

Women4TheBirds

During the Victorian period (1837-1901), birds were being brutally hunted, some for collection (taxidermy) but most for commercial trade, particularly for use to adorn women's hats with ornate feathers, wings, often entire birds, sometimes even nests, and eggs. Birds, threatened with extinction, were being killed for profit in the fashion industry. By the 1880s, songbirds, herons, egrets, swallows, terns, quails and pheasants were disappearing from America's farmlands and natural open spaces.

Laws in about twenty states to forbid the killing of non-game insectivorous birds critical to farming insect control were rarely enforced. A new law was considered to require men and boys lay down their guns used in shooting birds for taxidermy.

But it was the killing of birds for the female fashion industry that far outweighed the killing for taxidermy desires. More than 5 million birds were being killed annually for the booming North American millinery trade. Still no laws, legislated by a male legislature, existed to save the avifauna in America from those hunting for mercantile trade or commerce.



Two women, Harriet L. Hemenway and Minna B. Hall, brave and bold with no political power, positions nor aspirations, took action. At a time when women's public participation was neither authorized nor approved and often not welcome in the public sphere of men, they took it upon themselves to save the birds using the power they knew they did possess: the power of connecting, linking in, with other women.

Harriet was a Boston socialite and a passionate naturalist who participated in birding expeditions. Her outrage at the unscrupulous plume trade threat to the avifauna she treasured, aroused her activism (which already had been evident in other social injustices she championed), so she reached out to her cousin and fellow conservationist Minna to join her in starting a movement to disempower the plume trade.

The goal of their movement would be to organize a boycott of the mercantile trade industry. Their strategy was to engage and empower other women to join their movement.

They reviewed Boston's social register to garner names of other prominent women and planned a roster of recurring, informative tea-meetings to which they invited these women. They distributed circulars beseeching women to terminate the purchasing and wearing of feathered hats, to boycott, and welcomed them to join their movement for the protection of birds.

It would be the first American protest in defense of the environment. It would openly challenge the mercantile industry conducted by powerful men. The women knew it could be dangerous for those protesting. But also knew ignoring the devastation to the avifauna, as bird colonies were being wiped out, notably as in Florida, would be more dangerous for America.

Some nine hundred women responded which led Harriet and Minna to formally organize in 1896 as the Massachusetts Audubon Society. The society had a male president, ornithologist William Brewster, and two female vice presidents, Mrs. Louis Agassiz, president of Radcliffe College, and Mrs. Julia J. Irving, president of Wellesley College. Other female-centered Audubon societies began to be formed in more than a dozen states. Results quickly began to manifest themselves.

In just one year, 1897, the society convinced the Massachusetts legislature to vote to outlaw the wild bird feather trade in their state. That same year, Florence Merriam Bailey while a student at Smith College in Northampton, MA, cofounded an Audubon Society in Washington, DC.

Also that year, based on the overwhelming progress of Harriet and Minna's movement, Sara A. Hubbard, director of the Illinois Audubon Society was reported in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to have said: "I expect to live to see the time when the wearing of bird plumage will be a brand of ignorance." Audubon clubs formed by women in Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Iowa, Minnesota, and Rhode Island.

The official Audubon Society journal was founded in 1899 with Mabel Osgood Wright as editor of the Audubon section in which she also reported on the politics of the bird crisis. From the journal's fifteen secretaries, all but one, women, she requested news items to strengthen the movement.

Men were always welcome. In keeping with gender roles of the era, men served as presidents with women as vice presidents and secretaries doing most of the hands-on work. That said, in 1898 when a group of women met in Fairfield, Connecticut, to form the Connecticut Audubon Society, they elected Mabel Osgood Wright as president.

Hemenway continued to help establish a national network of the societies which led to more laws across the nation. And across the pond, it was reported that Queen Victoria announced she would no longer wear feathers.

At the 1899 annual meeting of the New York Audubon Society, a letter strongly in favor of protecting birds was read by then governor of New York and avid bird-watcher, Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1900, Congress passed the Lacey Act prohibiting trade in illegally taken wildlife.

In 1901, Florida voted to protect the badly decimated nesting spots in the Everglades.

In 1903, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order protecting Pelican Island in Florida as a federal bird reservation, the first of many to come.

In 1908, The *Greensboro, NC Patriot* underscored the importance of federal protection for songbirds.

In 1912, Minnie Moore Wilson wrote in *Forest and Stream*, suggesting well-to-do women in America stop wearing feathers in their hats.

In 1913, the Weeks-McLean Act passed in Congress outlawed market hunting and forbade interstate transport of birds.

In 1914, despite regulations, the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* reported that boxes of grebes were being sent to California factories labeled "coyote skins."

In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed which made it "unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, possess, sell, purchase, barter, import, export or transport any migratory bird." It literally ended the poaching of birds for the bird and feather hat commerce and mercantile trade industry.

Thanks to women for the birds.

Sources:

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