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## THE MOTHERS OF CONSERVATION

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# The Mothers of Conservation

BY JOHN H. MITCHELL

There is a breed of New Englander, as yet not extinct in our time, which commonly frequents well-known birding spots in the region. The species evolved in Boston sometime in the late seventeenth century and has somehow managed to thrive in spite of changing economies, rampant, unpredictable technologies, an ever-changing political climate, and violent upheavals in the socioeconomic landscape.

I spotted two members of this group not long ago standing beside their car near one of the pullouts by the marshes at the Parker River National Wildlife Sanctuary. The car was a modest, nondescript, older model with a camp blanket in the backseat, much upholstered with the hair of a white dog, and assorted stickers of environmental organizations plastered on the back window. The male was in his midsixties, with close-cropped gray hair and piercing blue eyes, and wore a tattersall shirt, rumpled gray flannels, and worn boat shoes. The female, presumably his mate, wore a wool skirt, a blue turtleneck, a short wool jacket, and tennis sneakers. They both carried antique well-used binoculars, dating, I would judge, from the early 1960s, when they must have been in their birding prime.

While we talked about weather fronts and birds, they eyed the upper air and the marshes. Just as we were about to part

company, the woman said something about tree swallows and began making squeaking noises at the sky. Within a second or two, a group of four tree swallows darted down and circled around her, followed by three more. Her husband joined in, and soon the sky was filled with diving birds. They appeared as if from nowhere, a great locustlike swarm, cheeping and squawking, and executing sharp turns above the dunes and swales.

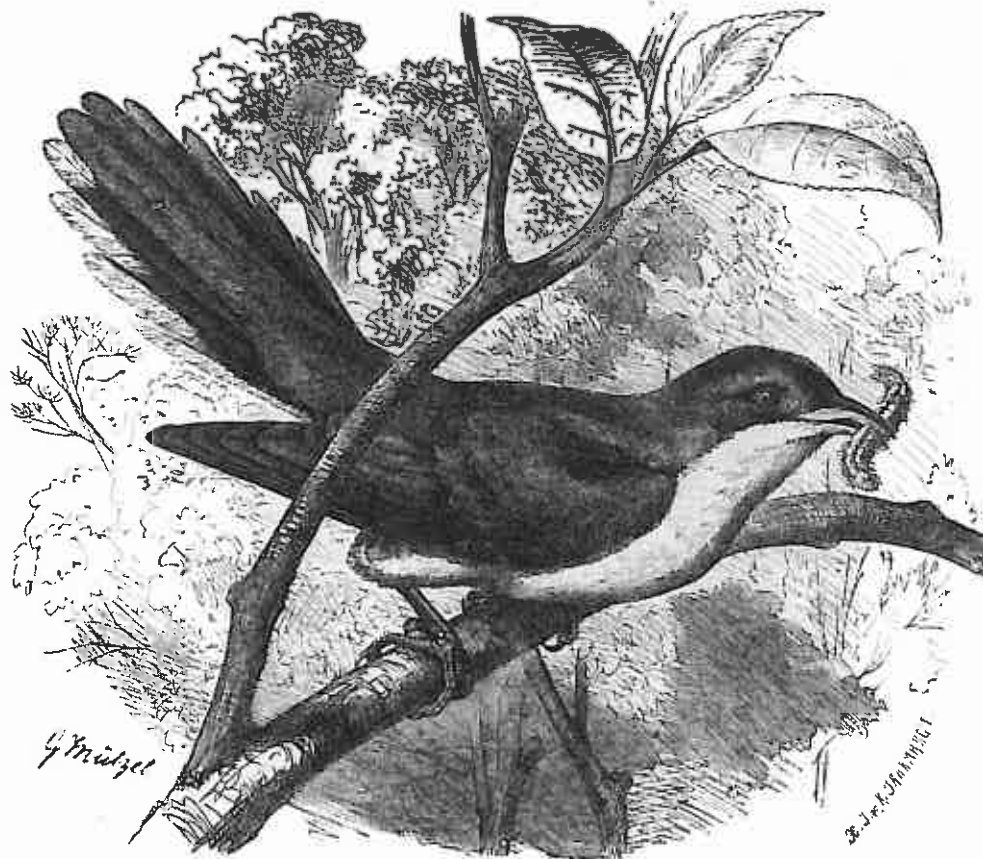
"Quite a storm," the woman said.

This whole affair was completed in a businesslike manner, without ceremony or fuss, and, when the flock swirled out across the marshes and disappeared, the couple began searching the salt pannes for shorebirds, with no-nonsense efficiency. It was as if they were somehow responsible for the well-being of this place and its birds—which, in a manner of speaking, I suppose they were.

Women of this group were once dreaded by highway builders and developers. They were known troublemakers, dogged fighters, ever polite, sometimes halting in speech, given perhaps to digression, but blessed with such an unstoppable ability to stick with a cause that they could, with the help of well-placed allies, bring down giants of industry. This breed was once, and to some extent still is, a known entity in Washington—the scourge of certain senators from the West, the bane of industry lobbyists, pesticide



AMERICAN EGRET



YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO

manufacturers, timber company officials, water managers, special-interest groups, and anyone else with a grand scheme for the makeover of the natural environment.

During the 1950s, a woman of this ilk named Olga Owens Huckins lived on a small property in Duxbury, Massachusetts. She had turned her land into a private bird sanctuary, well stocked with feeders and birdbaths. But in 1958, as a result of a state-sponsored aerial mosquito spraying of the South Shore, many of the birds, including those that had nested on the property year after year, were killed outright. Huckins had solid documentation of the event and wrote an impassioned letter to the *Boston Herald*, detailing what she viewed as an inhuman, undemocratic, and even unconstitutional act.

Because she foresaw the possibility of the increased use of aerial spraying, Huckins sent a copy of the letter to a woman she knew who worked with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, in which she inquired about persons in

Washington who might be able to help. Huckins's contact, who had been tracking pesticide-related incidents of this sort for years, made inquiries, but, in the end, could not locate anyone who would be able to assist her. The woman decided to do something about it herself. She began assembling her notes and data, spent the next two years doing further research, and finally wrote a book. The woman was Rachel Carson; the book was *Silent Spring*.

A point that has generally been overlooked by historians and analysts of political currents in this country is that historically, environmental activism has been the work of women. Theory, philosophy, and writing have been the handiwork of men such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir, but action—that is letter-writing campaigns, organization, boycotts, demonstrations, the willingness to lie down in front of offending bulldozers, and the like—has been the business of women. Marion Stoddard, for example, the woman who was primarily responsible for the salvation of the Nashua Riv-



er. had a blunt, direct style of confrontation. Once she brought a bucket of vile, polluted, river water into the governor's office and placed it on his very desk. On another occasion, she and her children wrote a short, simple missive to the governor—in large letters: "We would like to remind you," it said, "that the Nashua River *stinks*."

One of the seminal events in the history of environmental activism in this country took place in a parlor in Boston's Back Bay in 1896. On a January afternoon that year, one of the scions of Boston society, Mrs. Harriet Lawrence Hemenway, happened to read an article that described in graphic detail the aftereffects of a plume hunter's rampage—dead, skinned birds everywhere on the ground, clouds of flies, stench, starving young still alive in the nests—that sort of thing. The slaughter was in the service of high fashion, which dictated in those times that ladies' hats be ornamented with feathers and plumes, the more the better.

