

IMAGES PAINTED IN WORDS

Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of the Birds of Ohio

by Joy M. Kiser

It is safe to assume that most Ohio birders are familiar with the story of the family of Nelson E. Jones from Circleville and their book, *Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of the Birds of Ohio* that was completed in 1886. Perhaps they have seen images from the work published in articles, on web sites, or in my book, *America's Other Audubon* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2012). Fewer individuals, though, have had the opportunity to read the field notes from the Jones' book, most of which was written by Nelson Jones' son Howard, who had also gathered the nests and eggs for the illustrations.

Nests and Eggs, as it is popularly referred to, was always revered for its lithographs and never for its text. In fact, the editors of the ornithological journals who reviewed the work encouraged the Joneses to omit the text altogether because it offered no new scientific information. Still, we Ohioans can be thankful that the Joneses did not accept that advice. The paragraphs they wrote offered charming vignettes into the lives of the family and into the magical years in Ohio before vast swaths of forest were destroyed and avian populations were diminished.

Here are some examples. Howard wrote:



"I raised from a nestling a male Cooper's Hawk, and kept him until he was nearly a year old. He was an interesting pet, full of cunning and boldness. He became so tame that he had the liberty of the town. He would wander about from tree to house-top, and would sometimes be gone a whole day.

"He was very fond of buggy-riding, and would sit on the dash-board for hours manifesting the greatest interest in the objects passed. I intended to teach him to hunt, and was making rapid progress with his lessons, when I was obliged to leave for college. Some months later a letter brought me news of his death. A boy had killed him with a stone."



"A catbird which some years since built for several seasons in the yard of a friend, so excelled as a vocalist and mimic, that he attracted the attention and admiration of the whole neighborhood. At intervals throughout the day, from a favorite perch upon a pear-tree, he would drop his tail and wings, loosen his feathers until they seemed to stand almost on end, and assuming a comical, semi-quizzical look, pour forth volumes of as pure notes as ever came from a feathery throat.

"But it was in the early morning and late evening that he made his best efforts. After the sun had gone down, and the western heavens were aglow with soft red light, he seemed in his happiest mood. At such a



time, seated upon his favorite limb, he commanded the attention of a large audience, which he would first please, then astonish, then disappoint, then enrapture, then amuse, and finally, just as twilight was fading into night, as if it was a fitting tail-piece to his opera-bouffe, he would convulse his hearers with laughter by mimicking the crow of a young cochin rooster confined in a coop nearby."



"In 1875 a hummingbird flew into my room through an open window, and was captured without injury in a butterfly net. A cage was constructed of mosquito bar and the little fellow was imprisoned.

"After a week's confinement he became so tame that at times the liberty of the room was given him. He knew his name, and would come when called and perch upon my finger.

"One chilly winter day I found him unable to sit upon his perch. He had rapidly been losing vitality since the period of their migration had passed. I took him from the cage and placed him in the warm palm of my hand, and procured some hothouse flowers for him. The little fellow, though too weak to stand, endeavored to probe the flowers for their insects and nectar.

"When removed from my hand he would crawl back with the most human expression of a broken heart I have ever seen in a bird. In this position, chosen by himself, my hand continued to warm the little body until it ceased to live. The amount of intelligence and feeling displayed by this little bird was really surprising—so much so that I resolved never again to rob one of that liberty which must be so dear and pleasant."



"One of the prettiest objects I have ever seen in bird-life was a home containing five young orioles. I decided to take two of them, but the remaining ones would not stay in the nest so I brought it along with me and hung it up in my room.

"At night the little orphans would cuddle into this feather-lined basket and sleep quietly until dawn. They soon became very tame, and grew rapidly on pounded-beef and hard-boiled egg.

"My sister, Genevieve, now took charge of them, placing them in a cage with a number of other birds. Here they became so gentle and happy that they would fly upon her finger at the door of the cage,

and while perched upon one hand would catch flies imprisoned in the other. At the end of the second year they had to be released because they became so noisy with their song that no one in neighborhood could sleep after daylight.”



“The Cedarbird [Cedar Waxwing] is of beautiful form and feather, and is especially attractive on account of its handsome crest and “wax-tipped” secondaries. The vermilion wax-like tips are most plentiful on old birds, and, in very fine specimens, are not limited to the secondaries, but may be found also on the tail feathers. In two instances I have found four secondaries beautifully tipped in nestlings.

