

The Allen Bird Club - 100 Years Young

By George C. Kingston

The early part of the 20th century saw the founding of hundreds of natural history clubs as city dwellers gained access to the countryside through the expansion of street car lines. Most of these clubs survived only a limited time, but the Allen Bird Club is still going strong 100 years later. The first list of birds of the Springfield area was published by Joel A. Allen in 1864. His Catalogue of the Birds found at Springfield, Mass, with notes on their Migrations, Habits, etc.; together with a List of those Birds found in the State not yet observed at Springfield was published in Volume 4 of the Proceedings of the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts. This publication is available on-line through Google Books. The next significant account of the local bird life was Robert. O. Morris's Birds of Springfield and Vicinity which was published in 1901, but which summarized as many earlier records as he could find, including his own observations over the previous 20 years.

During the autumn of 1911, Mrs. Grace Pettis Johnson, the Director of the Springfield Museum of Natural History, and Miss Fannie Stebbins, the Supervisor of Elementary School Science in the Springfield School Department, began discussing the formation of a club for the study of wild birds in the local area. On the afternoon of Monday, January 8, 1912, they met with a group of amateur naturalists whom they had invited to the Museum



The Allen Bird Club,

1918

Fannie Stebbins is second from the left in the front row.

Grace Johnson is fourth from the left in the second row.

Rev. Herbert Thayer is third from the left in the back row.

and organized the Springfield Bird Club. The purpose of the club was “to attract, conserve and study birds.” Among the charter members of the club were the Reverend Herbert Thayer, pastor of the Park Memorial Baptist Church, who was elected as their first president, Robert O. Morris, Miss Effie Wilcox, C.H. Hardy, George B. Affleck, Miss Rebecca Harding, and Miss Rachel Phelps.

Two weeks later, the club met again. Their first order of business was to select a proper name for the club. It was the custom at the time to name natural history societies after prominent men in the field. The first proposal was to name the club the Robert O. Morris Bird Club in honor of one of the charter members, the Springfield Clerk of Courts who written *The Birds of Springfield and Vicinity*. Mr. Morris declined the honor and suggested that the club be called the Allen Bird Club in honor of Springfield native and prominent ornithologist, the Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History, Dr. Joel A. Allen, which the members agreed to. They then took their first action for bird conservation by composing a letter to the Springfield newspapers in support of a bill in the state legislature which would require the licensing of cats. The bill did not pass.

On February 12, the club held its first public lecture, bringing Prof. C.S. Hodge of Clark University in from Worcester by train to talk on “How to Make the Most of Our Bird Life”. The lecture was held in the physics lecture room of Springfield Central High School. From this modest beginning, the club has continued to study and record the comings and goings of birds for 100 years, making it the oldest continually active bird club in Massachusetts, one year older than the Brookline Bird Club and only 3 years younger than the Hartford Bird Study Club, now known as Hartford Audubon.

The club was founded to bring together the people who had been independently keeping records of birds and reporting them to Mrs. Johnson, who collated and preserved them. Using these records, she had updated *The Birds of Springfield* and issued a second edition in 1911. She would go on to publish 5 more editions, the last in 1949. For the first half of the twentieth century these slim red volumes were sold by the Science Museum and used as annual checklists by area birders. Her work has been continued by others, including Robert Sherwood, Edward Yates, and Moreton Bates and today is carried out by Dr. Seth Kellogg.

In the early days of the club, field trip destinations were limited by the available transportation, with the members often taking street cars to get to good birding spots. A 1913 newspaper article announcing a trip to South Amherst stated “members will leave Court Square on the 8:37 trolley or take the 9:10 train connecting in either case in Holyoke with the 9:30 Amherst and Sunderland car. The party will leave the car at Bay road and will then have a good mile and a half walk through a good bird district to the summer home of Miss Fannie Stebbins where luncheon will be served. In the afternoon a walk through the woods will be taken.” Beginning in 1918, the club began issuing an annual program book to help the members plan their participation in the field trips and meetings. The first of these consisted of a single folded sheet of paper, but by the 1930’s they had acquired covers and were adorned with line drawings of birds. These books were published every year thereafter and are still being issued today.

