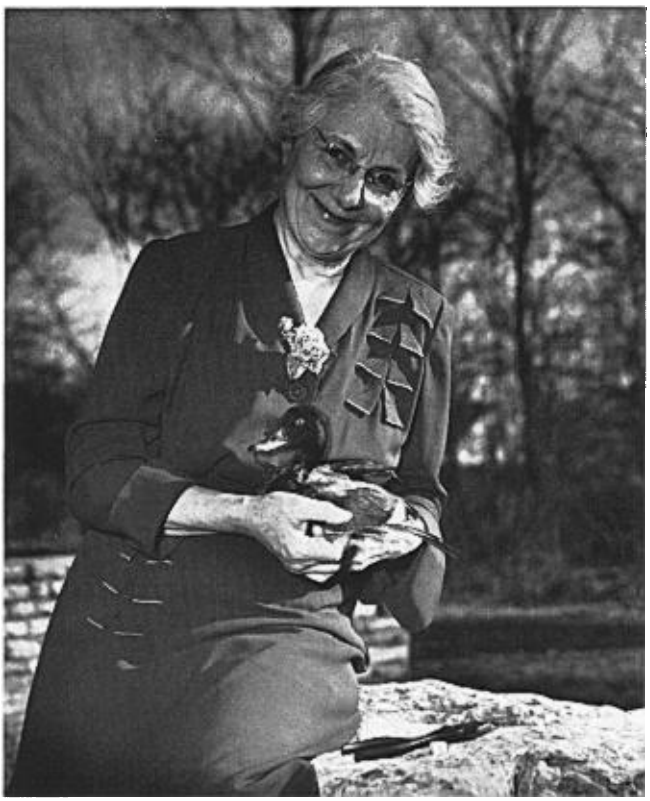

AMELIA RUDOLPH LASKEY, 1885-1973

(Photograph by Paul A. Moore, Tennessee Conservation Department)

IN MEMORIAM: AMELIA RUDOLPH LASKEY

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AMELIA RUDOLPH LASKEY died suddenly at her home in Nashville, Tennessee, December 19, 1973. Her death removed from the ornithological community a dedicated student, an objective observer, and a sensitive naturalist.

Amelia Laskey was not formally trained in science or philosophy, but she learned what an objective observation was and became a hard taskmaster both for herself and others when she came to apply those demands to bird study. She made the fields, the meadows, the wooded parks, and her own four acres of wild garden her laboratory. She used banding to set the controls for her studies and proceeded to amass a great volume of unimpeachable data on the natural history of birds.

Amelia Laskey was born December 12, 1885 in Bloomington, Indiana, the daughter of Susan and Frank Rudolph. Her family moved to Chicago while she was an infant. Of her forebears we know only that her family had recently come to this country from Germany. In Chicago her father operated successfully a well-drilling and construction business. Her mother was a devoted gardener who displayed her blossoms in competition and won many awards. Amelia attended primary and high schools in Chicago and was later employed as a stenographer at the Oliver Typewriter Company. As a young lady she taught a Sunday school class for young girls at the Ogden Park Methodist Church and was active in many church programs. She and Fredrick C. Laskey, also a Chicagoan, were married in 1911. Ten years later Mr. and Mrs. Laskey moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where he became manager of the Nashville office of Swift and Company and she was soon to begin her study of ornithology. As residents of Nashville both she and her husband were active in the Methodist Church. They had no children.

What kindled Amelia's first interest in natural history is not at present apparent. Evidently her mother's devotion to gardening influenced her and, even though little is known of Amelia's early aptitudes, we know she began to build her own wild garden immediately after she and Mr. Laskey moved into their permanent home. She made that garden a natural home for wild things that grew riotously and with apparent abandon, but with an indescribably delicate beauty. Every visitor to the garden carried away an indelible, unforgettable impression of its loveliness. The fact that she called her homesite "Blossomdell" could indicate that her first interest was in wild flowers rather than birds. As the years went by cultivation of natural foods for birds

became important in the garden but never overshadowed the beauty of the landscape. In those early years she was active in a garden club, played bridge frequently with a group of friends, and read papers before members of a literary society. It was a friend in one of these groups who introduced her to the Bird Club. Amelia became a member of the Tennessee Ornithological Society in 1928 and a note dated February 13, 1928 says, "Attended Bird Club. Very interesting and my first meeting." A note on April 21 of the same year reads, "Had first hummingbird of the year." Her first published paper, entitled "Attracting birds to the home," appeared in the Tennessee Ornithological Society's magazine, The Migrant (1931). From this apparent beginning, her study of birds matured and became an obsessive mental pursuit, an all-consuming force that pervaded her life in later years.