Harriet Hemenway was properly disturbed by the account, and inasmuch as she was a Boston Brahmin and not just any lady of social rank, she determined to do something about it. She carried the article across Clarendon Street to the house of another social luminary, her cousin Minna B. Hall. There, over tea, they began to plot a strategy to put a halt to the cruel slaughter of birds for their feathers. Never mind that the plume trade was a multinational affair involving millions of dollars and some of the captains of nineteenth-century finance; the two women meant to put an end to the nasty business.

Harriet Hemenway, it was often said, had a mind of her own. She once entertained a black man as houseguest when he could not find lodging elsewhere in Boston (he happened to be Booker T. Washington, but that is beside



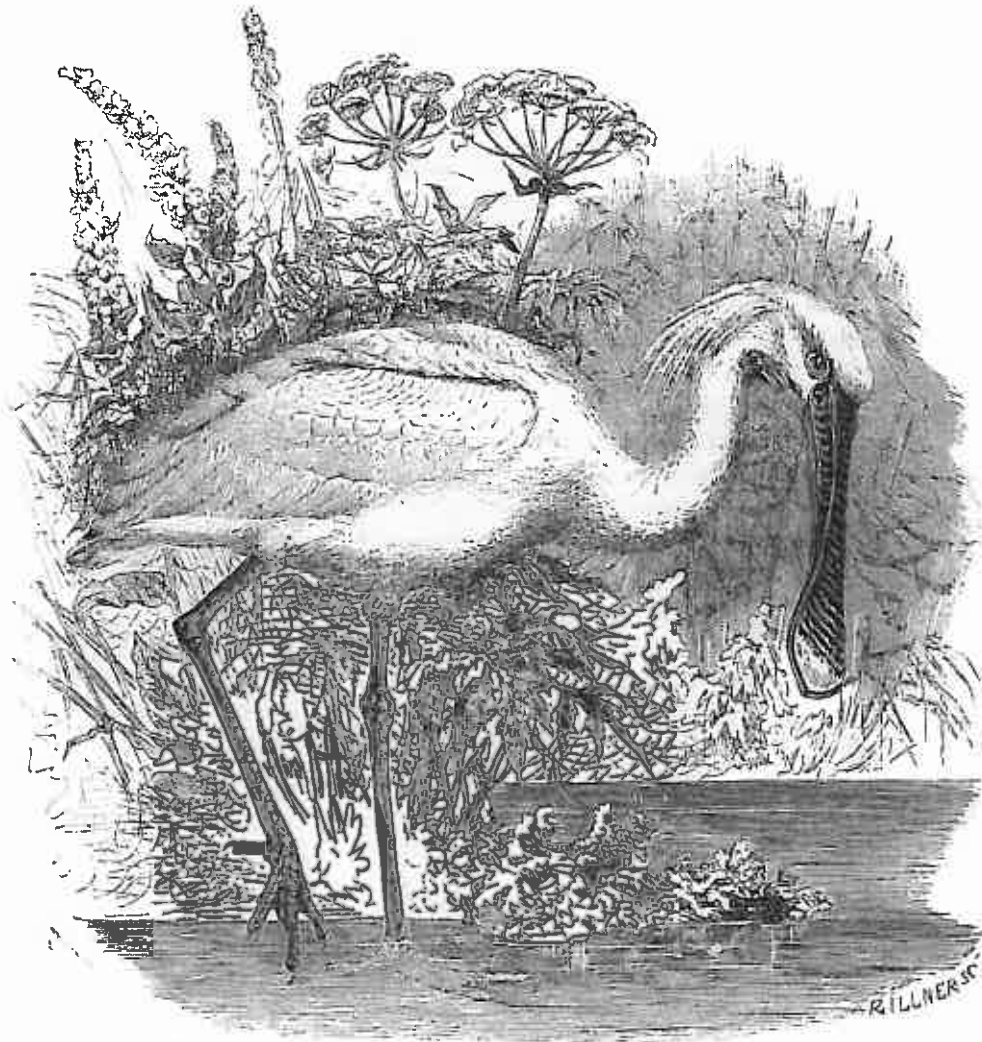
THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM: FASHION DICTATED THE WEARING OF PLUMES. (E. GRAY ON FIRST RETURN FROM PARIS—WITH BUBBLES THE DOG.)

the point). She would fire off public denunciations of other Brahmins if she felt they needed correction, and, when she sat for John Singer Sargent for her portrait, she let the world know she was pregnant by holding a water lily to her breast—symbolic language proclaiming her condition, and a rare, even shocking, public announcement for the period. She was independent, a bit of an iconoclast, an activist, boundlessly energetic, gregarious, overly fond of chocolate and tea, and, furthermore, she lived for a very long time. Not a few people around today remember her.

Boston tended to produce such women. Unlike members of well-heeled families

of other cities, when Bostonians came into money, instead of constructing grand estates in Newport or the Hudson River valley, they had a predilection for putting their riches into educational institutions, schools for the blind, social service institutions in mill cities such as Lowell, and other good works. It was Boston money that built some of the first museums and libraries in this country. It was Boston money that backed the abolitionist movement, and, when the war finally came, it was a Boston family that put one of its favored sons, Robert Shaw, at the head of a company made up entirely of African Americans. Harriet Hemenway, née Harriet Lawrence, was a product of this tradition. She came from a family that had made money from the textile mills. Her father was a devoted abolitionist and a great supporter of education, and, quite naturally, when she came to marry, it was only right that she should marry within the Brahmin clan. She became a Hemenway, another illustrious, rich, and active Boston family.

The Brahmins had a deep moral streak, part of which was no doubt inherited from their Puritan forebears. But that is not to say they were without sin. They had made their money



SPOONBILL

in the satanic mills, in the China trade, or even in the slave trade, and, by 1896, many of the female family members, Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall included, would commonly wear upon their hats the elaborate nuptial plumes of murdered birds. The practice was so common that there were fewer than five thousand egrets nesting in the United States. Terns had been entirely extirpated from the southernmost New England states, partly because of the rage for plumed hats, and, by 1896, it was estimated that some five million American birds of about fifty species were being killed annually for fashion. But unprincipled acts such as the wanton slaughter of innocent birds for so shallow a matter as fashion would not long endure once Harriet Hemenway was on the case.

She and Minna Hall took down from a shelf *The Boston Blue Book*, wherein lay inscribed the names and addresses of the members of Boston society. Hemenway and Hall went through the list and ticked off the names of those ladies who were likely to wear feathers on their hats. Having done that, they planned a series of tea parties. Women in feathered hats were invited, and, when they came, over petits fours and Lapsang souchong, they were encouraged, petitioned, and otherwise induced to forswear forever the wearing of plumes. After innumerable teas and bouts of friendly persuasion, Harriet and Minna had established a group of some nine hundred women who vowed "to work to discourage the buying or wearing of feathers and to otherwise further the protection of native birds." Hunters,





milliners, and certain members of Congress may have found the little bird club preposterous. After all, the feathers were plucked from long-necked things that lived in swamps and ate tadpoles, as one senator would later phrase it, whereas their plumes decorated the hats of beautiful ladies. The Lord made birds for bonnets, it was argued.

But opponents of any regulation on the trade underestimated their opposition. The Boston club was made up of women from the families of the Adamses and the Abbots, the Saltonstalls and the Cabots, the Lowells, the Lawrences, the Hemenways, and the Wigglesworths. These were the same families that brought down the British empire in the Americas. This was the same group that forced Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and it was these families that were about to create the American tradition of environmental activism. Within a matter of decades, the little bird club had spawned what would be the most influential conservation movement in America up to that time.

