

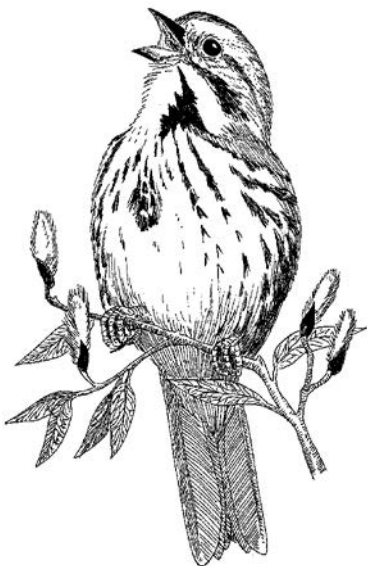
Margaret Morse Nice: “...a very important individual – ”

Edward H. Burt, Jr.

Beginnings

The story of Margaret Morse Nice, destined to become one of the most distinguished ornithologists of the twentieth century, begins in 1883. On September 26 of that year J. A. Allen, Elliot Coues, and William Brewster, all members of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, gathered 23 other prominent American ornithologists at the American Museum of Natural History and founded the American Ornithologists' Union. A little more than two months later, on December 6, 1883, Margaret Morse Nice was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, the fourth child and second daughter of Anson Daniel Morse, a professor of history at Amherst College, and Margaret Duncan Morse, a graduate of Mount Holyoke Seminary. The two seemingly disparate events would become interconnected.

Margaret's childhood home was surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens and groves of fruit trees that reflected her parents' shared passion for gardening. Beyond the garden wall were fields and woods through which the family walked on Sunday afternoons, Margaret gathering flowers and her mother teaching her their names. In 1891 she received her first bird book, John B. Grant's *Our Common Birds and How to Know Them*. With this book, one small girl began to identify the birds in her yard, and in the spring of 1893, at the age of nine, she opened her lifelong diary of birds with an entry on the Song Sparrow. Sample entries from 1896 include:



SONG SPARROW BY GEORGE C. WEST

“Oct 29 Juncos abundant. Kinglets have come. Warblers have passed.

Nov. 9 This is the time to find nests. Saw 47 of them from school to home. Climbed up a maple and got a Vireo's nest.”

That same fall she wrote a small booklet, *Fates and Fortunes of Fruit-Acre Birds*, in which she reported on the reproductive success of twelve nests of American Robins, Chipping Sparrows, and Least Flycatchers that nested near her home. From 45 eggs twenty young fledged.

In 1898 she entered the ninth grade where she found the curriculum to be largely review. “Time ... hung heavy on my hands, and I amused myself... writing a book ... ‘Bird Families,’ its author, ‘Hermit Peckwood,’ a conceited Hairy Woodpecker.” There are nine

families: “Climbers, Fruit Lovers, Seed Eaters, Flycatchers, Ground Builders, Pensile Nests, Tinys, Larges, Cannibals” (Nice 1979, p. 10). Cowbirds, shrikes, Blue Jays, crows, hawks, owls, and eagles belonged to this last family and received some extensive, if uncomplimentary coverage.

In September 1901 she entered Mount Holyoke College, where she used the Wednesday all-day holiday to explore the surrounding countryside on horseback, while her classmates devoted themselves to studying. She graduated in 1906, having spent a year abroad studying French, German, Italian, and Latin. A year later she was awarded a fellowship in biology to attend Clark University, one of only two women graduate students.

Counting Birds

She joined the American Ornithologists’ Union in 1907 and attended her first meeting in 1908. At that Cambridge meeting she listened enthusiastically to papers by Ernest T. Seton, C. Hart Merriam, Frank M. Chapman, and Edward H. Forbush, among others. She attended a paper, “The tagging of wild birds as a means of studying their movements,” by Leon J. Cole, later the first President of the American Bird-Banding Association. From across the room the shy graduate student admired William Brewster for his leading role in avian conservation. Toward the end of the meeting, Brewster hosted the gentlemen of the AOU at a reception at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. The ladies were invited to tea at the home of Mrs. Charles F. Batchelder, wife of the retiring president of the Union who was, of course, at the museum reception.

Her master’s thesis, a detailed study of the diet of the Northern Bobwhite, was published in the *Journal of Economic Entomology* in 1910. This first scientific publication revealed her skill in organizing data into readable form, her exquisite use of figures and tables to support her points, and her exceptional bibliographic ability.

In 1909 she married Leonard Blaine Nice, a fellow graduate student, who received his Ph.D. in 1911, in which year they moved to Cambridge, where Blaine, as he was known to family and friends, had an appointment as instructor at Harvard Medical School (Trautman 1977). In 1913 they moved to Norman, Oklahoma, where Blaine was professor and head of the Physiology Department at the University of Oklahoma. In 1915 Margaret returned to Clark University to receive her M.A. in zoology, completed six years earlier.

