



## **NORTHWEST ARKANSAS AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.**

### **EARLY DAYS (mainly 1978-1980)**

Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society originated during a period of expanding environmental awareness. Most of those involved were students at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, who found a home in northwest Arkansas and were interested in a way to advocate for the environment.

Locally, the Ozark Society had been formed 1961 by Neil Compton, Kenneth L. Smith, and others to stop two dams proposed for the Buffalo River. A student chapter of the Ozark Society was formed on the campus of the UA-Fayetteville in April 1964, with Dr Douglas A. James as faculty advisor. Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970.

A meeting was announced and held in the Student Union in Fayetteville about September 1, 1978. John D. Cobb, who became the group's first president, remembers that 15 or 16 people attended the first meeting. As a student organization, NWAAS was able to apply to Associated Student Government for funds. Fledgling NWAAS was funded \$281.00 for the period October 1978-April 1979 (materials archived in Special Collections at Mullins Library).

The first General Membership Meeting was held at the SWEPCO community room in Fayetteville on September 11, 1978. John D. Cobb narrated a US Fish and Wildlife Service film, "A Great White Bird." The second program, held October 2, 1978, was a lecture by Doug James' graduate student Fred Burnside on Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. It was presented on campus in the UA Science and Engineering building. Meetings were held in various places, including the Student Union and Lake Fayetteville Environmental Study Center.

Activities in the Society's first year (Sept 1978-August 1979) included canoe floats, birding, picnics, feeders, hikes, film presentations, and astronomy. There was some kind of education program open to the public each month. Expert presentations were presented by Dr Walt Manger, geologist; Dr Neil Compton, physician and conservationist; Dr Jeffrey Moran, zoologist; Dr Douglas James, ornithologist; and others.

The chapter had 38 members by September 1, 1978, and this had grown to 183 by August 1979.

The Society formally incorporated as a non-profit April 30, 1979. It received exemption from federal taxation as a 501(c)(3) by August 2, 1979. Congressman John Paul Hammerschmidt wrote to the IRS in support of the Society's tax exemption (letter of August 13, 1979).

The connection of this new organization with expanding ecological awareness was summarized in the NWAAS newsletter for Nov-Dec 1979. Entitled, "The Ecological Conscience," it provides a general outline of why folks came together to form NWAAS. "The Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society is a focusing point for people of all ages and backgrounds who care for the out-of-doors. Not alone for future generations, but as an anchor in reality here and now.

The distinguishing character of our Society is our service objective. We strive to be a valued and respected ecological conscience of the community by directing our attention to the wise use of land, water, air, wildlife – all natural resources. We initiate and join forces with other organizations to preserve areas of significant ecological value. We are a meeting place for considered judgment that will help safeguard the natural values of a community.”

The rest of this document includes brief histories of a few of the Society’s early personalities. More in this vein can be added as time goes on. If someone reading this history was involved in the Society’s early period, please write a profile that can be included and send it to the author.

## **JOHN D. COBB**

John D. Cobb was a key person in the Society’s origins. He remembers that “We had our sociologists, scientists, trekkers and tree-huggers ... however, we all had a vision that placed the sharing of ecological awareness and an awe for the beauties of the natural world for and without future generations foremost above all else. We were never, in any way during my membership tenure at least, by action or in perception an "activist" group in a negative or disruptive manner. We recognized the common ground that a vehicle such as an Audubon Society chapter provided for each of us - - no matter how far we leaned to the left or right, so to speak -- that we might responsibly impress others on the issues at hand. And, yes, one of those issues was the Hobbs Estate. Others included the growing numbers of septic systems around Beaver Lake, and interest in a natural trail that evolved into the Ozark Highlands Trail.”

John Cobb was an undergraduate student in business at UA-Fayetteville. He had previously attended Kansas State Teachers College (Now K State at Emporia). While there, he had been impressed by excellent nature programs, including the frequent Audubon Film Series lecture programs. And while he wasn’t specifically a bird watcher – in his own words, he says he always “enjoyed furry creatures” -- he was a nature enthusiast. He felt an Audubon group could be a good vehicle for bringing quality nature programs to Fayetteville.