Notorious, independent Boston women notwithstanding, these were not the freest of times for society women, and Hemenway and Hall were wise enough to know that if their group were to have any credibility it would need the support of men, and most importantly would need a man as its president, even if he would be a mere figurehead. The women organized a meeting with the Boston scientific establishment, outlined their program, and got the men to agree to join the group, which would be called, they decided, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, in honor of the great bird painter John James Audubon.

From the start, the organization had the backing of some outstanding names in American ornithology: Edward Howe Forbush, George Mackay, and the naturalists Charles S. Minot and Outram Bangs. Minot was associated at Harvard with

the foremost biologist in America, Louis Agassiz. The women made Minot chairman of the board. Then they chose as their president one of the cofounders of the Nuttall Ornithological Club and the American Ornithologists' Union, the Cambridge bird man, William Brewster. It was a skilled political choice. With Brewster as head of the organization, the Society immediately garnered national recognition—which is what the women wanted. This was, after all, a national issue; birds were killed and hats were worn in most of the forty-eight states.

By the third meeting of the young organization, the board resolved to use every effort it could to establish similar societies in other states. By 1897, Pennsylvania, New York, Maine, Colorado, and the District of Columbia formed groups. Massachusetts began producing leaflets and helped distribute the legislative models prepared by the American Ornithologists' Union to other societies. By 1900 a conference of state Audubon societies was held in Cambridge, and, the following year, Massachusetts organized another conference in New York. By 1905, with the prodding and money of the Brahmin women, a national committee of Audubon societies was established, a group

that eventually became the National Audubon Society.

All this was to accomplish a single purpose: to do something about the continued slaughter of plume birds. In 1897 Massachusetts had passed a bill outlawing trade in wild-bird feathers, and in 1898 Massachusetts Senator George Hoar attempted to introduce a bill to the US Congress to prohibit both the sale and shipment of plumes within the United States and their import or export to other nations. The bill failed, but sentiment for the cause was running strong by this time, and, when Congressman John



Lacey of Iowa proposed a bill in 1900 to prohibit the interstate shipment of animals killed in violation of local state laws, it passed. The Lacey Act, coupled with strong state bird-protection laws and the use of agents to enforce them, slowly began to weaken the trade, or at least make it more difficult. The fact that a friend of Minot's family and a former member of Brewster's Nuttall Ornithological Club, Teddy Roosevelt, became president of the United States in 1901 certainly did not harm the cause.

Like many successful campaigns, this one was fought on two fronts. Laws were passed, and, just as important, social pressures were applied. In 1909, when the first lady, Mrs. William Howard Taft, had the audacity to appear at the presidential inauguration with feathers in her hat, Minna Hall promptly wrote her a personal letter of remonstrance. Brahmin women never had been considered paragons of fashion: they shopped at R. H. Stearn's and preferred pearl chokers, low-heeled shoes, and long-sleeved nightgowns. By 1920, no lady with any sensibility would be seen on the streets of Boston wearing feathers, at least not without being glared at by one of her sisters. It was not unlike the current movement against wearing furs.

From time to time the legislative and the social fronts converged. In one fight in New York state, a deluge of letters and petitions from women's clubs convinced legislators to pass laws restricting bird hunting. A bill was passed in 1913 to protect migratory birds, and by 1916 the Migratory Bird Treaty with Great Britain further reinforced the law. By the 1920s the issue was dead. The trade had been made illegal, and, although Harriet Hemenway would still have to glare at an occasional offender on the streets of Boston as late as the 1940s, feathers



were going out of fashion anyway.

But the fight was not over. There was the matter of that other phrase in the founding charter, to "otherwise further the protection of our native birds," and Harriet Hemenway, who was sixty-two in 1920, still had another forty years to go. Proper Boston women, it used to be said, liked getting old. They could wear their hair in the Queen Mother style with impunity, ignore fashion altogether, and say what they wanted. The Boston abolitionist Julia Ward Howe, who wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and lived to be ninety-one, confided to her diary at the age of eighty-seven that she hoped the coming year would bring her useful work. Aging was like a cup of tea, she believed. The sugar was at the bottom.

#### THE LAND AS ANCHOR

The great ecological theorist Henry Thoreau believed that every town should have a plot of wild land preserved for instruction and recreation, where not a stick of firewood should be cut and where we could sense something of the older, wilder order. Thoreau was always out of step, but he was often ahead of the parade. When it appeared that the battle of the plumes was going to be won, members of the Massachusetts Audubon Society began thinking of other ways to protect native birds.

Quite naturally, the progenitors of conservation, Thoreau and Emerson, came to mind, and when, in 1916, a prominent society doctor, George W. Field, offered the use of his estate in Sharon as a bird sanctuary, the Society felt it could be a place of instruction as well as sanctuary and decided to turn the land into an educational center. The property (which was in a different location from the current Massachusetts



WOOD DUCK.—ALE SPENCER.



Audubon Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary in Sharon) consisted of some 225 acres of diversified fields and forests, complete with running brooks and a pond. In 1918 the Society appointed a warden, Harry Higbee, to maintain the property and demonstrate to visitors how birds may best be attracted. Higbee lived on the property in an ancient farmhouse, which he opened to the general public. In separate rooms in the house, Higbee displayed his collection of birds, minerals, flowers, and insects, as well as the ever-present and well-distributed Audubon literature. By 1920 the little sanctuary had become a sort of mecca for those interested in natural history. The site had over twenty-six hundred visitors that year, from some twenty-three states and not a few foreign countries, including England and Cuba; there was even a delegation of Japanese studying American institutions—of which, by 1920, the Massachusetts Audubon Society was one. In fact, membership in the Society—along with the Boston Symphony, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, the Boston Athenaeum, and the Chilton Club—had become *de rigueur* for the Brahmins.

In 1922, determined to build on the success of its first sanctuary, the Society purchased more

land in Sharon, a forty-three-acre site that became the core of the present two-thousand-acre Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary. The concept of land as an administrative base, a staging area for education, and a sanctuary to protect wildlife was established. It was a new twist. There were, by the 1900s, thousands of acres of preserved open spaces in New England; there were political organizations fighting the proto-environmental battles of the era; and there were even a few early outdoor educational programs. But until that time, no organization had managed to combine all three under one banner.

This idea of saving land to protect species was hardly new. Marco Polo reported that the great thirteenth-century Chinese ruler Kublai Khan had set aside a vast holding of land near the northern city of Changa-nor for the sole purpose of preserving and even producing wildlife. Never mind that the primary reason for this was to provide the grand Khan and his noblemen with successful hunting—the sanctuary, although it wasn't called that, was a successful and innovative idea. It took another six hundred years for the practice of setting land apart from normal human activities to become established in the West in the form of



HARRIET HEMENWAY IN HER DOMAIN.





MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY. PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRY HOWARD.

the royal deer park, and it was not until the midnineteenth century in America that the idea of setting aside grand tracts of land for conservation purposes was established.

Here in America, we at least had an excuse for not saving land—there was so much of it. We had to destroy it before we could think about preserving it. But even as early as 1820, it was clear that the burgeoning industrialization in the East would in time subsume the entire continent. Thoreau and Emerson recognized the threat, as did painters such as George Caitlin and Thomas Cole. Caitlin, the great painter of Indians, foresaw the fate of the nation and its native peoples and recommended setting aside a vast “park,” as he called it, where the natives could continue to live undisturbed.