Trips further afield might involve a journey by train, but little by little, automobiles became available and the members were able to explore the countryside. This early lack of mobility was balanced by the availability of excellent bird habitat close to home. Allen Street and Sixteen Acres were largely rural at that time, and their woods and fields were filled with bird song in the spring. Some of the field trip destinations, like Forest Park, Longmeadow Flats, and Agawam are still visited by the club today. Others, like Calla Shasta, the Springfield Yacht and Canoe Club's camp on the Connecticut River in Agawam, are now gone forever. Some, like the Black River Valley in West Springfield were developed, but others, like Bemis Pond in Chicopee and Atwater Park in Springfield were simply replaced by more interesting destinations. On these early trips, the members dressed formally, the men in suits and ties, the women in long, full dresses.



An early field trip

The club grew rapidly and by the end of 1912 had more than 100 members, including the naturalist and children's author, Thornton Burgess, Rachel Phelps, Robert Morris, and Robert Sherwood. Samuel Eliot, a drama professor at Smith College and amateur ornithologist who co-authored *The Birds of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts*, which was for many years the bible for bird watchers in this part of the state, was elected an honorary member. The original dues were \$0.50 a year. This was raised to \$1.00 in 1922. The dues today are only \$12.00. In 1917, the Allen Bird Club joined the New England Federation of Natural History Societies. This was a regional group that included not only bird clubs, but naturalist, mineral, wildflower and other societies. Its purpose was to bring these groups together to share experiences. In September, 1918 the club hosted a meeting of the Federation, including a business session, the reading of papers, field trips and a banquet. The club would again host the fall conference in September, 1929. The Federation was finally disbanded in 1931.

During its first year, the club established its tradition of holding both evening meetings with speakers and field trips, with most of the trips being in the spring and summer. However, the club did hold a "Christmas Count" on Christmas morning, 1912, and sent its results in to the magazine *Bird Lore* which compiled the national results. The tradition of participating in the national Christmas Count continues to this day, although the count is now held on a Saturday during the season, and not on Christmas Day itself.

Meetings were held twice a month, on the first and third Monday's, through the early 1940's. Sometime after that, the club went to the once a month schedule on the first Monday that it still observes.

The first overnight trip sponsored by the club was held during the 1920's when members journeyed to Saybrook, Connecticut and stayed at Saybrook Manor, the summer home of one of the members, Miss Jennie Perry.

In 1928, the club became concerned about the proposal to flood the Swift River Valley to create the Quabbin Reservoir, and sent letters to their state representatives asking that the government controlled land around the reservoir be kept as a wildlife sanctuary.



In 1930, the club contributed \$10 towards the purchase of 800 acres of land for a bird sanctuary on Plum Island, to be called the Annie H. Brown Wildlife Sanctuary. This was incorporated into

the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge when it was established in 1941, and Plum Island continues to be a special place for the club today.

During the 1930's, the club began its tradition of counting hawks during fall migration. The first hawk watches were held at Mt. Tom.



Robert Sherwood, President 1919 – 1922

In 1941, the City of Springfield honored the club's founder, Mrs. Grace P. Johnson, with the Pynchon Medal, its highest honor, for her work as a director of the Science Museum.

The annual Christmas census or count, which had first been done in 1912, was conducted again in 1931. It was started on an annual basis in 1946, 34 years after the first one, but was run independently of the club with only a few members participating. The 1951 count tallied 37 species, including a towhee, cowbird, and two bald eagles. The following year, 1952, the club took charge of the census and named William Tompkins as the coordinator. In 1954, it became a part of the official National Audubon Christmas Count and has continued to participate annually in that effort up to the present.

The first Mt. Greylock overnight trip occurred in 1947. The members stayed in the lodge and were served breakfast for a total cost of \$1.50 per person.

The first spring woodcock watch was held in 1950 at the Hampden Country Club on Stony Hill Road in Hampden. In November of the same year, the club took its first trip to the Massachusetts coast, visiting Newburyport. In 1965, the woodcock watch was moved to the Stebbins Refuge from Stony Hill Road. It remained there until 2003 when it was relocated to Meadowbrook School in East Longmeadow due to rising water levels in the Refuge.

The first chartered bus trip took place in 1952 with the club running a day trip to Saybrook, Connecticut. Charter bus trips continued to be used a few times a year, often in conjunction with the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Laughing Brook Sanctuary, especially for trips to the shore North and South of Boston, until 1989 when the cost became prohibitive. These were all day affairs that had something of a party atmosphere to them, but that also provided club

members an opportunity to observe sea birds and shore birds that rarely made their way into western Massachusetts.