Life history studies became the avenue through which she made her most significant contributions to ornithology. Over the 40-year span, 1933–73, subjects of published papers included more than ten species on which she reported her personal observations. Her notes on the courtship and nest life of Bewick's and Carolina Wrens were recorded in papers published in The Migrant (1947) and Bird-Banding (1948). Her study of the Cardinal extended from 1931 to 1943 and involved 1621 banded Cardinals resulting in a paper on the development of song, defense of territory, and longevity records of this species appearing in The Wilson Bulletin (1944). A summary of observations on 327 banded Tufted Titmice, accumulated between 1931 and 1956, appeared in Bird-Banding (1957). Her notes on Yellow-shafted Flicker life history were published in The Migrant (1943) and a short article describing a peculiar feeding habit of Downy Woodpeckers appeared in The Wilson Bulletin (1966). Her papers on the Mockingbird, Blue Jay, Brown-headed Cowbird, and Eastern Bluebird require special comment.

The Mockingbird commanded Mrs. Laskey's attention from the beginning of her study of birds. Ten papers on this species, published over a 30-year interval, report on the development of song, an instance of bigamy, a seven-egg clutch, and a 9-year-old wild bird and his five mates, in addition to treatment of defense of territory and mating behavior. Of three papers on the Mockingbird published in The Auk the last, "On breeding biology of the Mockingbird," appearing in 1962, summarized her 30-year study of this species. In this paper she gives her interpretation of the Mockingbird's "dance" and of "wing-flashing," and she treats briefly the Mockingbird she kept captive from 9 days of age until it died 15 years and 4 months later. "Honeychile" literally ruled the roost on Graybar Lane and was a favorite in the Laskey household. His primitive notes, his attainment of sexual maturity, his

reaction to free-flying Mockingbirds, and his illnesses through 15 years contributed both to the pleasure and the erudition of his mistress.

Blue Jays, after a fashion, charmed Amelia. She defended them and their ways whenever the occasion required. In 1958 she published her summary of observations on 1000 banded Blue Jays, their migrations, nesting habits, behavior, and age records; and in her last paper she gave a brief account of her experience with albinism in Blue Jays. Five completely albinistic Blue Jays of two broods, one in 1959, the other in 1972, came to her hands. In addition, she recounted an instance reported from the same part of town 45 years previously. From the first brood of three albinos she raised two that were spectacular specimens; two from the 1972 brood were equally dramatic as they grew to be adult, white, pink-eyed Blue Jays.

Mrs. Laskey's paper on "Cowbird behavior" (Wilson Bull. 1950) attracted the attention of her colleagues. In her study of numerous pairs of color-banded Brown-headed Cowbirds she observed only monogamous behavior; she did not observe defense of territory in the usual interpretation of that phrase. In addition to previously described "bill-pointing," Mrs. Laskey saw displays she thought had not been described. These she called "toppling-forward bows" and "peck-gestures," parts of the intimidation display of male cowbirds that establish dominance over other males in the same feeding group. Females exhibited the same displays with the same effect over less dominant females. She observed dominant males "guarding" their mates against the approach of other males, a behavior that Mrs. Laskey called "defense of domain" at the "feeding plot." She recognized this as an expression of "sexual jealousy" and a dispute for dominance or a defense of domain. It was emphasized that in spite of defense of domain by individual birds, groups of cowbirds continued to feed as a flock with males moving between their mates and other males. This paper on cowbirds is probably her most significant publication.

In the future, it may well be established that Amelia Laskey's important contribution to ornithology is the more than 40 years' accumulation of data on nesting of the Eastern Bluebird. Although she published short notes on bluebirds through the years, this material is as yet in the main unanalyzed and unpublished. She was summarizing the material at the time of her death.