The Englishman Thomas Cole took a sketching trip up the Hudson River valley in 1820 and was so impressed with the primal beauty of the river and nearby Catskills that he settled in the area. Soon other artists followed him to the region, and in time a recognized school of landscape painters was formed, the Hudson River School, the first such group in America. By the time of the Civil War, painters out of this tradition had discovered the vast pictorial landscapes of the American West. By 1872, when Congress voted to establish a “national” park at Yellowstone, the public was ready for the move.

New England, as usual, was ahead of the pack. In 1825, Mount Auburn Cemetery, America’s first “garden” cemetery—essentially a landscaped open space—was established in



Cambridge. By 1853, the residents of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, founded a group known as the Laurel Hill Association, which set aside a wooded hill in the center of the village as a wildwood park. By the next decade, under the direction of park planners Frederick Law Olmsted and Boston's native son Charles Eliot, the concept of an urban common as wild park—a place that at least imitated a natural landscape—was coming into vogue. Olmsted and Eliot's Emerald Necklace, originally designed to surround the city, eventually preserved some 2,200 acres of green space. What began in Boston with Olmsted's firm soon spread throughout the Northeast, as city after city began to set aside open spaces and establish landscaped natural parks. It is certainly one of the great ironies of our time that the city with one of the highest percentages of preserved open space in the United States is Manhattan, thanks mainly to Olmsted's innovative Central Park. The place is now an important stopover for migrating birds.

By 1876, the Appalachian Mountain Club was organized in Boston to support the preservation of open space throughout New England and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation, which in this period was becoming the rage of Boston society. By 1891, a group of Brahmins who came from the same patrician families that would make up the board of the Massachusetts Audubon Society a few years later voted to start an organization known as the Trustees of Reservations, whose purpose was to acquire and maintain beautiful or historic sites throughout the Commonwealth. It was the first organization in the world devoted solely to the preservation of open space for public purposes, and it became the model, a few years later, for Britain's National Trust, which has been such a major force for the preservation of the historic and natural landscapes of Britain.

**An Evening in Birdland**  
100 STEREOPTICON VIEWS

**EDWARD AVIS**  
Whistler      BIRD MIMIC      Violinist

ENTERTAINMENT FOR THE EARLY  
AUDUBONERS.

The effort to save land has borne fruit. The Trustees of Reservations now hold 19,500 acres. The New England Forestry Foundation has 15,000 acres throughout New England. The state of Massachusetts holds some 500,000 acres, and towns maintain almost another 100,000 acres of open space. The 55,000-member Massachusetts Audubon Society, which is now the largest conservation group in New England and one of the largest in the nation, maintains 24,000 acres, including eighteen staffed sanctuaries.

This idea of saving land to protect birds had taken hold by the 1920s, and over the next four decades some of the major properties held by the Society were donated: Moose Hill in

Sharon, Arcadia in the Connecticut River valley, Pleasant Valley in the Berkshires, Ashumet and Wellfleet on Cape Cod, Wachusett Meadow in central Massachusetts, and Drumlin Farm in Lincoln, just west of Boston. But in spite of a period of steady acquisition, these were quiet years. Other organizations in the country, including a few seedlings of the original Boston group, were beginning to flourish, whereas in Massachusetts the members were more interested in—one might even say obsessed with—birds. All quite natural. From the beginning some of the greatest names of American ornithology had been associated with Massachusetts Audubon—William Brewster, Arthur Cleveland Bent, Charles W. Townsend, Edward Howe Forbush, the great bird artist Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and later on the dean of all birdwatchers, Ludlow Griscom, who championed sight recognition as a means of identifying birds in the field and, up until the publication of Roger Tory Peterson's field guide in 1934, did more to foster popular birdwatching in this country than any other individual.

There is, nevertheless, a certain redundancy



in the biographies of those young, energetic bird men who were now associated with the Massachusetts Audubon Society; you could almost write one for them all. Born: eastern Massachusetts. Schools: Milton Academy, Harvard. Place of residence: North Shore. Interest: ornithology.

The same might be said of the programs offered by the organization in these quiescent years. Witness this announcement from the 1921 Massachusetts Audubon Society Bulletin.

*March 29, 1921. The Audubon Bird Lectures will be given again this year in Symphony Hall on Saturday afternoons at 2 o'clock. The Audubon Society's motion picture film "The Birds of Killingworth" will be shown at one of these lectures. The course will be a treat for bird lovers, exceeding anything which the society has yet put before the public. As always, Mr. Edward Avis [no pun intended, this was apparently his real name], well known for his wonderful whistling reproductions of bird music, will appear at two of the lectures.*

Notice the use of the term "Audubon Society." In the mind of Boston, there was only one Audubon Society, or at least only one real one. In fact, there were dozens all over the country, including the national one, and they were all at work educating schoolchildren about the value of local birds. It was out of this effort that the next generation of conservationists would be fostered.



COUNTRY ROAD IN CANTON. PHOTOGRAPH BY MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON'S FIRST PRESIDENT, WILLIAM BREWSTER (1890).

### THE END OF AN ERA

By 1931, Harriet Hemenway had moved to the family summer house in Canton, southwest of Boston. Her husband, Augustus, was dead. She was seventy-four years old and had a burgeoning crowd of grandchildren. She had not changed her style very much since the 1890s; in fact, it could be said that in some ways she was just coming into style. She dressed in black. She wore a Queen Mary hat (sans plumes, needless to say), and she went about in sensible shoes, which fashionable ladies of Philadelphia referred to as "ground grippers." For outings, she was not embarrassed to don white tennis shoes, an item that in later years would become the very symbol of female conservationists and an object of derision by New Yorker cartoonists and threatened developers. Every Friday she took the train to Boston to attend the Chilton Club lecture and

luncheon, followed by the symphony. There she would meet her fellow "low-heelers"—as proper Boston women were called. They were all of them aging now, but, true to Boston form, they were coming into their prime.

On Sundays at one o'clock, the grande dame presided over dinner at the Canton house. These affairs had an English cast: family silver, joints of beef with horseradish sauce, green peas and mashed potatoes. And after dinner—chocolate. Harriet Hemenway adored above all a bit of postprandial chocolate. Later in life she took to feeding upon straw-



berries, and when family members reminded her that her doctors had told her that strawberries were bad for her rheumatism, she reminded her family that those doctors were now long dead, whereas she was alive and well.

All the Boston doyennes professed a love of nature, at least publicly. (Privately, many of them preferred the shadowed corners of their Victorian sitting rooms, a cheery fire, a cup of tea, and a good book.) But Harriet Hemenway meant it. Survivors of her Sunday outings remember being dragged along on bird walks or stargazing parties—even in the depth of winter. She was always out-of-doors, and she walked everywhere, sometimes to the dread of those family members who began to worry about her health. She was intractable. You could not tell Harriet Hemenway that she was too old to safely walk the grounds.

Furthermore, she never gave up on her causes. She started a fund to buy more land. She instructed the New England Forestry Foundation—which by 1953 would be under the direction of her grandson John—to purchase 495 acres in memory of her late husband. She fought for the rights of working women, and she dutifully attended the Saturday-afternoon lecture series of the Audubon Society at Symphony Hall (although it is pos-

sible that after all the *Sturm und Drang* of the early years, she was a bit bored—one wonders what she thought of Mr. Avis and his bird whistling).

In 1957, Harriet Hemenway turned one hundred. The Society presented her with a scroll and pointed out that few people leave such significant memorials to their personal foresight—which anywhere else but Boston might have been true.