In 1956, Mr. Otis, the director of the Natural History Museum announced that henceforth, organizations like the Bird Club and other educational groups would be encouraged to meet at the museum free of charge, however the club still had to pay for a projectionist and even today pays for a security guard to open and lock the hall.

In 1957, dues were raised to \$3.00 per year to help pay for the increasingly expensive Audubon lecture series. Serious consideration was also given to finding ways to make the club more attractive and gain new members. The club had about \$800 in its treasury. In December, cardinals and Carolina wrens were observed as unusual records. The Mass Audubon Society was starting to ask birders to look for cardinal breeding records.

In January 1958, the club held a bus trip to Rockport and Cape Ann. During the late 1950's the club observed Audubon Day, in May, by holding a spring count. The cost of an overnight stay at the Mount Greylock lodge increased from \$1.25 to \$2.50. The treasury had increased to about \$1000.

During the 1960's and 70's a bird banding station was operated in the Stebbins Refuge by Dr. Robert MacLachlan, Francis Pike and Mary and Alan Muir.

In May, 1960, the club began publishing the "Pioneer Valley Bird News". The club was selling binoculars and telescopes to its members at a 20% discount, with 10% going to the club and 10% to the buyer. In 1962, the club had a heightened interest in legislative support for environmental issues and, at the instigation of the president, Ben Breitung, established a committee on Legislation. Over the next few years, the club would contribute money to various lobbying committees in support of environmental legislation. Concern about the cost of the Audubon screen tours continued into 1963, when a complete season of three programs cost \$450. The club decided to try to schedule only one such program a year, if the arrangement could be worked out with the National Audubon Society. In the event, the screen tours turned a profit and were repeated for many years. At the time, the treasury held only about \$1000.

The club also took an activist stand on local environmental issues. In 1964, club members sent over 100 letters to the Springfield Park Department protesting plans to spray DDT in the parks as a measure against Dutch elm disease. By 1964, the club had 232 members, and was comparable in size to what it is today.

In the 1970's and 80's hawk watching was done from a number of sites, but in 1987 the official club hawk watch site was established on Blueberry Hill in Granville. For many years, this was manned by John Weeks on an almost daily basis, although he was often joined by other club members, especially on weekends. Every fall, one Saturday is chosen for a pot luck picnic there that attracts up to 100 birders.

The club has run a spring census for most of its existence. Until 1985, this census was done during the entire month of May, but from 1986 onwards it was consolidated into 24 hours starting at 6 o'clock in the evening on a Friday and ending on Saturday with a pot luck compilation dinner.

During the 1990's, with the encouragement of John Hutchinson, the club added to coast of Maine to its regular field trip schedule. Two trips are generally run, one to the south coast of the state and one to Monhegan Island in September for the fall warbler migration. In 1991, the regular spring walk in Robinson State Park was moved to the morning of Mother's Day, a tradition that continues 20 years later.

The club took its first pelagic trip in 1990, sailing from Provincetown to the Stellwagen Bank for petrels and shearwaters.

In the 2000's, regular trips were scheduled to Rhode Island, Vermont, and New Hampshire to locate birds which do not occur regularly in Massachusetts. Tom Swohack initiated the Rhode Island Blitz, an intensive two-day tour of that state, and a Vermont Blitz was also held for several years.

Many famous speakers have addressed the club, including the artist and field guide author, Roger Tory Peterson, who visited the club twice as part of the National Audubon screen tour series which the club hosted from 1968 to 1995. Others of note were Aaron T. Bagg, who co-authored *The Birds of the Connecticut River Valley* in Massachusetts with Samuel Eliot, Thornton Burgess, Massachusetts State Ornithologist Edward Forbush, and prominent ornithologists Dr. Alan Cruikshank, Alexander Sprunt, Owen Sewell Pettingill, Richard Pough, Arthur A. Allen, Don Kroodsma and Wayne Petersen. A frequent speaker was Alvah Sanborn, the Director of Massachusetts Audubon Pleasant Valley Sanctuary in the Berkshires.

