

Tiadaghton Audubon Society Celebrates 100 Years

By Phil Krajewski

Imagine, 1906 Wellsboro. Automobiles, telephones and electricity. Where? Although all three were on the way, soon to arrive via the Williamson Road or down from New York State, they were essentially non-existent in the North Central Highlands at the turn of the century. Communication between people in different parts of the state, country or world was moving at a horse's trot rather than at the speed of light. I find it very exciting that in the state of Pennsylvania Wellsboro could possibly have had the distinction of predating a metropolis such as Philadelphia or Pittsburgh as the first locale to formalize a group of the National Association of Audubon Societies. Although research by others may uncover information to the contrary, it is clear that Wellsboro had an organized effort as early as May 1906.

I am intrigued by how communication might have spread so quickly as to make a rural spot in "the middle of nowhere" an integral part of the vanguard of a national movement. Two thoughts come to mind. First, the "wildfire syndrome"-- that indefinable almost mystical way in which ideas spread super rapidly as exemplified by my two teenage daughters, who simultaneously with every other teenager coast to coast started to answer "whatever" instead of "yes" or "no" to a direct question. Secondly, as Bob Dylan put it, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows". The 1906 formation of the Wellsboro Audubon Society came about because people from the area spent a lot of time in and appreciated their natural environment. They saw the numbers of birds diminishing from year to year, were concerned about it, and decided to do something to rectify an unacceptable reality. Although scientific and publishing groups from NYC were at the forefront of the plan to protect North-American birds, the first hand knowledge of persons, farmers, and hunters from this area also led to direct action as they noticed fewer birds, observed more crop insect damage, and lamented the passing of large numbers of game birds. Tioga County had plenty of outdoor laboratories in which a person could conduct the simple experiments of observation.

There were specific reasons that contributed to Victorian-era avian demise other than "the hordes will last forever" mentality, and this concerned fashion. The feathers as well as the other parts of birds were used extensively as centerpieces by the millinery trade for the making of hats. The numbers of bird killed were staggering throughout the country. At one location on Long Island, for example, in three months time in 1886, 70,000 skins were provided to local New York City manufacturers. We seem to have come a long way from these turn of the century slaughters, with the Audubon Society having evolved as a vigilant group in protecting birds and helping to instill in our citizenry a love and appreciation of the beauty as well as the practical aspects of our 'feathered friends'. Having touched upon why Wellsboro was ripe for involvement in this national movement, let me now 'crow' with celebration as to the historical facts which point to the Tiadaghton Audubon Society's 100th anniversary in 2006.

I have uncovered the following through historical research:

1. 1873: *Forest and Stream* (name later changed to *Field and Stream*) magazine is founded in NYC.

2. 1883: The American Ornithological Union (AOU) is founded in NYC.

3. 1886: The Audubon Society is founded by the publishers of *Forest and Stream* magazine. The idea originated with the editor, Dr. George Bird Grinnell. Many groups including the AOU were sympathetic to avian demise, but were unwilling to take on what they perceived as an enormous financial obligation. *Forest and Stream* magazine, already a well circulated publication, decided it had the capabilities to undertake such a venture. On February 13, 1886, the Audubon Society was officially established. Circulars were sent to newspapers asking people to sign a pledge card for the protection of birds and to join as members. By May over 1,500 membership certificates had been issued with the number growing to 20,000 by the end of the year. On December 31 the Philadelphia list included 28 local secretaries and a membership of 1,645 people. The list was called Philadelphia but its members probably came from the entire state. It seems that the original Audubon Society had an umbrella structure under which all of the members from the United States and Canada were included. Hopefully future research will uncover a few names from the Wellsboro area.

4. 1887: In February, Volume 1, Number 1, of the *Audubon Magazine* was published by Forest and Stream Press. It is interesting to note that the book *Woodcraft* by Wellsboro resident Nessmuk (George Washington Sears) was listed on the back cover as an offering from the Forest and Stream Press. It is probable that Nessmuk was aware of the Audubon concerns and shared them with others from this area. It is not inconceivable that he could have been a member, possibly honorary, since his history as a complete outdoorsman would certainly be consistent with a group whose aim was to protect birds and wildlife from wanton destruction.

5. 1905: The National Association of Audubon Societies is formed in NYC on January 30.

6. 1906: In mid April, *A Report of the Audubon Society of Wellsboro, Pa.* was issued. This document was found in the Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., under Record Unit 7294, Audubon Naturalist Society of the Central Atlantic States (formally District of Columbia) Series 1, Box 1, Volume 2. The report is 3 pages and was written by Fanny E. Watrous, President of the Wellsboro Audubon Society. It is a personal account of the founding of the Wellsboro Society with little factual information other than the time of founding was mid April and there were 21 original members -- all women. This document will be reprinted in the March *Birdwatch* column.

7. 1906: On May 24, 1906 the following appeared in the *Wellsboro Agitator*, page 4, column 2 under *Wellsboro Items*: "The Audubon is the name of the latest society organized by Wellsboro ladies. The object of the society is to promote the knowledge and the love of birds".

8. 1906-1911: Page 169 from the book *Life in Wellsboro 1880-1920: A Socio-Historical Portrait* by noted historian and Wellsboro resident Gale Largey. Mr. Largey's research revealed the names of 23 early members and a bird list from 1911.

9. 1907: The following appeared on July 3 on page 5, column 3 of the *Wellsboro Gazette*. "The July meeting of the Audubon Society will be held in the Grand Jury Room Court House this evening at 8 o'clock. Subject for discussion, 'Birds nests and protective coloring'".

10. 1953: Indications that the name was changed to the Tiadaghton Audubon Society (TAS) appear in the treasurer's handbook of Hulda Fisher along with new entries made under this name beginning on April 9, 1953.

11. 1967: August. First issue of the chapter newsletter *The Raven* is published.

12. 1969: May. Chapter constitution is adopted.

13. 1972: May 1. National Audubon Society grants the TAS a "Charter of Chapter Participation".

14. 1976: April 19. Official date of incorporation of the TAS.

The uncovering of historical documents and facts is an ongoing process and any future "eureka's" will appear in this column. It is very exciting to TAS current members that 2006 will not only mark Wellsboro's bicentennial, but will also mark the centennial of TAS. Please visit our new website at <http://www.tiaudubon.org> for more information. *Birdwatch* appears the second Wednesday of each month in the *Wellsboro Gazette*.