Six years earlier, in 1951, her co-conspirator and cousin, Minna B. Hall, had died at the age of ninety-two. She had remained active to the end, still serving on the board of directors of the Society, still watching birds, still taking excursions into the woods around Swallow Pond on Beacon Street in Longwood, where she had been born and raised. The pond used to be known as Hall's Pond, and Minna herself was one of the last members of a club of Brahmins, founded by one of the Lowells, known as the Society of Those Still Living in the House They Were Born in. Only a few years before Minna died, Harriet Hemenway confided to one of her fellow Audubon members that Minna was overdoing it. She was too busy, Harriet said.

Minna countered. She cornered someone at symphony one Friday afternoon and suggested that Harriet was gadding about too much and



HARRIET HEMENWAY IN HER TWILIGHT YEARS.



looked tired. "She doesn't know when to stop," Minna said.

These, mind you, were women in their nineties.

A few years after Minna's death, Harriet Hemenway broke her hip and couldn't get about as much as she used to. She was still clear-headed, but the racehorse was penned. In this period on summer nights in the suburbs, strange vehicles with sprayers mounted on flatbed trucks would pass to and fro along quiet town streets, drenching the local elm trees with DDT. The practice of aerial spraying for mosquitoes was coming into vogue. Levittown, the first large tract-housing development, had been built, and the design was spreading to Massachusetts. The first shopping mall in the country, on Route 9 in Natick, had opened for business. Coastal and inland wetlands were being filled at such a rate that nearly half of the original wetlands were now drylands. Songbirds were dying horrible deaths on front lawns. And to the dismay of aging traditionalists such as Harriet Hemenway, parking lots were overwhelming green space and historic buildings throughout New England. It was not the best of times.

By 1960, the term Brahmin, originally coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes to describe those ascetic, intellectual, and cultured aristocrats of Boston, had been in use for about one hundred years. The Boston Brahmins themselves had fled the city and dispersed north and south to live quiet lives on their trust funds. R. H. Stearn's closed its doors forever. Bostonians actually began to admit to having money; some of them even displayed the fact by driving expensive cars, building monumental houses in the suburbs, and wearing jewelry and fashionable clothes. Things were changing, and out in Canton, as if to put an end to an era, Harriet Hemenway quietly succumbed. She was one hundred and three years old.

In 1959, the Society hired as its executive vice-president Allen Morgan, a young insurance executive with an interest in birds and wildlife who was already a member of the Massachusetts Audubon Society board of directors. This Allen Morgan was a

sharp birder and he knew a thing or two about flowers and trees, but he was not, or at least claimed he was not, a real naturalist, as were some of the old-style heads of Massachusetts Audubon. Morgan had been a marine during World War II, and in spite of a mild obsession with bird life, he had become more concerned with the human condition as a result of his experiences during the war. It was he who came up with the little advertising slogan that was once used by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, "We're not just for the birds...."

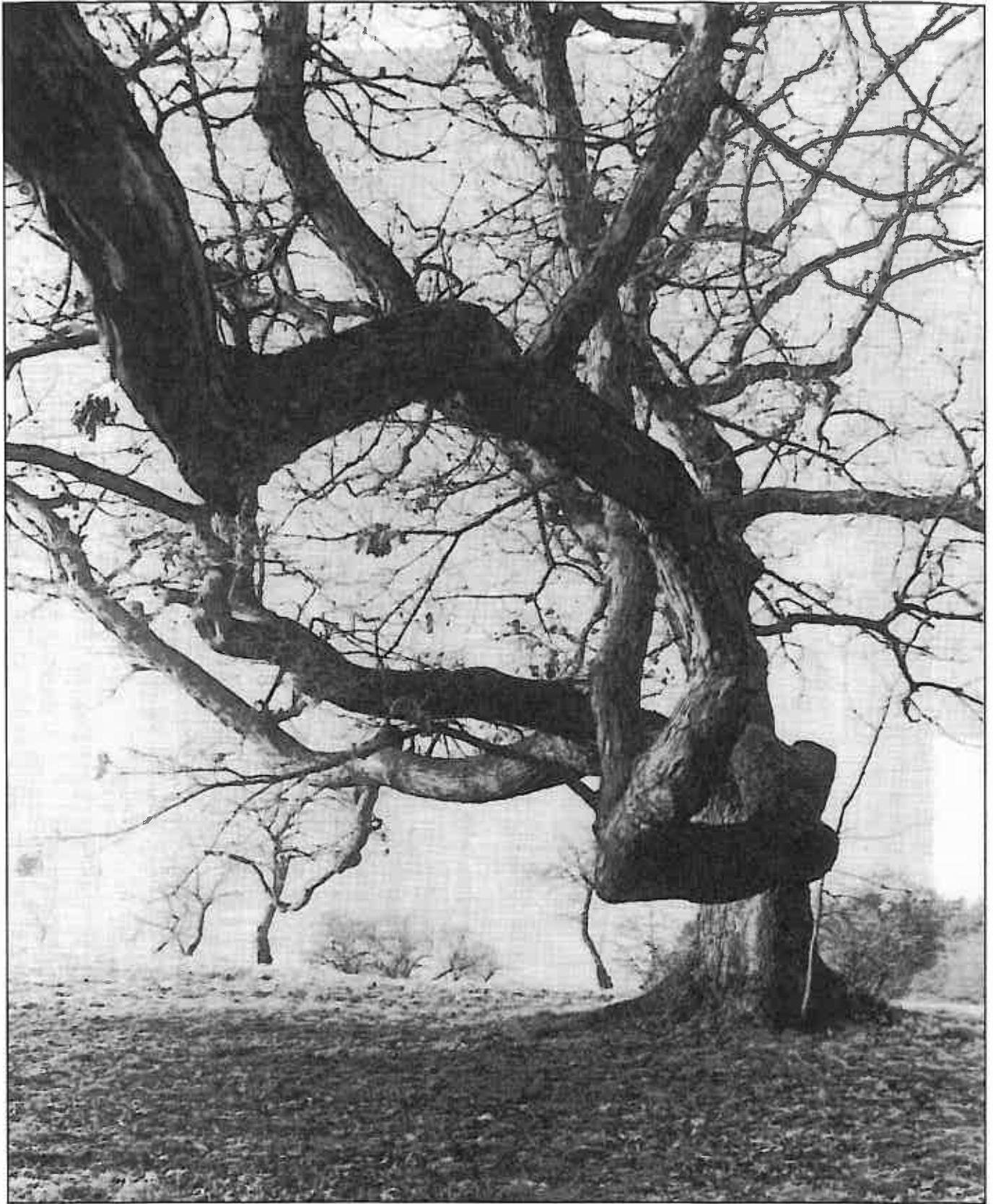
This was entirely in keeping with the mood of the nation. More and more people were recognizing the relevance of environmental issues to their lives. By the mid-1960s, the Sierra Club, originally founded as a mountaineering group, was actively campaigning on environmental issues. Massachusetts Audubon's large and energetic offspring, the National Audubon Society, was taking a stand against pesticide use; even hunting and fishing groups such as the Isaak Walton League and the newly formed Ducks Unlimited were working to conserve land; and new, active grassroots organizations were appearing across the country to protect open space.

Morgan saw the need to broaden the scope of the Society's activities to meet new challenges. He began to garner friends and allies in high places. He was outspoken and well informed, a gadfly in the style of Harriet Hemenway, and he was not averse to moving the organization into the nasty snake pit of the political arena, which was of course the original intent of the Audubon women. In 1956, Mrs. Louis Ayer Hatheway had donated her entire property and estate, Drumlin Farm in Lincoln, to the Society. When Morgan took over, the organization headquarters were located in a small office on Newbury Street. Under his direction the operation was moved to Lincoln, and the staff began using the farm for educational purposes.

