

John Farrand, Jr. MOMENTS IN HISTORY

Robert Ridgway's Roseate Grosbeaks

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THE WABASH RIVER, CELEBRATED in song, arises near Grand Lake in Ohio and flows westward and southwestward across the green countryside of Indiana. Near Covington it turns to the south, and from just below Terre Haute until it joins the Ohio River, the Wabash forms the boundary between Indiana and Illinois. On this final portion of its course, the river is bordered by bottomlands and occasional high bluffs.

On one such bluff, rising one hundred feet above the river on the Illinois side, sits Mount Carmel, in Wabash County. In the middle of the last century, Mount Carmel was a farming and lumbering town with fewer than 2000 residents. Among its leading citizens was David Ridgway, a druggist who had opened the town's first modern, three-story commercial building. In 1849, he married Henrietta James Reed, the daughter of a

veteran of the War of 1812.

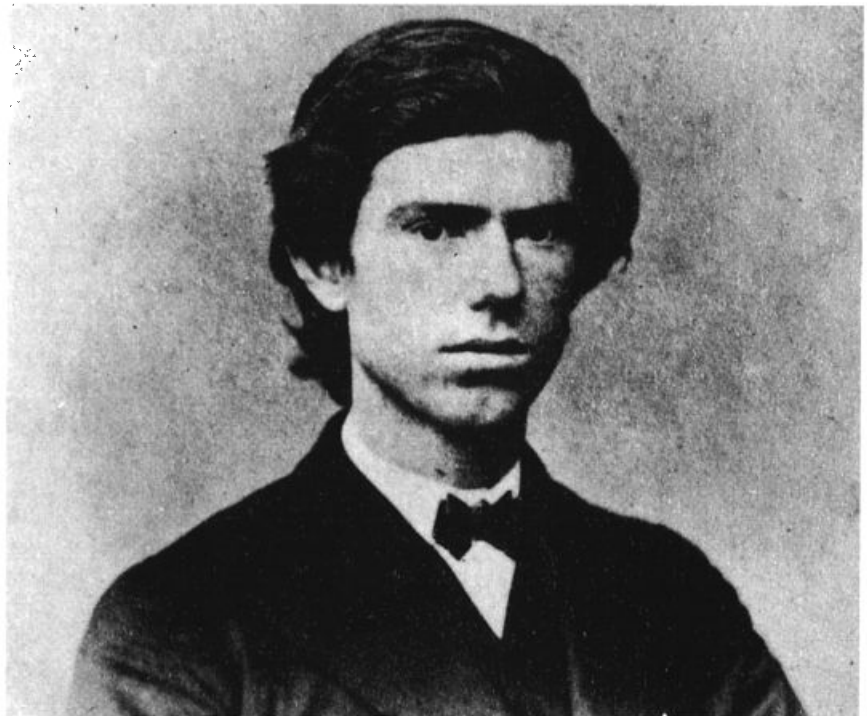
Robert, the first of the Ridgways' ten children, was born on July 2, 1850. His parents were keenly interested in nature, and Robert's own passion for birds soon revealed itself. He had made his first bird drawing by the age of four, and at ten, had a large collection of drawings, eggs, and nests. He loved to go hunting with his father, who knew the local names of many of the birds they saw.

Wild Turkeys and Passenger Pigeons were common in those days,

and one year there were rumors of a cougar. Along the banks of the Wabash grew giant sycamores; in these hollow "swell-butts," swifts still nested in the ancestral way. Swallow-tailed and Mississippi kites wheeled over the prairies west of town. In a swamp with ancient cypresses and sweet gums, Robert glimpsed what he decided was an Ivory-billed Woodpecker.

Robert worked hard at identifying the birds he found. At first, his only book was Oliver Goldsmith's *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, an antiquated, almost useless work that emphasized European and tropical species, with engravings so stylized that many of the birds are hard to recognize even now. But then one day, in a store in the nearby town of Olney, Robert and his mother found a copy of Samuel G. Goodrich's *Illustrated Natural History of the Animal Kingdom*. Published in New York in 1859, the book contained an excellent text and 390 engravings of birds; it discussed and figured many American species, and frequently cited Wilson, Audubon, and Nuttall. Mrs. Ridgway purchased it for him on the spot.

Robert quickly matched his fa-



Robert Ridgway at the age of sixteen. Photo: Ruthven Deane Collection, Library of Congress.

ther's "ground robin" with Goodrich's "Chewink, or Ground-Robin" and his father's "yellow mocking-bird" with the Yellow-breasted Chat. The "bell bird" was harder, because Goodrich's description of the Wood Thrush was quite vague, and the "blue wren" probably remained a mystery, because Goodrich didn't describe his "Blue-gray Fly-catcher, or Gnat-catcher." But thanks to Goodrich, the list of identified birds began to grow.

On a bright day during the winter of 1863-1864, as Robert was walking past a stand of giant ragweed, he startled a flock of unfamiliar birds. The males were a beautiful crimson that contrasted with the snow. Robert and his friends Lucien and Granville Turner soon found more of them feeding on the seeds of sycamores. Robert collected a few. Knowing nothing about preparing specimens, he made a colored drawing of the male and female.