“Their intelligence is of low order. They are great gormandizers—fearless when hungry, and stupid when satiated. They destroy immense quantities of cherries and small berries; and thousands are shot every year by fruit-growers, who are not far sighted enough to see that the large crops are often due to the Cedarbird, which, in seasons of the year when berries are wanting, feed upon destructive insects, or their eggs and larvae.”



“After the young are safely reared, the life of the Chimney Swift becomes a great holiday. All day they fly about in scattered communities, and at night collect in some favorite chimney to roost. It is an entertaining sight to see them, as night approaches, hastening from every direction to their home.

“At first, but few are to be seen; but, as the evening glow begins to fade, more and more plentiful they become, delaying the roosting, however, until the last moment. They fly in circles around and around the chimney. Now a small band separates from the rest and flies off to prolong its frolic, now it returns and joins the throng, which resembles leaves carried up in a whirlwind more than a flock of birds.

“Now some sleepy fellow hangs over the chimney, as if hesitating or measuring the fall, then, suddenly, partially closing his wings, down he tumbles; a dozen follow in rapid succession. A short interval, and another group falls in, others follow, and still others. Now something disturbs those within, and outcome fifty or more, and resume their circling flight.

“Finally, just as darkness comes on, they fall into the chimney in a column. Thus, to the ordinary observer, ends for the night the incessant chatter and the whirling flight of this bird-colony; but if, with superhuman power, one could divine the thoughts and emotions, the pleasures and hardships of the lives within that long, dark, and often sooty tube which the Chimney Swallow calls home, what sensational bird-history it would make.”



“Whatever sins may be laid at the door of this [English/House] Sparrow, it must not be forgotten that he did not come here uninvited. In fact, it nearly broke his heart to leave his native land, but having recovered from homesickness he began to show

qualities of pluck and endurance which challenge all bird history. And now, whether we like him or not, he cares but little; all the means which can be used to exterminate him will not avail. He came against his will, but he now likes this free country, and he is prepared to stay.”



“Excelling the spectrum in gorgeous tints, he [the Wood Duck] moves, a perfect rainbow of color, with equal ease and grace among the lilies of the pond or branches of the forest tree. Upon his head he wears a crest of iridescent green and purple, and narrow, parallel, curved, white, superciliary, and postocular stripes.

“If the nest is situated so that the Ducklings can climb out they leave it as soon as they are two or three days old, by jumping to the ground or water beneath; but if the nest is in a cavity so deep that they cannot climb to the exit, or if unwilling to leave of their own accord, the most curious thing in the life-history of the Wood Duck occurs.

“The mother-bird appreciating the fact that they must leave such confined quarters, takes her downy brood in her bill, one at a time, and throws them out of the tree to alight the best they can. It is a very interesting sight to see an old duck thus engaged in launching her young ones.

“The little fellows, as they obey the law of gravity, extend their legs and wings in an irregular and comical manner; now one turns a summersault, another spins around like a falling autumn leaf, and still another, parachute like, descends with a sailing motion, all striking with a soft thud if upon ground, or a sharp splash if in water; and as if the breath was entirely knocked out of them, remain quiet a moment upon the rippled surface. Soon they recover from the shock and boldly strike out with their paddles as if delighted with the qualities of H₂ [sic] and thankful to be released from their previous home at any price.”



“While waiting for the coming of ducks, I have often been amused by the confiding nature of this Carolina Rail [now called Sora], and also by its curiosity.

“I have had them come up to me and peck my gum boots, and play with the gun barrel as a bantam rooster does when teased. One instance in particular I remember, I was having such sport playing with one of these birds that I refrained several times from shooting at Wood Duck.

“I have frequently captured them alive, and have kept them for months. They do well in confinement, soon becoming very tame. I kept one all winter some years ago, and fed it chiefly upon minnows. They are adept fishermen, resorting to the same tactics for their capture as do the Herons.