Among the birds found and reported by Allen Bird Club members were numerous records of rare birds. These include the third New England and second Massachusetts record for the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, a bird from the desert Southwest. It was sighted by Fannie Stebbins on the farm of George Bartlett, "Fruit Acres", in West Springfield in 1933. After many local birders had observed it, the bird was shot and collected by Harvard Professor of Ornithology, Ludlow Griscom. The skin is now in the Boston Science Museum. Other first regional records include Western Grebe, by Albert Dietrich in 1934; Glossy Ibis by Fannie Stebbins in 1926; Eurasian Widgeon by Sam Eliot in 1931; Barrow's Goldeneye, the second record was by Alice Bowen at Calla Shasta in 1923 and the third by Albert Dietrich in 1935; Yellow Rail first spring record by Ida Wemple in 1918; Baird's Sandpiper, by Sam Eliot in 1933.

In the late 1940's the club started its annual June overnight trip to Mt. Greylock, where they stayed in the lodge.

Up until 1950, a different bird graced the cover of each year's program booklet. At the November 20, 1950 meeting of the club, it was decided to adopt an "official Allen Bird Club bird" and the members were presented a slate of 8 nominees. The American Goldfinch was chosen by secret ballot to be the club bird and it has remained so to this day. The following month, the club decided to start issuing membership cards that would identify the bearer as a member of the Allen Bird Club.

In the 1940's, the club established a fund to be used for building an observation tower at the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Arcadia Sanctuary in Easthampton, and it grew to several hundred dollars, but it was not enough to pay for a tower. At the suggestion of the Arcadia superintendent, Mr. Edwin Mason, the club decided to let the sanctuary use the funds to publish an information pamphlet about itself, provided that money obtained by selling the booklets be set aside for the erection of a fireplace with a bronze plaque indicating that it was a gift from the Allen Bird Club. In 1956, Mr. Mason asked the club to have a member serve ex-officio on the Advisory Committee of Arcadia Sanctuary. This and the frequent appearance of Alvah Sanborn before the club were examples of the close cooperation between the club and Mass Audubon in the mid-years of the 20th century.

Perhaps the largest undertaking by the Allen Bird Club was the establishment of the Fannie Stebbins Wildlife Refuge in Longmeadow. The idea for creating a refuge was discussed among the members beginning in the late 1940's. In September, 1949, the club appointed a committee of five members, led by Mr. Harold Dickey and including Grace Johnson, to look into the possibility of acquiring land. By May, 1950, the committee had made enough progress that the club appointed another committee to consider ways and means for raising the money needed to purchase and maintain land for the sanctuary. In January, 1951, the committee announced that it had selected 175 acres in Longmeadow along the Connecticut River in the area known as "the flats". This was an area of swamps and forests along the Connecticut River that was often visited on club field trips.



Fannie Adele Stebbins

In March, the club voted to name the sanctuary after one of its founders, Fannie Adele Stebbins, who had died in 1949, and began serious fund raising. Initially, they raised \$800 from members to pay for preliminary legal and real estate expenses, including incorporating the Sanctuary. The land was inexpensive and contained important breeding habitat for many different birds including Wood Ducks and Bald Eagles. The Sanctuary was incorporated on November 28, 1951, and in 1952 the club was able to purchase 59 acres and lease an additional 48 acres. Creative fund raising helped. Contributions were solicited from retired Springfield school teachers in honor of Fannie Stebbins.

By May, 1953 the Sanctuary had reached 114 acres of which 48 were leased. By 1963 it had reached 220 acres due in part to a donation of 6 acres by Mr. & Mrs. Timothy Page of Longmeadow. That land is now the Page Section of the Refuge. In the 1960's, fill and topsoil

from land along Pondsides Road was sold to the state highway department for the construction of Interstate 91. Not only did the sale provide funds, it transferred the land that the refuge had been leasing to the ownership of the refuge.

More land has been added, including 50 acres purchased with a legacy of \$10,000 from club member Rachel Phelps. In the 1960's the Rev. Robert Hatch, Episcopal Bishop of Western Massachusetts, served as a trustee of the Refuge. In 1972, the Refuge was named a National Environmental Education Landmark, a title that was later changed to National Natural Landmark. The Refuge is still owned and managed by the club, in cooperation with the Town of Longmeadow, which owns a large amount of conservation land nearby.

During the 1940's and 50's and into the early 60's, the club ran an annual rummage sale at the Y.W.C.A. to raise funds, first for the club itself and then for the refuge as well. At various times, the club also sold binoculars, telescopes, field guides, and bird food at discount prices to its members. The youngest member ever to join the club was Richard Wayne Longley, 24 days old, who was enrolled by his parents Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Longley, Jr.

