was carried out in 1932, also.

Miss Helen McGill became secretary-treasurer of the club by election at the annual meeting in 1933 and continued in that capacity for several years ensuing, as did John Handlan as club president.

In January, 1934, the Club established a class of Honorary Members, at that time restricted to those who had performed services for the organization but whose residences forbade their participation in the club's activities as Active Members. Messrs. Maurice Brooks, of Morgantown, Merit B. Skaggs, of Youngstown, Ohio, and George M. Sutton, of Bethany, W. Va. and Ithaca, N. Y., were the first Honorary Members to be elected, each subsequently accepting the recognition tendered by the club.

In the early months of the Club's 1933-34 year, Mr. Russell West undertook, single-handed, to publish a monthly mimeographed paper or club journal known as "The Redstart." He collected, wrote and edited copy for two issues of one page, each, and himself cut stencils and mimeographed copies of the journal. At the January meeting, mentioned above, the club took formal and appreciative action for his efforts and, at West's own suggestion, chose Mr. Tom Shields as editor for The Redstart which began its appearance again in early 1934 as a monthly, mimeographed journal of several pages.

Active Members, as defined by the Club, lost such membership if they failed to appear at any three consecutive meetings of the organization and might be reelected to the Active Membership class only after first attending any three consecutive meetings. The Class of Honorary Members had previously been created, as noted above, to include a limited number who could not meet Active Membership requirements.

Publication of THE REDSTART and interest in this journal by people whose homes are beyond the Wheeling District, now brought about the formation of a class of Corresponding Members. This plan was decided at the Club's meeting in May, 1934. This class of membership was opened to anyone interested, with application for membership and payment of annual dues of 50 cents the sole formalities involved. These Corresponding Members received THE REDSTART, of course. An energetic committee, led by Charles Conrad had enrolled 57 of these new members by September, 1934, and swelled this number to 83 by October of the same year.

The club year which began in October of 1934 was, in many respects, one of the most active in the group's history. On December 28 and 29 of that year, 26 of the club's Active and Corresponding Members were present at Pittsburgh, Pa. for the annual meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Club at the Carnegie Museum. Two of the Club's Active Members were among those who presented papers at this meeting.

Dr. Earl Brooks, of the faculty of Boston College, accepted his election, in January, 1935, as an Honorary Member of the club. At the March meeting of that same year a committee headed by Mr. Clyde Upton reported a program arranged by the club and presented before the Ohio County branch of the Wild Life League of West Virginia.

In 1935, also, the Club took out a club membership in the National Association of Audubon Societies and contributed a small sum from its treasury as a gift toward the purchase of "Hawk Mountain" near Dreherstown, Pa., a project of the Emergency Conservation Committee.

At the annual meeting in September, 1935, Miss McGill was succeeded as secretary-treasurer by Miss Carolyn Conrad. At the same meeting, Mr. Tom Shields relinquished editorship of THE REDSTART and his duties were assumed by John Handlen. Mr. Shields had announced at the club meeting in July, 1935, that press of business duties would forbid his continuance of the club's editorial duties.

A change of importance was made in the club's rule regarding Honorary Members at the regular meeting of October, 1935. That part of the definition of an Honorary Member which required him to be an out-of-town resident was rescinded. Subsequently, Mr. A. B. Brooks, for whom the club is named, was elected an Honorary Member of the organization.

During the year which began with that meeting, the Club endeavored to work toward the establishment of an Ornithological Section of the West Virginia Academy of Science. Correspondence and personal interviews with officials of the Academy revealed that the only path open toward such a goal lay in individual memberships in the Academy with enough of these individuals being represented so as to request the formation of such a Section. The Club, nevertheless, presented a public campfire program at Bethany, W. Va., the evening preceding the annual meeting of the Academy at Bethany College, and individual Bird Club members attended the various Academy sessions there.

In this brief record there has been little reference to the Club's field activities. Early in its life the organization began a series of Sunday morning field trips, primarily designed to provide individual instruction in field identification of birds to less experienced members of the group. These field trips, held during May and June each year since the Club organized, eventually were thrown open to the general public. The club's interest in the organization and encouragement of organizations similar to itself was well exemplified by its official connections with such groups as the Triadelphia High School Bird Club, a similar club at the Zane Junior High School in Martins Ferry, Ohio, and with a club for adults at Roney's Point near Wheeling, West Virginia. For each of these organizations the club provided field trip leaders, speakers, and so on and, for a time, distributed free copies of THE REDSTART to these semi-official affiliates of the Brooks club.

There has been no mention here of the tremendous increase in interest among the Brooks Club membership in the reading and ownership of good books dealing with ornithology. Some very creditable personal libraries were founded by club members during these early years of the organization's history. It is very natural, too, that such contacts as those provided by the Wilson Ornithological Club meeting at Pittsburgh, combined with other factors to direct attention of local amateur ornithologists to fields other than those in their own "back yard." A steadily increasing interest in field trips to points away from the Wheeling district is noted in the club records for its first four years of activity. Many of these have taken the group to points which afforded an opportunity to observe waterfowl and shorebirds -- avian groups very poorly represented at any time in the general vicinity of Wheeling.

That the club has been, since its inception, a major influence in the development of a competent group of field observers of birds there is no doubt. Many of its members, brought together for the first time by mutual interest in bird study, have formed firm friendships and have enjoyed the informal, social side of the club's meetings and field excursions. In brief, the first four years of the Brooks Bird Club opened to its active membership, at least, vistas previously unseen by them and paths which they have followed to the enjoyment of self-education in the absorbing field of amateur ornithology. The satisfactions of assisting others to see the same vistas and to follow the same paths has been no small reward (and part of the genuine pleasure!) that the first four years of The Brooks Bird Club returned to the Club's members.

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