Nelson Jones was a passionate hunter since boyhood and Howard enticed his father to contribute text for the remarks about the Northern Bobwhite and Wild Turkey:

"The Bob-White is a permanent resident of Ohio. When paired, the two are constant companions, ever watchful over the welfare of each other. They share equally the duties and responsibilities of wedded life and from the birth of the first offspring to their settlement in the world, as faithful father and mother, are unceasing protectors and providers for the family. This extraordinary strength of attachment, and exhibition of natural affection, has often attracted my attention.

"I once discovered by accident, a nest nicely concealed by some tufts of grass, after being placed under the projecting end of a fence rail. At this time there were in it five eggs. The number increased daily until twenty-three eggs filled the nest, and incubation began.

"All went on happily, until one morning there was evidently great distress in this little household. The male bird was sounding his anxious alarm;—he went hurriedly from one part of the farm to that of every other—sometimes running—sometimes flying—stopping a moment here—a moment there—calling at the top of his voice for his mate, in that peculiar tone which denotes distress.

"His unanswered cry soon told the tale—some accident—some ruthless hawk—some sneaking cat, or some other enemy had captured and destroyed his faithful companion. He kept up his call several hours, sometimes coming close after me, making a low, chattering noise, as if suspicious something could be told—that I could tell where his love had gone.

"Far from it, I was also in search—in search of anything to give a clue to the unfeeling wretch that had done the bloody deed.

"About noon of that day, he ceased his noise, and, hoping his mate had returned, I hastened to the nest again; but in this was again disappointed.

"The reason, however, for his stillness was explained. He was on the eggs, keeping life in the prospective family. For several days he left his charge frequently, to make further search and call for the missing partner. One morning I stopped as usual to see how the little widower was getting along, and found nothing but a huddle of egg shells. Every egg had been hatched. Not far from the nest I heard a low chit-chit-chit, and soon discovered Bob with his brood.

"He continued to care for the young, as I can testify from our frequent meetings, and reared a fine large covey, which received protection and sympathy, during the following winter, of all the farm hands and sportsmen who knew him and his well-behaved family."



"I once captured a full-grown young female [turkey] that had been winged several weeks before. The poor bird was almost dead from starvation and injury, yet life seemed so dear that she cried most piteously when she found resistance useless. The broken end of the wing was amputated, and the vermin vanquished, and the prisoner placed in a large open pen by the side of the walk to the barn.

"In the pen was a small box, large enough to afford the timid creature a place of concealment, a roost, and other measures of comfort. Here she was kept more than a year, with every attention to have her become accustomed to a new mode of life and presence of friends around her; yet she would remain concealed during the day, and would not even take food or water excepting at twilight; and then only in the absence of every object of fear.

"I placed her in a garden overgrown with an abundance of bushes of currants, gooseberries, raspberries, etc., interspersed with strawberry plants, and with her a pair of tame turkeys. Here she remained over two years without manifesting the least inclination to make the acquaintance of her well-raised relatives.

"A misplaced board on the fence surrounding the place of confinement finally gave her that boon she so much desired. It was the beginning of summer when she obtained her freedom, and was seen no more until the following spring, when she was noticed several times near the tame turkeys, and this always very early in the morning. That she could get there at that hour in the day, or get there at all, from the timber-land, near a mile distant, through farms and fences, as she was unable to fly over an ordinary fence, seemed most remarkable."



The prospectus for *Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of the Birds of Ohio* indicated that it would contain images of the nests of eggs of Ohio's 130 summer resident birds. Howard wrote that he had had firsthand experience with 109 of them. For the species he knew little about, he was forced to borrow quotations from other sources.

Toward the end of the project it became increasingly more difficult for him to collect specimens that were either too inaccessible or could not be found. To complete the book, Howard traveled to Washington, DC to make sketches from the collections in the Smithsonian.

The Jones' work fell just short of the goal, depicting 129 species of Ohio birds—the Cerulean Warbler was omitted because no specimen could be found.

Joy M. Kiser was born in Akron and grew up in Norton, Ohio. She began her professional career as the librarian for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History in 1995. In 2001, she moved to the Washington, DC, area to become the librarian for National Endowment for the Arts. That library was eliminated in 2006, and she was then employed as a writer/editor for the U. S. Department of Homeland Security and later for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. In 2013, Joy returned to Ohio and is currently a Content Research Specialist for the United Way of Greater Cleveland.