In Amelia's banding records, the first Eastern Bluebird appeared August 5, 1931, a female trapped in a nest box in her garden. This bird was followed by two males banded 6 weeks later, and she was launched on a study that would absorb her interest for the remainder of her years. In 1934 she noted that one male bluebird had four dif-

ferent mates with as many broods in the same nest box; in 1935 she recorded that one mated pair had two broods in two different boxes. More important in the Laskey bluebird calendar is April 25, 1936, the banding date to which the location Warner Park is first attached. This municipally owned, 2000-acre park with its Laskey bluebird boxes became Amelia's most notable laboratory.

During the first year, 1936, she kept 26 boxes under observation; there were 37 boxes in 1938, 56 in 1939, and the number increased to nearly 100 at the height of the study. Amelia kept meticulous records, box after box, week after week, year after year. Her carefully kept notes on the number of eggs laid, the number hatched, the number of birds fledged, repeat and return records, the movements and matings of individual birds, and predation statistics are amazing. It was only with the help of friends that she could continue to inspect bluebird boxes in Warner Park during the nesting season of 1973 when only about 12 boxes were active.

The material from this study, extending from 1936 through 1973, contains a notable volume of nesting data that may yield answers to a variety of questions. Of tremendous interest to geneticists is the fact that some information on third generation progeny might indicate the inheritance pattern of a white-egg-laying character. Here is a study of one species, in a single location, over a 37-year period by the same person. Whatever its impact on the life history of the Eastern Bluebird, this material stands as a remarkable monument to Amelia Laskey.

It may be added that during her last 5 or 6 years when she needed help physically to do the bluebird work, she initiated study "trails" in other areas that friends could help with, and which they carry on at the present time. It is sharply evident, however, that the Warner Park bluebird story will stand as a unit.

Throughout this account of her life history studies, it is clear that bird-banding played a major role. Banding techniques including the use of colored bands set the controls by which objective observations could be made. The Fish and Wildlife Service granted Amelia a bander's permit in 1931 and during the years that followed her energy and enthusiasm for banding never lapsed. The constancy of her operation of traps and her devotion to the accumulation of information about birds and their movements were the chief factors underlying the large number of return and recovery records she established. A number of other banders, introduced to banding by Mrs. Laskey, profited by her precepts.

An exciting recovery was that of a Laskey-banded Chimney Swift. During the late thirties and forties, hundreds of thousands of Chimney

Swifts were banded throughout the eastern United States with the outside chance that the winter home of the swifts would be detected. So it happened in December 1943. One Chimney Swift Mrs. Laskey banded, along with 12 other banded swifts, was killed in Peru 3000 miles from where it was banded. A.O.U. members know well the circuitous route these recovered bands traveled to get back to the Fish and Wildlife Service where their points of origin were known and the story was pieced together. It is a pleasure to recall that one of Amelia's bands played a direct part in this historic event in the saga of bird-banding.

Trapping and banding paved the way for Mrs. Laskey to add a species, the Harris' Sparrow (1934), and two subspecies, Gambel's Sparrow (1934) and Bicknell's Thrush (1940), to the Tennessee state list.

Amelia did not "play" with ornithological pursuits. Whenever she deemed an activity to yield unsound or questionable results, or whenever she thought material might be unwisely used, she withheld her participation. On the other hand, when she saw opportunity to make a well-founded contribution, she applied her energy without stint. Within this last frame fall the time and energy she applied in one instance to night-long counts of migrating birds silhouetted against the moon; in another instance to the collection and study of television tower casualties.

She bought a telescope and entered enthusiastically into the program of "moon watching" as outlined and directed by George Lowery and Robert Newman of Louisiana State University. Two or three nights during the period of the full moon of September, October, and November of at least 2 years would find Amelia and a companion bundled in blankets with telescope, flashlights, and record-sheets perched atop a high building all night long counting birds silhouetted in motion against the moon. As with many other projects that appealed to her this entailed a sheaf of meticulously kept notes.

The first nocturnal casualties detected in Nashville fell in September 1948 at an airport ceilometer light. Amelia immediately began a systematic watch for casualties during the fall when weather conditions would appear set to precipitate an accident. As a result of her efforts and those of F. C. Lincoln, the U.S. Weather Bureau directed its stations all over the country to insert filters over ceilometer lights on nights when birds were falling, thereby eliminating the lights' disastrous effect on migrating birds.

