

**PROFILES OF NEW ENGLAND ORNITHOLOGISTS:
RUTH P. EMERY, THE ORIGINAL VOICE OF AUDUBON**

by James Baird

Editor's Note. James Baird spoke about Ruth Emery in a memorial service held in her honor on September 10, 1991, at Bigelow Chapel, Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Bird Observer is pleased to publish Jim's eloquent tribute.

Ruth Price McMurtrie, a child of the nineteenth century, was born on August 5, 1898, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, of a Scottish father and an Irish mother. She was proud of her Celtic heritage but clearly favored the patrimonial donation. Although Ruth took frequent trips in search of birds, she never strayed far from home, and her death on August 14, 1991, occurred in the same city in which she was born. Given that Ruth was born a scant two years after the founding of the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), her life, in a sense, paralleled that of the Society, even though it took forty-six years for them to find each other.

Ruthie was a bonnie lassie with her thick red hair, quick intellect, and vivacious personality, and it was a lucky Maurice Emery who captured her heart, and whom she married on September 1, 1925. They bought a house in Wollaston where Ruth lived for nearly sixty-five years, and which became a welcome beacon to generations of birders.

Maurice and Ruth had wide-ranging interests and delved deeply into whatever subject they were immersed at the moment—whether glass, china, antiques, or stamps. Ruth was an accomplished artist whose talent found expression in the tole trays and wooden pantry boxes that she so beautifully decorated. It was no small recognition of her artistic ability that her work was accepted for sale at the Women's Industrial Union in Boston during the 1930s and 1940s. Ruth's artistry also found outlet in crewel work, flower arranging, and quilting. On one occasion a quilt that she designed was exhibited in a storefront window of R.H. Stearns in downtown Boston.

Maurice and Ruth discovered birds around 1943. One of their first field trips was to the Society's Moose Hill Sanctuary in Sharon, which, according to Ruth, she first visited wearing a hat and veil! In 1944, Ruth got a job as secretary at the Society's headquarters at 155 Newbury Street in Boston. There she met her friend and lifelong birding companion, Margaret Argue (who had started a few months earlier) and gradually became acquainted with most of the leading birders in the Boston region. She and Maurice became increasingly active birders. Ruth slowly broadened her official duties to such nonsecretarial activities as coleading the MAS bus trips with Margaret Argue, and she undoubtedly got trapped into answering the many calls that came into the office from an insatiably curious public, especially around baby bird season. She and

Maurice joined the OCBC (ostensibly the Old Colony Bird Club, but affectionately dubbed by its members as the Outer Circle Bird Club) that was started as a counter to the male-only Nuttall Ornithological Club. Ludlow Griscom characteristically invited himself to OCBC activities, thereby putting Ruth (and the other members) in close association with the country's most experienced field ornithologist. This association, of course, greatly accelerated the Emerys' interests and abilities.



Tragically in 1951, while attending a Nuttall Club meeting, Maurice suffered a stroke which subsequently proved fatal. Thankfully, Ruth Emery was surrounded with solicitous and caring friends from MAS and the birding community who helped her through the trying months that followed. As a consequence, Audubon and birds became increasingly important to Ruth.

But it was the Voice of Audubon that thrust Ruth Emery into the limelight. The Voice was the product of a meeting between Griscom, the Argues, and the Cottrells, all of whom were, to say the least, active birders and all of whom thought there was a need for some sort of bird-reporting service. Henry Parker, another active birder who just happened to work for the New England Telephone Company, was contacted, and the Voice of Audubon (KENmore 6-4050) came into being in December 1954. A great success from its inception, the early years were particularly exciting. Not only was the Voice greeted with enthusiasm by birders, but it achieved considerable notoriety through demonstrations at sales meetings and boardrooms all across the country (and abroad) where it was presented as an example of the new communications frontier. Ruth was perfect for the job with her sure knowledge, her measured pace, and her clear diction; Ruth Emery was the Voice of Audubon for fifteen years.

By this time Ruth had already acquired a reputation as a skilled field birder, but it was her meticulous and methodical recordkeeping that garnered her the most admiration from the birding community. Records flowed in a constant stream from all over the Commonwealth and beyond to the one person who could assimilate, collate, and prepare them for publication in the *Records of New England Birds* and *Audubon Field Notes*, which she coedited for a number of years. During these most productive years she also wrote articles on birds for the various Society publications and occasional news releases on birds. Long after she officially retired from MAS in 1973, Ruth was actively involved in

assembling and collating records for *Bird Observer* and *American Birds*. Recognition of her preeminence among birders came when she was one of five women elected as the first women members of the Nuttall Ornithological Club in 1974.

Ruth had an engaging personality and quick wit, and despite the occasional acerbic remark, Ruth inspired great loyalty from her friends and fans. The truth of this statement finds credence in the fact that Ruth never drove a car, yet could be found out birding every weekend or wandering about the country on her vacations in pursuit of birds. Of course, being the lady that she was, Ruth never asked to go birding, but she never lacked for birding companions and spent very few weekends languishing from a lack of attention, a remarkable testament to someone who remained an active birder well into her eighties. Having lived for fourscore and thirteen years, the list of Ruth's friends is long, but we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge those special friends of long standing like Sue Loring, Margaret and Arthur Argue, and Wallace and Priscilla Bailey, whose generosity and camaraderie were one of the constants in Ruth's life. Then we have the Higginbothams, Sib and Ruth, who were not only old friends, but whose efforts on her behalf in the last few years of her long life stretched the bonds of friendship to limits seldom reached but by the privileged few.

For more than half of Ruth P. Emery's long life, birds and birding were her passion. It was, therefore, not surprising when she made it known that because of this, and because of her high regard for the Society, she wanted to leave the proceeds from the sale of her house to the MAS. After discussion she decided that she wanted to establish a Fund for Field Ornithology, the income from which would be used to carry on those activities, such as the Voice of Audubon, which were dearest to Ruth's heart. I cannot think of a more fitting memorial and one that brings to full closure a rich and productive life while at the same time offering unlimited opportunity for future expansion. On behalf of birders everywhere and the MAS in particular, I want to acknowledge our deep debt to this truly remarkable lady.

JAMES BAIRD is himself a distinguished New England ornithologist. He has published over fifty articles on birds and mammals, authored three subspecies accounts of Savannah Sparrow in Bent's *Life Histories of North American Cardinals, Grosbeaks, Buntings, Towhees, Finches, Sparrows, and Allies*, and served as the editor of *Records of New England Birds* from 1963 to 1968. He recently retired as vice-president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), having held several positions in the organization since 1961. As director of the MAS tours department, he has led or coled tours throughout the world. Jim describes himself as a "lifelong birder and ardent (but discouraged) conservationist."