

RUTH: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

by Wayne Hanley, Lincoln

If you haven't developed an interest in birds by the age of 40, there's still hope for you.

For instance, Mrs. Ruth P. Emery, at the age of 42, began wondering why some neighbors on Belmont Street in Wollaston were feeding birds. She looked into the matter, became intrigued, and within two years she purchased a copy of Roger Tory Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds.

Surely any reader of this publication knows that from this late beginning, Mrs. Emery went on to become one of the best known field birders in America.

Many who know her well may not realize that Ruth Emery became 80 years old on August 5. She spent that day as she has spent so many others: afield on Monomoy with friends. And it was an active day because Mrs. Emery, despite a few hip fractures from jumping down off warehouse ladders or getting caught in bus doors, is still a challenge to keep up with in the field.

The first half of Mrs. Emery's life was free of feathers, except for the occasional fluffing of a pillow. She was born in Cambridge, lived there through school, and as a young woman moved with her family to Newport Avenue in Wollaston. In 1925, she was married to Maurice C. Emery, who was employed by the Cambridgeport Savings Bank. The Emerys moved to Arlington, but they moved back to Wollaston in 1927, buying a house at 225 Belmont Street, where Mrs. Emery still lives. Her husband died in 1950.

Before she became a collector of birding lore and an editor of field notes, Mrs. Emery worked at jobs as prosaic as those that most of us fill. She had been secretary to the president of a small bank, had worked for a wholesaler of British yarns (for whom she knitted sweaters and the like, which were used as displays to promote knitting yarns in retail stores), and had been secretary to a wool merchant.

In 1943, Mrs. Emery joined the Massachusetts Audubon Society. While her husband worked on Saturdays she made as many field trips as possible, so she could scout good birding places where they could go together on Sundays.

"I had no idea what a field trip involved," Mrs. Emery said. "So on my first trip to Moose Hill in Sharon I wore high heels and a veil. One of the women on the trip suggested to me that the coat I wore was of unusual quality for a field trip."

The next year, 1944, Mrs. Emery joined the Massachusetts Audubon Society staff as a secretary working three days a week. Mrs. Emery's duties at Audubon consisted primarily of answering letters sent either to the Society or to its executive secretary, Mr. C. Russell Mason. Some international unpleasantries were in progress at the time, and many young men interested in birds were gaining experience among the birds of Europe

or birds of the Pacific.

"These young men used to write Mr. Mason, reporting on birds that they had seen and asking how things were going in Massachusetts," Mrs. Emery recalls. "Mr. Mason dictated rather perfunctory replies. I was becoming an involved birder and one of the leaders of Audubon field trips, so I added more details to the letters, reporting on interesting birds which we had observed.

"Among the young men with whom I corresponded were Dr. Norman P. Hill, who later wrote The Birds of Cape Cod; Henry Parker, now a director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society; and James Baird, now director of Massachusetts Audubon's Natural History Services."

During the last two years of the war, Mrs. Emery often assisted Mrs. Margaret Argue in conducting Audubon field trips.

"Gasoline rationing, of course, kept us from operating a bus or using automobiles," she recalls. "So we would meet the field trip members at North Station, board a train to Newburyport, and walk from the Newburyport station to Plum Island. The round trip required all day.

"We also worked out an arrangement with a regular interstate bus line which we could ride to a stop near the Artichoke River, get off the bus, walk in the river country, and then catch another bus back to Boston."

Also working on the train or bus field trips were Frances Elkins, Cora Wellman and Arthur Argue, Margaret's husband.

It was during this period that Mrs. Emery met one of the great field birders of the era, Ludlow Griscom, research ornithologist at the Museum of Comparative Zoology and a director of Massachusetts Audubon. After Mrs. Emery had attained considerable renown as a birder and bird notes editor, Griscom used to say of her, with some fondness, "She's a great birder, especially considering that she didn't start until she was an old lady!"

Ruth also had the privilege to work with another famous birder, the late Dr. John B. May, a pioneer in the promotion of the appreciation of predatory birds, an associate of the great E. H. Forbush, and his successor as state ornithologist.

In 1945, when William and Annette Cottrell revived the Records of New England Birds, Mrs. Emery became their typist and Donald Alexander their compiler. Two things happened quite promptly: Ruth found that the Records required more time than a three-day-a-week secretary could handle, and because the raw material kept pouring into the Audubon office, she had to make many on-the-spot decisions.

In July, 1945, Ruth Emery became assistant editor of the Records. The August issue, which was the first to bear her name, featured a front-page photograph of two Marbled Godwits taken by her husband, Maurice.

From that August, 1945, issue right up to the present, Mrs. Emery's name always has been associated with Massachusetts Audubon field notes. Her

name now appears as editor on the field notes page of the Massachusetts Audubon Newsletter and her field notes of eastern Massachusetts are a valued feature of the Birder's Kit.



Ruth Emery at her eightieth birthday party.
Photo by Pat Fox.

Ruth's achievements are even more impressive when one considers that she has never owned an automobile and does not know how to drive. These supposed handicaps failed to keep her from becoming a pioneer member of the 600 club in the early 1950's. (Members have life lists of 600 or more species seen in the United States.) This was quite an accomplishment in the era before interstate highway systems and relatively inexpensive airline travel.

Due to the vagaries of taxonomy, Mrs. Emery has broken the 600-species barrier twice. Changes in species designation among birds have cost her 18 species which were recognized as valid when she entered them on her list but which were later declared void. Her present U.S. list totals 619 species.

Her global life list exceeds 1500, with her best single field trip to Africa in 1967 when she added 475 species. Her greatest handicap in accumulating a world list lies in the fact that she has never visited the New World tropics, an area exceptionally rich in species.

Ruth's Massachusetts list is 381, one of the better totals ever logged in this state. Local birders are well aware that her enormous success here not only has depended on her **great** skill and **knowledge**, but also has benefitted from phenomenal luck. She is renowned for "being there," either when or immediately after a rarity has been spotted.

When Dr. May discovered two White-winged Black Terns in North Scituate in 1954, Mrs. Emery alerted a friendly birder who had her in Scituate within an hour.

When a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper from Siberia appeared in Newburyport Harbor on November 3, 1973, Mrs. Emery and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Argue, suddenly appeared on the seawall while Richard Forster and Wayne Petersen were making a positive identification of the bird, which they had been pursuing.

In July 1966, when an excellent specimen of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was found in Dennis, Mrs. Emery happened to be vacationing there with friends.

It goes without saying that she didn't miss that ultimate in rarities, the Ross's Gull.

Next time you come upon a rarity, look around. Chances are that Ruth is nearby. If you don't see her, remember to call her with your report, but don't be surprised if she says, "Oh, yes, I saw that bird this morning ... "



The quintessential birder.