No history of the Allen Bird Club would be complete without a mention of Helen and Moreton Bates. Helen joined the club in October, 1953 and Mort joined a year later in September 1954. They both quickly moved into leadership positions, with Mort taking over as Publicity Chairman in 1955. They remained the soul of the club through the 1990's. Mort was the keeper of the bird records and Helen was a field trip leader and the Western Voice of Audubon. She also wrote a column on birds for the Springfield newspapers for many years. Both served as president of the club.



Moreton & Helen Bates

Rudolph "Rud" Stone, a dedicated and expert birder, joined the club two weeks after Helen Bates. Among his other accomplishments, Rud was a curator for the natural history collection at the Wisteriahurst Museum in Holyoke. Ben Breitung joined the club in April, 1955.

In the 1969, more overnight trips were introduced, with the first one being to Brigantine, New Jersey. These eventually included far flung destinations, such as Cape May, New Jersey, Monhegan Island, in Maine, and the Adirondacks. One trip was actually made to North Carolina.

In mid-2000's the club received a substantial bequest from the estate of charter member Rachel Phelps. It donated \$25,000 of that gift to the Town of Wilbraham to acquire land from the Rice Farm to help establish the Rice Nature Preserve on Wilbraham Mountain and a further \$17,000 to the Town of Southwick to help preserve open land along the Connecticut border.

Social aspects have always been an important part of the club. In the early days, a Christmas party was held annually at the museum, a tradition that continues in a toned down version even today. In 1968, the first annual banquet was held. But perhaps the most popular events are the compilation pot luck dinners held after the annual Christmas Count and Spring Census. The first annual banquet to be held in conjunction with the annual meeting was held on May 11, 1964 at the suggestion of President Ben Breitung, and this tradition continued up until 2010.

Today the club has 237 members and holds more than eighty field trips a year. The Allen Bird club looks forward eagerly to its next hundred years.

PRESIDENTS OF THE ALLEN BIRD CLUB

Rev. Herbert E. Thayer	1912-1913
Prof. George B. Affleck	1913-1917
Mr. Fred AI Eldred	1917-1919
Mr. Robert S. Sherwood	1919-1922
Mrs. Edna Ingalls	1922-1928
Mr. Alfred T. Wright	1928-1931
Mr. Theodore F. Dwight	1931-1932
Mr. J. Spencer Read	1932-1934
Mrs. William G. Oehlhof	1934-1935
Mr. Lyman B. Phelps	1935-1938
Mr. Donald R. Hylan	1938-1943
Mr. Charles H. Risely	1943-1945
Mr. H. Arthur Avery	1945-1946
Dr. Edward A. H. Fuchs	1946-1948
Dr. H. Harrison Clarke	1948-1950
Mrs. Helen Avery	1950-1951
Mr. Ernest Yates	1951-1953
Mr. William A. Tompkins	1953-1955
Mr. J. Edward Hyde	1955-1957
Mr. George P. Rickards	1957-1960
Mr. Richard L. Ballman	1960-1961
Mr. Moreton R. Bates	1961-1962

Mr. Benedict G. Breitung	1962-1964
Mrs. Helen C. Bates	1964-1966
Dr. Raymond I. Longley, Jr.	1966-1968
Dr. Lawrence M. Debing	1968-1969
Mr. William Natti	1969-1971
Mrs. Evian Simcovitz	1971-1973
Mr. Bruce Kindseth	1973-1975
Mr. Leon V. S1. Pierre	1975-1977
Mrs. Maxine Gromack	1977-1979
Dr. Seth Kellogg	1979-1981
Mr. Thomas Tynning	1981-1983
Mr. William Platenik	1983-1985
Mrs. Coleen Withgott	1985-1987
Mrs. Diane Puff	1987-1989
Mr. Howard Schwartz	1989-1991
Mrs. Judith Bryan Williams	1991-1993
Dr. Nancy Eaton	1993-1995
Ms. Janis LaPointe	1995-1998
Rev. Patrick McMahan	1998-2000
Mrs. Louise H. Dirats	2000-2001
Mr. John Hutchison	2001-2003
Mrs. Katherine Conway	2003-2005
Dr. George Kingston	2005-2007
Mr. Myles Conway	2007-2009
Mr. Stephen Svec	2009-2011
Mrs. Janet Orcutt	2011-