

## Wilson Ornithological Society Establishes Margaret Morse Nice Medal

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“On March 26 I . . . banded a very important individual—my first Song Sparrow—later called Uno. 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. Uno’s mate was evidently an experienced bird for she fed more than he did during four hours on the 29th, but after that he outdid her record. . . . the two babies were carried off by some enemy the night of June 2 and so ended my observations on Song Sparrows in the spring of 1928 except for my becoming acquainted with Uno’s spirited neighbour, later dubbed 4M, and my recording in words and symbols of four of his distinctive songs” (Nice 1979:91).

So began Margaret Morse Nice’s landmark study of the Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*) nesting in the floodplain below her home on the Olentangy River just north of Columbus, Ohio. Over the next eight years she pioneered the use of bands to mark individual birds and follow the lives of each one. She described the melodic variations used by different male Song Sparrows and how variations were shared among neighbors. Later she would explore song learning and behavioral development in hand-raised Song Sparrows. Her individually marked birds enabled her to explore site fidelity of males, females, and offspring and the social interactions among neighbors. Through her study of Song Sparrows she introduced many of the concepts of European ethology to American ornithologists (Nice 1939a).

In August of 1935, Margaret Nice began writing “Studies in the life history of the Song Sparrow” (1937). On 25 June 1936 her journal entry reads:

“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 1979:151).

Indeed it was. Of this first volume, “Studies in the life history of the Song Sparrow. I. A population study of the Song Sparrow,” Jean Delacour 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 1937:656).

In 1943 the second volume (Nice 1943) was published with the following evaluations:

“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” (Mayr 1944:60).

“No other life-history study combines such rich scholarship with such keen field work” (Hickey 1943:231).

In 1943 her achievement was recognized by the American Ornithologists’ Union which awarded Margaret Morse Nice its prestigious Brewster Medal given to the author of “. . . the most important work relating to the birds of the Western Hemisphere . . . over the last six years.” On the rim was engraved “Margaret Morse Nice Life History of the Song Sparrow.”

Margaret Morse Nice was born on 6 December 1883 in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father, Anson Daniel Morse, was a professor of history at Amherst College with a deep love of the wilderness and a devotion to gardening. Her mother, Margaret Duncan Morse, a graduate of Mount Holyoke Seminary, taught her the names of wild flowers during Sunday afternoon walks. In 1891, at the age of seven, Margaret received her first bird book. In 1896 she wrote and published a small booklet, “Fates and fortunes of Fruit-acre birds.” She graduated from Mount Holyoke College in

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1906 and, a year later, entered Clark University as one of only two women graduate students. Her master's thesis (Nice 1910) was the first comprehensive study of diet in the Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*). In 1908 she married Blaine Nice, also a graduate student at Clark University and in 1913 they moved their family to Norman, Oklahoma where he had accepted a faculty position at the University. From 1913 to 1927 Margaret Morse Nice worked on her "Birds of Oklahoma" (1931), often with the help of her daughters. In 1927 the family moved to Columbus, Ohio where Blaine had accepted a professorship at The Ohio State University. In 1936, shortly after finishing the first volume of her life-history of the Song Sparrow, she and Blaine moved to Chicago where he was to head the Departments of Physiology and Pharmacology at the Chicago Medical School.

Although a landmark among ornithological studies, Margaret Morse Nice's contributions to ornithology are not limited to her studies of the Song Sparrow. She joined the American Ornithologists' Union in 1907, attended her first meeting in 1908, and in 1920, at the 38th Stated Meeting, she was the only woman to present a paper. The next year she joined the Wilson Ornithological Society. She attended her first Wilson meeting in 1927 when she reported (1930) on the nesting of Myrtle Warblers (*Dendroica coronata*). In 1933 she founded the literature review section of Bird-Banding (now Journal of Field Ornithology). Over the next nine years she wrote 1800 reviews, most summarizing and commenting on articles written in foreign languages, of which she read five fluently. In 1935 she was elected Second Vice-President of the Wilson Ornithological Society and succeeded to its Presidency in 1937, the first woman to preside over one of the world's major ornithological societies. Also in 1937 she was elected a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, only the second woman so honored. She published a popular account of her field work, "The Watcher at the Nest" (1939b), a major review of territoriality (1941), a review of incubation periods of North American birds (1954), and an important synthesis of our knowledge of behavioral development in precocial birds (1962). She was made an honorary member of the German Ornithological Society and a

Corresponding Member of the Royal Hungarian Institute of Ornithology. In 1955 Mount Holyoke College and in 1962 Elmira College awarded her honorary Doctor of Science degrees. Perhaps Dean Richard Bond of Elmira College best summarized the career of Margaret Morse Nice when he stated:

"She used the outdoors near her home as her laboratory and common species of birds as her subject. 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 1979:262–263).

The Wilson Ornithological Society is pleased to establish the Margaret Morse Nice Medal in recognition of her scientific creativity and insight, her concern for the education of young and amateur ornithologists, and her leadership as an innovator and mentor. The medal honors a lifetime of contributions to ornithology. The recipient will be invited to review her or his contributions and their significance to ornithology and science in general at the opening plenary lecture of the annual meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Society. The recipient will also be invited to publish the substance of those remarks in the Wilson Bulletin.

The first recipients of the Margaret Morse Nice Medal are Elsie C. and Nicholas E. Collias whose research on hormones and behavior, the mechanisms, development and evolution of nest-building in the Village Weaver, the role of family integration and dominance in avian social behavior, and, most recently, the genetics of egg color exemplify the scientific and creative excellence Margaret Morse Nice embodied and the Wilson Ornithological Society wishes to honor.

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