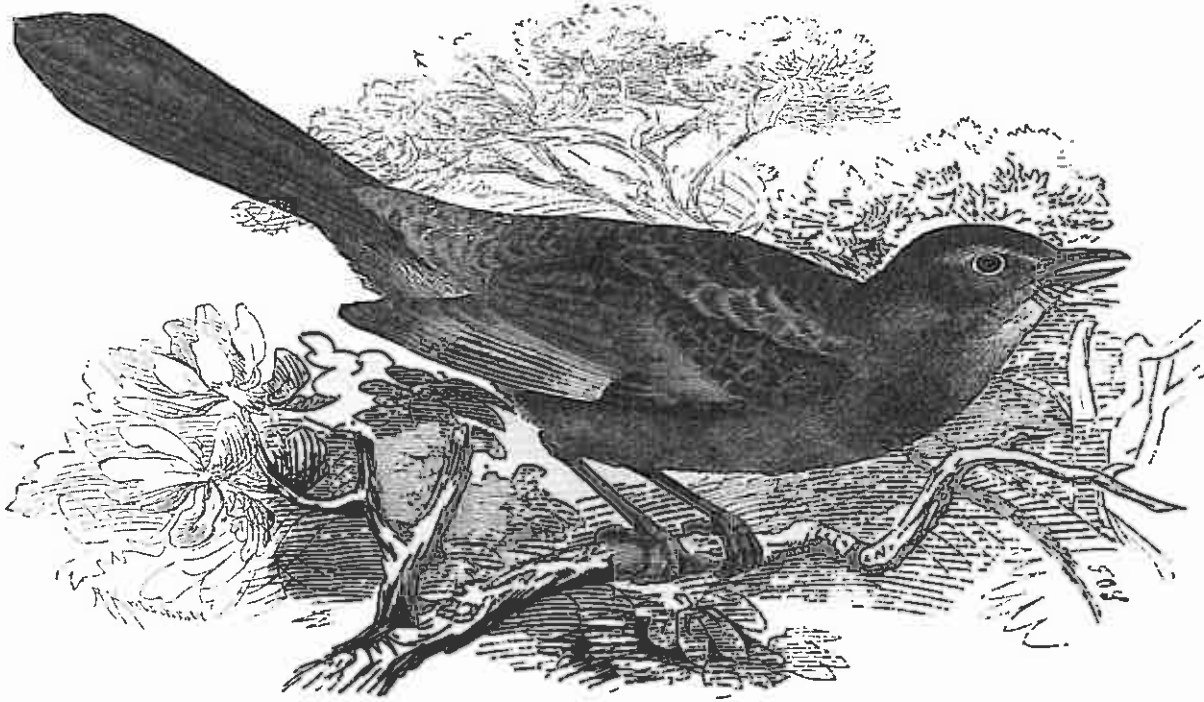
One director at Drumlin Farm, Bill Drury, was a biologist and ornithologist with an interest in original scientific research, and he suggested to Morgan that the Society use the sanctuaries for data gathering and controlled studies. After some negotiation, Morgan and Drury reorganized the Society and invit-







THE PORTER OAK AT MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON'S BROADMOOR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. PHOTOGRAPH BY LES PORTER.



CATBIRD

ed local and international ornithologists to use Drumlin Farm for their studies. The Society had now added a third direction to conservation and education—research.

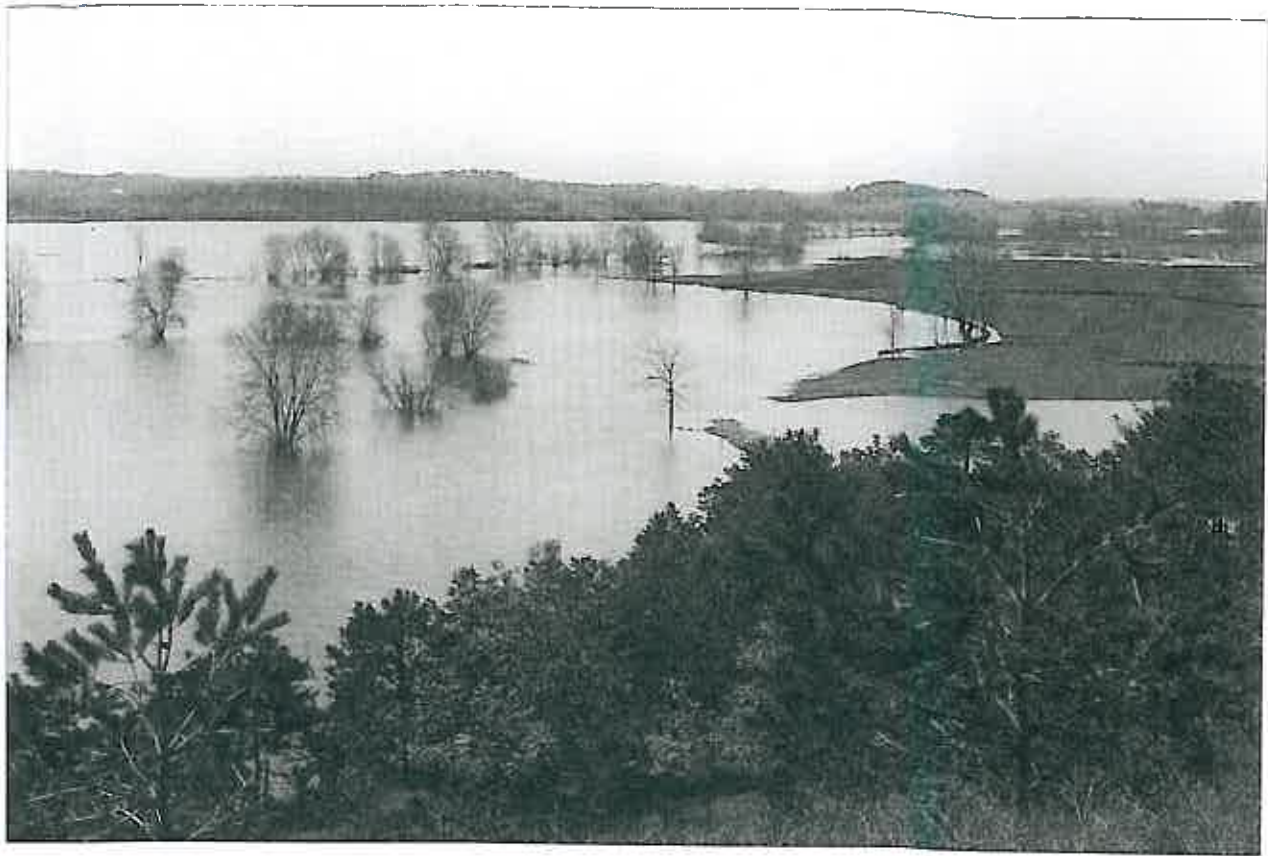
Initially the research was purely ornithological: nesting behavior of red-breasted nuthatches and chickadees, breeding strategies of killdeer and the like. But by the early 1960s the scientists began to focus on pesticide use. Morgan was a friend of Olga Huckins's in Duxbury; in fact, he had met Rachel Carson on the property one afternoon when she came up from Washington to look at the land where the story had begun. After the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962, under the direction of William Drury, the Society began to do its own studies on pesticides. The great furor at this time was the fact that all the evidence was circumstantial. The spray trucks would pass, and the next day robins would be seen quivering and dying on people's front lawns. The lawyerly pesticide companies were quick to point out that, in a court of law, this would be inadmissible evidence—merely coincidence. Furthermore, no one in the state labs could find any residue of pesticides in the bird corpses that

were brought in for analysis.