He completed his studies at the UofA in Fayetteville earning a BSBA in Administrative Management and a MEd in Adult Education. Subsequently, his additional studies have been primarily in areas of nonprofit organization management, regional public safety, and natural disaster mitigation (through Oklahoma State, Purdue, USAF Air University, and Coast Guard Training Center ,Yorktown).

Newsletters required much effort, including writing, typing, mimeographing, folding and mailing – a lot of organization, at which John Cobb excelled. One can assume if material appeared in these newsletters, it did so because it expressed the contemporary interests of NWAAS. Rereading them more than three decades later, these newsletters are useful primers that reflect ecological concerns of the period, and in a relatively small community (fewer than 15,000 students on campus) in a corner of a small state.

Below are some topics and concerns included in the January-February 1979 newsletter:

1. Designation of new wilderness areas in Arkansas, including 10,529 acres in the Buffalo River headwaters
2. Relocation of Highway 71 north of Fayetteville, now the I-49 corridor
3. John Cobb’s “President’s message,” a summary of the 1978 Fayetteville Christmas Bird Count, a summary of legislation including wilderness, the Endangered Species Act, etc
4. A “Nature Books Reviewed” by Elizabeth Fleener and “Other Publications of Interest.”
5. A calendar of events with “room # ... posted throughout Union inside the small, glass-fronted cases.” On January 8, Brent Daugherty was presenting a program on reptiles in northwest Arkansas. On February 12, an Audubon Wildlife Film, “Okefenokee – Land of Trembling Earth” with Dennis Holt of National Audubon.
6. Dr Neil Compton, Programs Committee Chair, and student Shonah Hunter, welcomed anyone interested in leading “any field trip or activity.”

7. Officers included John D. Cobb, President; David Vander Zwaag, V. President; Cathy Ross, Secretary; Paul M. Blore, Treasurer. "Chairpersons:" Kelly Carithers, conservation; Ellen T. Neaville, education; Shonah Hunter, field trips; Sheila M. Hoelscher, finance; Mimi Burke, membership; Dr Neil Compton, programs; James E. Hoelscher, Jr, publications; Royanne Cobb, publicity.
8. The newsletter masthead (see the top of this article) was drawn for the society by Architecture professor Herbert Fowler and was selected for the masthead by vote of the membership.
9. Dr Douglas A. James listed as U of A organization sponsor.
10. The State of Arkansas had taken title to 11,644 acres of Hobbs Estate.

Among contents of Volume 2, Number 2 (March-April 1979): Ellen Neaville organized "Enjoying Arkansas Birds," an intro course at the Bentonville Free University where "babysitters will be available Saturday morning for families with young children." Doug James presented a program, "Where to bird in Arkansas and U.S."

A series of Bird Seeds Savings Day programs was initiated with Shiloh Museum in Springdale on January 19, 1980.

NWAAS had ratified its constitution and by-laws on March 12. The Society incorporated, with a set of member-approved by-laws. NWAAS achieved chapter status with National Audubon Sept 1, 1979.

Because many of the members were not students, NWAAS ceased to be a registered U of A student organization by about December 3, 1979. Officers listed in January 1979: Ellen Neaville, president; Don Petty, VP; Cathy Ross, secretary; Sheila Hoelscher, treasurer. Directors: Paul Blore, Hal Brown, Joe Cook. Doug James, University sponsor.

## **ELLEN NEAVILLE (TURNER)**

The Society's second president was Ellen Neaville (Turner), a native of Hope, Arkansas. As an undergraduate student at Hendrix College, she considered medical school for her future, but decided she wasn't interested. Instead, Hendrix's Professor Art Johnson encouraged her to apply go to National Audubon's Hog Island environmental education camp in Maine.