From 1910 to 1933, the years in which her daughters were born and grew up, Margaret was much interested in child psychology. During those years she published 18 articles on the development of language and imagination in children. These studies, like her studies of birds, involve close observation of fundamental processes.

Margaret reentered ornithology after reading a letter published in the Norman, Oklahoma, paper that advocated beginning the open season on Mourning Doves in September because the doves were no longer nesting. She knew this to be untrue and took up her binoculars and pen. From 1921 to 1924 she published six papers on

Mourning Doves as well as numerous papers on behavior, ecology, and distribution of birds.

In 1920 the family bought a second-hand Dodge touring car and began to survey the state's birds on camping trips sponsored in part by the Oklahoma Department of Geological and Natural History. Margaret rejoined the American Ornithologists' Union and attended the meeting in Washington, D.C., in November 1920, where she presented "The Nesting of Mourning Doves at Norman, Oklahoma", which she later published with the title "A study of the nesting of Mourning Doves" (Nice 1922). She was the only woman to present a paper. However, her meeting with Dr. Harry C. Oberholser of the Biological Survey was the most significant event of the trip. They had corresponded about her distributional study of Oklahoma's birds. He showed her the Survey's bibliography of Oklahoma birds, provided the names of collaborators, and carefully reviewed the species list she and Blaine had compiled. "... what a field day Dr. Oberholser did have in changing scientific names and adding subspecific labels! Seven of our birds he rejected, but later all but one were reinstated. ... I resolved then and there that no bulletin would be written by us without a great deal more field work" (Nice 1979, p. 59). She credits Dr. Oberholser with gently introducing her to the care and analysis that characterize the science of ornithology. Back in Oklahoma, the family resumed their camping trips with a new intensity of purpose, and in 1924 she and Blaine published "The Birds of Oklahoma." Seven years later she published a completely revised and expanded edition of which George Sutton (1967, p. ix) wrote: "[it] has been of inestimable value not alone for the information it contains but for the interest it has aroused in the conservation of wild life."

In 1921 she joined the Wilson Ornithological Society and attended her first Wilson meeting in 1927, at which time she reported her observations at a nest of Myrtle Warblers. Publication of these observations in 1930 reflected her growing interest in behavior and population dynamics, an interest that soon became a passion. She became increasingly active in the Wilson Ornithological Society, first as a Councilor. In 1935 she was elected Second Vice-President of the Wilson Ornithological Society and succeeded to its Presidency in 1937, the first woman ever to preside over a major ornithological society. Following her presidency, she served as an associate editor of the *Bulletin* from 1939 to 1949.

Bands, Behavior, and Song Sparrows

In 1927 Blaine accepted a position as professor of physiology at The Ohio State University Medical School. The family moved to a house on a bluff overlooking the weedy floodplain of the Olentangy River.

"On March 26 [1928] I ... banded a very important individual – my first Song Sparrow He owned the territory next to our house and on May 22 I found his nest with three eggs, two of which hatched on May 28 and 29. For five days I spent a total of 18 hours watching the family. ... the two babies were carried off by some enemy the night of June 2..." (Nice 1979, p. 91).

So ended Margaret Morse Nice's first field season in her landmark study of Song Sparrows nesting on the floodplain below her home on the Olentangy River just north of Columbus, Ohio. The season had been short, but Uno, that first Song Sparrow, had been banded and color-banded, as had his mate, Una, and their ebullient neighbor, 4M. All were to return, as would many of their children and grandchildren, to share their lives for the next eight years with the ever patient and attentive Margaret Nice. Over those years she pioneered the use of colored leg bands to mark individual birds and follow each life. She learned to recognize 4M by his distinctive melodies and realized that each male had his own distinctive theme and variations, but that each also learned and sang some of the variations of his neighbors. Later Margaret explored song learning and behavioral development in hand-raised Song Sparrows that roamed freely throughout her home. Individually marked birds enabled her to explore site fidelity of males, females, and offspring and the social fabric that bound neighbor to neighbor.

Her interest in banding as an important ornithological tool led her to help organize the Inland Bird Banding Association in 1922 and to serve as an associate editor of *Inland Bird Banding News* from 1946 until her death in 1974. Her wish to make the important contributions of European naturalists available to American banders stimulated her, in 1933, to write her first reviews for the Recent Literature section of *Bird-Banding*, now the *Journal of Field Ornithology*. Later that year she was appointed review editor. As editor and author, she provided thoughtful, analytical reviews of selected ornithological articles. She summarized her vision of the Recent Literature reviews in the following succinct statement (Nice 1934a, p. 49). "It has been decided as an experiment to group reviews when feasible under subjects, which are of importance to bird-students primarily for the purpose of suggesting problems for study by banding methods."

She edited the Recent Literature section until 1943, during which time she wrote some 1800 reviews, many of these commenting on articles written in foreign languages, of which she spoke four fluently. She continued to write and contribute reviews until 1971, 3313 reviews in all.