Try as they might, the boys couldn't find the new bird in Goodrich. Although its bill wasn't crossed, it seemed closest to the "American Cross-Bill, *Loxia Americana*." Robert named it the "Roseate Grosbeak, *Loxia rosea*," but deliberations went on into spring. Finally, Mrs. Turner suggested they write to the Commissioner of Patents in Washington. Perhaps he knew the names of birds. Robert was ready to try anything, so off went a letter along with the colored drawing.

In early July there came an answer, not from the Patent Office, but from Spencer F. Baird, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Baird praised Robert's artistic ability and his attention to scientific detail. "I had no difficulty in recognizing the bird you sent, and was much pleased to see that you had given all the essential features of form and color with much accuracy. The bird is the Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*)." Baird urged Robert to continue his studies of birds, and asked what eggs



The bird that started Ridgway on his path to fame, the Purple Finch (*Carpodacus Purpureus*). Photo by J.R. Woodward/VIREO.

he had in his collection.

Ridgway later called Baird's letter "a revelation." He knew that Wilson, Audubon, and Nuttall were all dead, and had thought he was the only person alive who was interested in birds. But now he had a letter from a living ornithologist, who invited him to reply. A brisk correspondence followed, in which Baird counseled, encouraged, and admonished the promising teenager in southern Illinois.

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On Wednesday, March 6, 1867, Ridgway came in from the field and found another letter waiting for him. In it Baird offered him a job, at \$50.00 a month, collecting speci-

mens for the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, soon to depart for the wild country between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. A second turning point had arrived.

"How I survived this additional thrill I do not know," Ridgway later said. "I only remember that the consent of my parents was, after some hesitation, obtained and the offer was accepted." On or about April 18, 1867, the family drove to Olney, where Ridgway boarded the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad and headed east toward Washington. It was his first train ride and he was only 16, so he was accompanied by David Scott, an Olney merchant on his way to Baltimore to buy goods for his store.

There followed two busy weeks at the Smithsonian, where Ridgway studied western birds and learned from Baird how to prepare specimens. Then early in May, he traveled to New York, where the expedition embarked by steamer for Panama. After crossing the isthmus, they took another steamer to San Francisco. For two seasons, Ridgway explored the little-known country between Sacramento and Salt Lake City.

When Ridgway returned to Washington in the fall of 1869, Baird put

him to work writing technical descriptions and making drawings for the three-volume *History of North American Birds*, which Baird was writing with Thomas Mayo Brewer. When this great work finally appeared in 1874, its authors were listed as Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway.

Ridgway became Baird's leading disciple and one of the most respected ornithologists of his time. In 1880, he was appointed Curator of Birds at the Smithsonian. In 1883, he was one of the founders of the American Ornithologists' Union, and in 1898 succeeded William Brewster as its president. His own magnum opus, *The Birds of North and Middle America*, began to appear in 1901. Considered one of the greatest works on taxonomic ornithology ever written, it won the Brewster Medal of the A.O.U. and the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal of the National Academy of Sciences.

Ridgway arrived on the scene after the great age of discovery and description had passed, but among North American birds, the Cackling Goose, Mexican Duck, Mottled Duck, Lesser Prairie-Chicken, Caribbean Coot, Mountain Chickadee, Bicknell's Thrush, Worthen's Sparrow, Belding's Sparrow, Dusky Seaside-Sparrow, White-winged Junco, Black Rosy-Finch, Brown-capped Rosy-Finch, and McKay's Bunting bear scientific names he gave them. He himself is remembered in the scientific names of the Masked Bobwhite, the Buff-collared Nightjar, the interior form of the Plain Titmouse (possibly a distinct species), several Central and South American birds, and in *Ridgwayia*, the genus of the Aztec Thrush.

Throughout his long career, Ridgway never forgot the Wabash country of his boyhood. He always dreamed of going home, and in 1906, a few miles northwest of Olney, he and his wife purchased a small tract and named it "Bird Haven." Since 1945, the Bird Haven Sanctuary has been



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the center of a Christmas Bird Count circle. In 1915, when the Ridgways moved to Olney for good, what he described as "more than forty-five years of homesickness" came to an end. Here he spent the remainder of his days, working on *The Birds of North and Middle America*. Eight thick volumes had been printed when he died in 1929, and three more appeared during the next few decades.

It is unlikely that Ridgway had a favorite bird, but when he wrote *The Ornithology of Illinois* in 1889, he said of the Purple Finch that he had "first made its acquaintance at Mount Carmel, in mid-winter, under circumstances of delightful

memory." Delightful indeed must have been the memories of that first encounter, when he found his "Roseate Grosbeaks" in the ragweed at the edge of town and couldn't figure out what they were.

As it turns out, the Purple Finch was in Goodrich's book all along. There was even a picture. But the description was brief and the illustration only a crude, black-and-white copy of Audubon's Plate IV. Robert Ridgway was only 13 then, and simply didn't recognize the bird. If he had, he would never have sent that letter to Washington. It was a mistake anyone might make. In view of all that followed, it is fortunate for ornithology that he made it. 