At Hog Island in 1972 she heard the singing of White-throated Sparrows on their nesting grounds. "You've heard people say things like, 'There was this moment, then I knew ... well I had that moment at Hog Island ... I remember flying back after my two weeks on Hog Island. As I sat on a plane at La Guardia, I saw swallows flying for the first time. I realized that I had missed much in my life and I knew exactly what I wanted to do for the remainder."

Ellen married Dr Gary Neaville and taught biology for 3 years, first in North Little Rock, and then at Little Rock Parkview. She joined the Pulaski County Audubon Society (now Central Arkansas Audubon Society) and Arkansas Audubon Society. She attended an Ozark Society meeting during that time and signed up for a birding field trip with graduate student Kimberly G. Smith, now University Professor of Biological Sciences, UA-Fayetteville. "I was stunned at his ability to recognize the songs of birds and made that my next goal."

For graduate school she attended Washington University in St Louis. There she worked with a Jesuit priest, James Mulligan, author of a monograph on the singing behavior of Song Sparrows. She worked in his lab to sequence the songs of canaries and used a biodiversity index to quantify the diversity of individual bird songs. Research was fun, but her purpose was to develop an ear for bird song.

An article appeared in the St. Louis paper about a land purchase in Arkansas – the "Hobbs Estate." That article -- and 12,000 acres in state protection -- cinched Rogers for her. On her first day in Rogers (1978) she met Dr Neil Compton. Since Compton was program chair for the new Audubon group in Fayetteville, Ellen thinks it likely that's how she learned about NWAAS and became involved as education chair.

Many early NWAAS members were from Benton County. One of the reasons is that most of the newly arrived retirees lived around Beaver Lake, in Benton County, and in Bella Vista. These folks seemed eager to learn about their new home and since they were retired, they had time to give to the new Audubon chapter.

According to Ellen, the new chapter also benefitted from other younger folks, too: Pam and Paul Blore, Bob and Cathy Ross, Jeff Moran, James and Sheila Hoelscher, Harriett (Robinson) Sisson, and many more, all in their late 20's and early 30's with passion and energy to move NWAAS forward.

Ellen lists the following among her favorite experiences from the Society's first years:

1. The Bentonville Environmental Education Program (BEEP) program "Introduction to Arkansas Birds" presented in April 1979.
2. "Audubon Encounters," a day camp that we held at the Lake Fayetteville Environmental Study Center. One of the highlights involved the resolution of a conflict between the elves, who lived in the meadow, and the trolls, who lived in the forest. The dispute was over the transition zone between the meadow and the forest (the "edge"). Both groups had to organize and present their ownership claims to The Wizard, who happened to be Mike Lemons dressed in a wizard costume.
3. Being listed under the title "Audubon" with the Rogers Chamber of Commerce! Two natural events brought over 75 phone calls: The first was the Purple Martin starvation event during one unusually cold spring. Another cold spring, the Baltimore Orioles hit the area hummingbird feeders big time. A woman called and said she had a big hummingbird. That turned out to be a Green Violetear, one of the few records ever for Arkansas.
4. Developing the Eastern Bluebird Trail at Bella Vista with energetic retirees.
5. Being called from time to time to check out calls received by Kim Smith and Doug James at UA-Fayetteville who didn't have time to check them out. Example: Maurice Loux in Maysville claimed to have 150 eagles around his field. When Ellen learned that they were throwing out dead chickens for the eagles, she asked Maurice if he thought that was safe for the birds. He looked at Ellen and said: "Lady, it hasn't been many years since people around here were shooting hawks and eagles. Now they are driving over here with their families to look at the birds. I figure what we are doing is OK."
6. Serving as an "expert witness" for a family in Rogers whose small farmer had been surrounded by new, clean subdivisions. Neighbors complained, the city served notice that the family had to clean up their brush pile and fencerow. Ellen documented many native species on the property, including the Northern Bobwhites that took cover in the brush pile. Judge Jennings drove to the property himself (he heard the bobwhites) and dismissed the case.
7. Regular phone calls from a "mole" in the U.S. Corps of Engineers office in Rogers, who would tip Ellen off when folks were trying to ease the shoreline regulations on Beaver. The mole's handle was "Brush pile." Ellen was "Mockingbird." After his call, she sent requests to folks in NWAAS who would write letters to congress.