Following these efforts Amelia became a pioneer in watching for casualties at television towers. For 20 years she reported numbers and species counts of ceilometer and television tower casualties. Many new early and late fall migration dates came out of these records. Mrs.

Laskey made every effort to see that these casualties were put to some scientific use. Upon request, specimens were sent to various persons for study purposes and others were used for study locally.

The Laskey library contains a wealth of ornithological references equaled in few university libraries. It was an active library to which local students were warmly welcomed. Amelia lived with her books; they were a great joy to her and a comfort when she felt lonely. This remarkable collection of books reflected her insight into a library's importance to serious study. Found there was a complete set of a first edition of Alexander Wilson's "American ornithology," as well as a later edition of the same work. There were many out-of-print volumes, almost all classical references, most of the state books, and many monographs and treatises, with a new book of national or international interest added almost weekly. Reprints and pamphlets were filed and cross-referenced. One section devoted to plants, animals, spiders, moths, butterflies, and beetles indicates Amelia's active interest in all of natural history. For many years she systematically collected spiders for the American Museum of Natural History.

Amelia Rudolph Laskey became a Member of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1933; in 1951 she was made an Elective Member. Fifteen years later, in 1966, her professional colleagues bestowed one of its highest honors by electing her a Fellow in the society. Amelia was moved by this recognition; she felt deeply honored. Of twelve articles by her published in The Auk, three are important parts of her study on the Mockingbird. Her first note to appear in The Auk reported Harris' and Gambel's Sparrows in Tennessee; and her last publication, discussing albinism in Blue Jays, appeared in The Auk. Amelia enjoyed her association with members of A.O.U. at the annual meetings and was always disappointed when she could not attend. Members attending the meeting at Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1973 may recall her bright smile and may have shared this silver-haired lady's ride in a dune buggy.

Mrs. Laskey was a Life Member of The Wilson Ornithological Society and the Tennessee Ornithological Society. She was a member of the Northeastern Bird-Banding Association and various other regional banding societies, as well as several state societies at least one of which lists her as a Founder. She contributed regularly and generously to a long list of both conservation and philanthropic institutions. She was among the first members of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and was a member of the first Board of Directors of the Children's Museum in Nashville.

In addition to the twelve papers published in The Auk, she has a long list of articles published in The Migrant (104), Bird-Banding (19), The Wilson Bulletin (12), Bird Lore (1), Journal of the Tennessee Academy

of Science (2), Inland News (1), The Chicago Naturalist (1), and The Volunteer Gardener (1). Her papers were widely quoted and reviewed. Her correspondence reflects a dialogue and friendship with a delightful and distinguished group of ornithologists both in this country and abroad.

Most of the above statements about Amelia Laskey's contributions to ornithology are documented by published records. Much of it refers to the hard core of scientific knowledge that she bequeathed to those who come after her. Subjective evaluation of its ultimate worth may vary; its profile may be changed by the chisel of time, but the accuracy of Mrs. Laskey's observations will remain immutable. The account above says nothing of the hundreds of hours of weeding and thinning, the intelligent application of sound principals of ecology that made her garden a gem to behold, a year-round haven for both bird and man. Published records do not document the gentle way Amelia cared for a constant stream of injured birds brought to her doorstep, be it a warbler with a broken wing, a rail, a coot, or a nighthawk that could not fly. Her compassion for birdlife knew no bounds. She kept a crippled Red-tailed Hawk for well over 10 years and an albino Great Horned Owl for 22. A one-winged Cedar Waxwing got fresh grapes from her hand every day for something like 4 years, and through the years hundreds of American Robins and Starlings benefitted from her administrations. The salvage of a single bird's life moved her deeply. The facts of life histories do not record the number of high school students, the list of college and post-graduate students, and the many bird lovers she guided, instructed, and encouraged. This lady lived with quiet modesty and scientific integrity. She was uncommonly retiring and reserved. She shared her vast experience in natural history gladly and was ever generous with her means. Her thousands of ornithological records, her library, and the beauty of her garden cast telling insight into the quiet, introspective, inquisitive, and sensitive nature that was Amelia Rudolph Laskey.

3407 Hopkins Lane, Nashville, Tennessee 37212. Accepted 9 December 1974.