"That," said Morgan, "is because they were using the wrong technique."

In these years there was a new technology on the horizon for detecting pesticide traces: the gas chromatograph. Within the Society, Morgan raised funds to purchase two gas chromatographs, which the Society donated to the state of Massachusetts. By now Morgan had hired an assistant, James Baird, to help work on the new environmental issues. Baird started on the problem of controlling pesticides, which, since the publication of *Silent Spring*, had finally become recognized as a national environmental problem. Under the prodding of Baird, state labs carried out the tests, and there, as everyone suspected, stored in the birds' fat, was the evidence: the residue of sprays.

Morgan skimmed by on intuition. He had an excellent sense of timing for issues and solutions, and he was not afraid of innovative theories that had yet to be accepted by the scientific establishment. In the early 1960s he read an obscure article about a salt marsh study by an ecologist named Eugene Odum. The study identified the relationship between



CONCORD RIVER IN FLOOD. PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

energy and food production in salt marshes and offshore fisheries, and Morgan believed the study made a strong case for the importance of halting the draining, filling, and polluting of coastal wetlands. He called his friends and allies in the legislature, got the Society to publicize the story, buttonholed the activists, and gave speeches on the subject to women's groups. He began working to develop legislation with Charles H. W. Foster of the Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources, who had also been studying the issue. Foster had recently instituted a governor's commission on wetlands preservation, and, working together, the two of them managed to get a bill to control draining and development of coastal wetlands through the Massachusetts legislature. It was the first salt-marsh-protection bill in the nation.

From the studies instituted by Foster, Morgan inferred that the same dynamics that made salt marshes a factor in storm-damage control must also be at work in freshwater wetlands. Morgan had lived along the Sudbury River for years and had watched the normal flooding

cycles, and it struck him that natural wetlands act like sponges, absorbing excess waters during heavy rains and slowly releasing the excess over time. So he began pushing for a freshwater protection bill. Once again he sent out his point man, Jim Baird, who with the assistance of a Department of Natural Resources legal adviser, Bob Yasi, and the legislator Francis Hatch, wrote the legislation that eventually was passed as the Hatch Act, the first law in the country aimed at protecting freshwater wetlands. Some years later these two laws were combined to create the current Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act, passed in 1979, which was used as a model for federal wetlands protection laws.

Around 1971, Morgan got the idea that this question of energy production was one of the most fundamental and insidious aspects of the multitudinous human effects on the environment. The oil spills that were befouling the nation's beaches were only part of the problem, he believed. On his recommendation, the Society's board hired MIT physicist Jim MacKenzie as energy specialist to work on energy conser-



TRAIL AT MASSACHUSETT AUDUBON'S STONY BROOK WILDLIFE SANCTUARY.

vation issues. In 1972 this was something of an outrageous step for an organization that was still, in the minds of the general public, associated strictly with birds. But in 1975, after the oil embargo, the general public began to understand just how pivotal the question of energy consumption and conservation really was. By 1978, when Morgan had a solar heating system installed as a model project at Drumlin Farm and began promoting conservation and solar power as an alternative to fossil fuels, the public understood the ecological connection.

One of the things that was recognized by Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall was that the issue that was facing them in 1896 was not local; it was a national, even international, problem. It was for this reason that the women began providing money to start up other state Audubon societies, worked at the federal level, and through the years devoted so

much time and energy to the education of children. Since that time, the awareness of global interconnectedness has only deepened. This realization prompted the board in 1980 to hire as a successor to Allen Morgan a thirty-six-year-old scientist from Washington named Jerry Bertrand, who already had broad international environmental and legal experience. Late-twentieth-century geopolitics, the existence of multinational corporations with no particular allegiance to any nation, and the bioregional nature of environmental issues made the choice logical.

The fact that the Society has had only six presidents in one hundred years says something about the singularity of purpose of the organization. But it is curious that the board also seems to pick people with boundless energy to head the Society.

Like that of the earliest presidents and board activists at the fledgling organization,





Bertrand's background was academic. Unlike the others, he actually had two advanced degrees: a doctorate in biological oceanography from Oregon State University and a JD in environmental law from the University of Wisconsin. In addition, he had trained as a civil engineer. He had served as chief of international affairs for the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the Department of the Interior and had dealt with worldwide wildlife problems in Asia and South America. But he had learned his lessons well in environmental geopolitics and knew that all global issues are local issues. So he started to buy land in the state of Massachusetts.

In the first eighty-five years of its existence, the Massachusetts Audubon Society had acquired or been given approximately 11,000 acres of land throughout the state. In the first ten years of Bertrand's reign, he added over half that amount again, about 7,000 acres, and in the next five years another 5,000. Currently the Society has 24,000 acres. Jerry Bertrand's grand design is to have one Massachusetts Audubon sanctuary within twenty minutes' driving time of every urban center in the state and, once the land is secure, to establish

nature centers and develop a nature education program that will reach every child in the state. You can always raise money, he says, but you have to save the land while it's still there.

As any ecologist will tell you, however, the creation of relatively small tracts of land (the average size of a Massachusetts Audubon sanctuary is 1,100 acres) is insufficient if you want to save larger species of birds and mammals and protect the entire fabric of an ecosystem. By 1980, partly as a result of the research of island biogeographers, it had become clear that—with the incredible spurt in development in the Northeast: haphazard, town-by-town zoning; increasing human population—in time the preserved open spaces would become totally surrounded by development and begin to function as islands. Islands are notoriously precarious places for local wildlife; furthermore, many of the continental species, such as wood thrushes, are not suited to small isolated existences. Cut off from traditional migratory routes, access to water, extensive stretches of deep woodland, or old trees, many species of birds, mammals, and even insects would be facing extinction.



SCARLET TANAGER





TROPICAL HUMMINGBIRDS

Bertrand took seriously the Society's mandate to do everything possible to "further the protection of native birds." He extended his view beyond the boundaries of the Society's sanctuaries and sought larger sections of open space that would interconnect with other large preserved tracts of land, even if the latter didn't belong to the Society. In this way, he aimed to link the many little islands that have been saved in New England by various organizations into a great network of corridors, where wild species could travel freely.

Bertrand extended this approach to research, and, in 1993, organized the Center for Biological Conservation, which studies ecological issues on a regional basis. The Society's biological research on local wildlife populations, such as grassland birds, no longer ceases at state borders. As local, state, and national conservation activists have learned in the past thirty years, nature ignores political boundaries. The world does not end at the borders of Massachusetts—as some locals prefer to believe.

For a large percentage of Massachusetts and New England birds, even this enlightened regional approach might not be enough. Many birds that inhabit the backyard woods and fields of Massachusetts are in fact mere visitors. Some species, such as the shorebirds and terns, which played so great a role in the foundation of the Society, spend only a few months out of the year here during the summer breeding season. It was clear to Bertrand that if you are going to follow the mandate of the organization and do everything you can to protect "native" birds (whatever that means), you have to go outside of the country to those areas where "our" birds spend most of their lives—which is to say the Neotropics.

During this same period of the eighties, frightening statistics on the decline of natural habitat in the tropics and subtropics began to emerge. In 1986, Jerry Bertrand chaired a symposium in Ontario for four hundred scientists on the future protection of wintering bird habitats, and there were many calls at that conference for more studies on the connection between subtropical habitats and migratory birds, and more active participation in the protection of endangered habitats in the Neotropics. Even before the conference, though, Massachusetts Audubon was at work in the small Central American nation of Belize,



which, because of a fluke of economic history and population density, happened to have some 90 percent of its land still undeveloped.