## **CATHY AND BOB ROSS**

Hot Springs native Cathy Ross attended Arkansas Tech University where she earned her bachelor of Arts in Biology (1971). During studies there, she had classes with botanist Gary Tucker and was a botany lab assistant and worked in the herbarium. It was through Gary Tucker that she met Dr. Delzie Demaree (peer of Dwight Moore) who lived in Hot Springs. She typed herbarium labels for Dr. Demaree who in his late 80s was still sending specimens to universities in the US and internationally. He took Cathy out on a couple of collecting trips. Once she graduated from Tech, she and her husband Bob Ross moved to northwest Arkansas in 1971. Cathy was NWAAS secretary in the early years.

She taught Junior High science for several years, then began working for Shofner's Printing and Office Supplies. She had always been interested in natural science, but never had a formal ornithology class. In 1989 she returned to the U of A to earn an MS in speech-language pathology and then returned to the public school system.

When she was a kid, she was outdoors all the time. Her family didn't camp or hike, but spent hours outdoors for picnics and play. Her parents were casually interested in plants, gardening, and birds and taught their children names of many

common flowers and birds. Her sister is a physician and there are several research scientists in the family. As Cathy puts it, "there must be a few science genes among us."

## **PAM AND PAUL BLORE**

Pam Blore is originally from Michigan, Paul from Southern California. The Blores met at UA-Fayetteville as students, married, and moved to Michigan. She helped form and was president of an Audubon chapter at her college, Audubon Trails Club, in Olivet, Michigan. She got Paul interested and both enjoyed meeting others who enjoyed similar nature studies.

The Blores moved back to Fayetteville in fall of 1978, just as NWAAS was getting off the ground. Upon return to Fayetteville, Dr. Jeff Moran told her that people were starting up an Audubon chapter in Fayetteville, so they got involved.

Paul graduated from the U of A in 1975 with a business degree. Pam started her MS in Zoology in 1974 and wanted to go on to a PhD, but Doug James was on sabbatical. In 1979 she took a job in Animal and Poultry Science.

While the following isn't directly relevant to the first days of NWAAS, it does show the interests of early leaders. Pam Blore would go on to earn a PhD in veterinary microbiology in 1989. She worked with an avian pathologist, Dr. Kirk Skeeles. Together they helped wildlife rehabbers, Joe and Vivian Stockton from Siloam Springs, to understand the cause of mortality of animals they took in.

Paul Blore was NWAAS treasurer in 1979 and served as a Director in 1980. The Blores were also very involved in speleology at that time. They helped with the Boston Mountain Grotto and served as area coordinators for the Cave Research Foundation.

## **SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT**

In connection with reading this history, please also at least peruse the early newsletters. They provide more depth.

There is obviously a GREAT deal more that could be added here, but this brief summary of the first years. In the future we can add more personalities to this founding group.

I find it interesting that, one way or the other, these founders went on to become teachers, researchers, government officials, business creators, etc. In my communications with John Cobb, for example, I learned that he had, among other things, developed a specialized pest control company that includes a service for "controlling" bats, but in an ethical and non-lethal way. Ellen Turner is serving on the Arkansas Natural heritage Commission. Doug James is still teaching. I talked with Pam Blore, still in her lab at UA-Fayetteville. I keep running into young folks who had either Bob or Cathy Ross as teachers and counselors. There's no telling how many have gone on their justifiably renowned owl prowls.

NWAAS now spans several generations. Where shall we go in the future?

--Edited by Joe Neal, NWAAS Field Trip Leader, January 2015