In 1933 she published two important papers. "The theory of territorialism and its development" appeared (Nice 1933a) in the American Ornithologists' Union's "*Fifty Years Progress of American Ornithology 1883-1933*." The second was her first major paper on Song Sparrows, written in German, and published in two parts (Nice 1933b, 1934b) in the *Journal für Ornithologie* at the invitation of Dr. Erwin Stresemann, one of Europe's leading ornithologists. Her many previous articles had established her as an ornithologist, but the articles on territory and Song Sparrows established her as an international scholar.

Over the next three years she spent innumerable hours in the field gathering data, sometimes from before sunrise until after dark. She combed the Ohio State libraries, the Ohio Historical Society library, and Columbus public libraries for information. Finally, in August 1935, after another successful field season, she sat down at her desk and began to write "*Studies in the life history of the Song Sparrow*" (1937). Ten

months later on June 25, 1936 she wrote in her journal: “It has taken one solid year of work writing it up, ... Have done almost no field work for a year, no trips, ...very little other writing ... Well, it’s an achievement” (Nice 1979, p. 151).

Of her achievement Jean Delacour, noted French ornithologist wrote:

“In its form, this book is a model of clarity; in its substance, it is perhaps the most important contribution yet published to our knowledge of the life of a species” (Delacour 1937, p. 656).

She “saw so much in what appeared common to so many.”

In 1937 she was elected a Fellow of the American Ornithologists’ Union, only the second woman so honored. Later that same year she and Blaine moved to Chicago, where he was to remain as Professor of Physiology and Chairman of the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology, and the Chicago Medical School, until his retirement in 1952.

With the move Margaret lost the ready access to a field site that had been so important to her observational studies. She filled her time reading the European literature, writing reviews, analyzing data collected earlier in Ohio and Oklahoma, and the family continued to make summer visits to Grey Rocks, their special place in New England. Her record of the warblers she observed there conveys the peace she found: “I was lucky enough to find two nests of the Black-throated Green Warbler, both while the females were incubating. This warbler has always held a warm place in my heart because of the charm of his chief song – *trees, trees, murmuring trees* – a delightful and unforgettable little message that seems to express the very spirit of a drowsy afternoon among the hemlocks.”

Back in Chicago she turned increasingly to the synthesis of data and ideas. In 1938 she attended the International Ornithological Congress in Rouen and Paris, then spent a month in Altenberg with Konrad Lorenz, founder of the science of animal behavior and winner, in 1973, of the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology. In 1938 she published an excellent article, in German, on the effect of temperature on Song Sparrow activity along with an important review of the biological significance of bird weights (Nice 1938). At the urging of friends she wrote a popular account of her avian studies “*The Watcher at the Nest*,” which was published by Macmillan in 1939 and reprinted in 1967. Also in 1939 she published “The social kumpan and the Song Sparrow” in which she introduced Lorenz’s ideas to an American audience. In 1941 she published an extended review of territoriality in birds, which further developed ideas first advanced in her 1933 review.

In 1942 she began work on the second volume of her Song Sparrow work, which focused on behavior. At the annual meeting of the American Ornithologists’ Union she was awarded the Brewster Medal, “... as the author ... of the most important work relating to the birds of the Western Hemisphere ...” for her first volume on the life of the Song Sparrow.

Following publication of her second volume in 1943, Ernst Mayr (1944) wrote:


“This treatise is far superior to anything of the kind that has been previously attempted. Many of the chapters ... are complete treatises in themselves with enough meat in them to fill separate volumes.”

She continued to write reviews for *Bird-Banding* and a variety of behavioral papers throughout the 1940s. In the early 1950s she wrote several articles on the incubation period of birds, culminating in an important review published in 1954. In 1955, at her 50th reunion, Mount Holyoke awarded her an honorary Doctor of Science degree.

She continued to write reviews and short articles and took up sketching. In 1962 she published and illustrated an important monograph on the behavioral development of precocial birds. That same year Elmira College awarded her an honorary Doctor of Science Degree. In his citation Dean Richard Bond wrote: “She used the outdoors near her home as her laboratory and common species of birds as her subjects. In so doing, she joined the ranks of the eminent ornithologists of all time, who saw so much in what appeared common to so many” (Nice 1979, p. 263).

Margaret Morse Nice contributed importantly to our ornithological knowledge. She had published over 250 papers. But equally important, she advocated a philosophy that continues to distinguish the science of ornithology from other scientific pursuits. In 1952 Margaret Morse Nice wrote to a friend:

“The study of nature is a limitless field, the most fascinating pursuit in the world. I feel that the study of ornithology is a wonderful game in which strong sympathy and fellowship reign between the serious participants: we are friends and glad to help one another” (Nice 1979, p. 268).

Let that be her epitaph. 

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He is grateful to the Trustees of Ohio Wesleyan University who supported the scholarly leave that gave him the time to write this sketch of the life and accomplishments of Margaret Morse Nice, to Dr. Douglas Causey and Harvard University for hosting him during his leave, and to William E. Davis, Jr. for leaving him no choice but to write this tribute, which he has thoroughly enjoyed writing.

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