One of the strategies of Harriet Hemenway and company was to provide money to start other bird protection organizations and then work behind the scenes to see that they became established. This is, in effect, the same technique that Jerry Bertrand employed to do something about the sad decline of forests in the Neotropics. Once again, Jim Baird, who up until his retirement in 1991 had served as a sort of knight in armor in the service of various lords of Audubon, sallied forth. Central America was hardly new territory for him. In the 1960s he had represented the Society in pioneering an ecotourism program in the region. Now he again began spending time in Belize.

In 1984, using funds made available by the board of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Baird started working in association with the local Belize Audubon Society to hire a staff and help them set up management programs for the national parks. Then, in 1987, the board of Massachusetts Audubon again decided to extend the Society's purview: It provided \$500,000 to launch the Programme for Belize, a conservation group organized to preserve land, encourage economic development, and advise the government on environmental matters. The aim was to work with Belizeans so that eventually the Programme would be locally run (which it now is). Funds for the Programme were solicited by a consortium of conservation groups spearheaded by Massachusetts Audubon. One of the Programme's main goals was to demonstrate that it is economically feasible to set aside large tracts of land for conservation. The Programme began by acquiring several large tracts of unspoiled forest in northern Belize to hold in trust for

the Belizean people; eventually, it created the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area, a vast tract of some 230,000 acres that is managed for wildlife conservation and research. The goal is for the Programme and the region's people to be self-supporting, in part from ecotourism in the region, and from the collection and sale of renewable forest products such as chicle.

Another relatively undisturbed and progressive country in Central America is Costa Rica, which in the 1960s designated large tracts of land as national parks—at least in theory. In fact, purchase was intended to come later. Land of course is at a premium in the populated regions of Central and South America, and Bertrand and company realized once more that, unless land were saved outright, soon the great bulldozer that is even now rolling over the tropical regions of the world would squash even the well-intentioned parks of Costa Rica. Two large

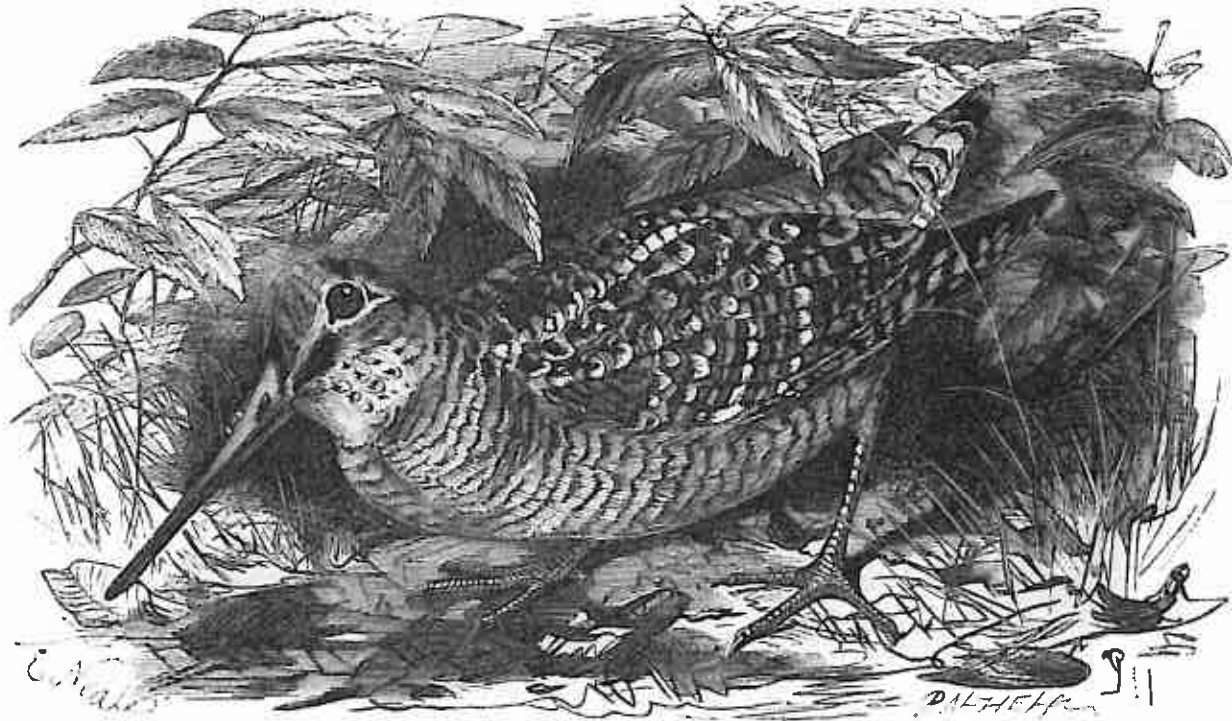
parks were close to each other but were not contiguous, so Massachusetts Audubon began a mission to connect them and to enhance the wild habitats beyond the formal park boundaries, either through acquisition or by means of nontraditional methods such as conservation easements.

Working with local nongovernmental agencies and international funding agencies that have an interest in tropical conservation, a Massachusetts Audubon consultant, Andrew Kendall, began putting together the funds and programs to save the tracts of land near the national parks and permanently establish the designated parks.

One of the most interesting of the alternative methods Kendall used to preserve land in Costa Rica involved the US carbon offset project, which is designed to slow the accumulation of gases associated with the



MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON PRESIDENT JERRY BERTRAND IN 1980. BERTRAND HAS DOUBLED THE SOCIETY'S LAND HOLDINGS AND MOVED THE ORGANIZATION INTO THE REALM OF INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION.



WOODCOCK

greenhouse effect by balancing emission and absorption of carbon in the earth's atmosphere. One of the best ways to ensure adequate absorption of carbon is to preserve the great forest tracts of the planet, which use carbon for photosynthesis. A major contributor to Kendall's effort in Costa Rica was a US power company that, in essence, traded rights to release a certain amount of carbon for money donated to the Massachusetts Audubon-sponsored program to purchase forested parklands in Costa Rica.

This combination of using innovative international funding strategies, cooperating with the business world, and jumping traditional political boundaries to work in small Central American nations may seem far removed from the Clarendon Street parlor where it all began. But, in fact, one should not suppose that because they dressed in frumpy clothes and preferred a low profile, the families that started the Massachusetts Audubon Society were not powerful manipulators of funds and governmental agencies, with influential connections in the political arena.

The defining characteristic of the Brahmins, the thing that sets them apart from high society in other cities in America, is that they put their power to good use. In our time, as wild-

lands throughout the world are shrinking, as habitats and species are lost and the human population continues to expand at exponential rates, the little bird club founded by Harriet Hemenway and company back in 1896 could serve as a model for international conservation in the twenty-first century.

Were she with us now, no doubt the grande dame would approve.

*John H. Mitchell is editor of Sanctuary and author of the recently published Walking Towards Walden (Addison-Wesley).*

The Mothers of Conservation is excerpted from *The Nature of Massachusetts* by John H. Mitchell, Christopher W. Leahy, and Thomas Conuel. The book is illustrated by the eminent Swedish painter Lars Jonsson and is an overview of the ecology of New England and a commemoration of the role of the Massachusetts Audubon Society in conservation over the past hundred years. *The Nature of Massachusetts* will be published by Addison-Wesley next fall.