

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF YAKIMA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

by Helen Wilson, 1985

John James Audubon was born on his father's plantation in Santo Domingo on April 26, 1785. His father was a French naval officer, ship captain, slave trader, merchant, and planter. His mother was one of a series of mistresses kept by the elder Audubon on his plantation, and a Creole (an 18<sup>th</sup> century term referring to a person of Spanish or French descent who was born in a colony instead of in the mother country). When John James was four, he was taken to France where he was spoiled by his father's wife and received only a rudimentary education due to his unwillingness to study. He was, however, taught to read and write and do sums, and began to develop the interests and achievements of a gentleman. He learned to fence, ride, shoot, and dance, to play the violin and the flute, to draw, and to study nature.

When he was 18 and in danger of being conscripted into Napoleon's army, Audubon's father sent him to America and installed him on a modest estate near Valley Forge in eastern Pennsylvania. He spent most of his time dressed in fine clothes, riding good horses, going to parties, and behaving like the spoiled young man that he was. He was teaching himself to draw birds but with no other goal than the achievement.

A few years later, a business venture took Audubon to Louisville, Kentucky. Then he returned to Valley Forge to marry Lucy Bakewell and bring her west. Several business ventures in Louisville and Henderson all ended disastrously due as much to circumstances beyond his control (war, embargoes, naval blockades, federal economic policy, and bank failures) as to the amount of time Audubon spent in the woods observing and drawing birds. Western bank failures wiped him out, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy was the turning point in his career. As no one would employ him, he turned to his art as a means of eking out a living. He drew portraits, for which there was a ready market around Louisville; and he began to think about drawing all the birds in North America and eventually set about doing so. While others drew from mounted taxidermy specimens, Audubon spent many hours studying birds' habits and actions in the wild before arranging the specimens he collected in poses he had observed and then drawing them. All of his drawings were life sized. His collection of 435 plates was published in England as The Birds of America. He also wrote the Ornithological Biography based on his observations of birds' habits in the wild. During this time, his wife worked as a governess in order to support herself and their two sons.

After John James Audubon's death in 1835, his widow Lucy taught at her home in New York using his art as teaching aids. One of her students, George Bird Grinnell, would later become editor of Forest and Stream magazine.

The first Audubon Society was organized in Massachusetts in 1896 by this same George Bird Grinnell. He is known as an American naturalist prominent in preservation of wildlife and in conservation movements. From his group the national organization evolved in 1905, stating as its threefold purpose study and preservation of wildlife, preservation of the environment, and conservation of natural resources. As I write this in 1985, membership in National Audubon Society totals more than 550,000 persons in 505 chapters in all 50 states; and the number of members and chapters increases steadily. In the state of Washington there are over 12,000 members in 24 chapters.

In the early 1960s several members of Seattle Audubon Society came to Cascade Camp on Wenas Creek for a birding trip. Finding that the area contained an abundance of bird species, they requested that Boise Cascade make the camp a bird sanctuary. The request was granted, and logging ceased. Motorcycles are banned from the area, although the area continues to be used for camping and picnicking. This camp is the site of the annual State Audubon Campout over the four-day Memorial Day weekend, an event that draws between 200 and 300 Audubon members from all over the state. Field trips, workshops in bird and wildflower identification, and evening campfires are part of the daily program. More than 20 bird species and many plant, animal, and reptile species are to be found in this very special area.

Locally, Audubon Society activity began in 1969 with a number of important events taking place. In the spring, several members of National Audubon Society began to go birding together. The following November, Pauline Hager was asked to give a slide show and talk on birds at the YWCA. Those who attended the bird talk were later contacted to determine if they would be interested in forming a local Audubon chapter. The response being positive, an organizational meeting, publication of the first issue the Calliope Crier, and the first annual Christmas Bird Count to be held in this area all took place in December of that year.

Until this time, Audubon Society members living in the Yakima Valley were listed by national headquarters as being members of Seattle Audubon Society, the nearest chapter. The local group was organized because founding members (Lola Bartol, Ellis Bowhay, Gertrude and Ray Dixon, Helen Doornink, Orma Eustis, Doris Fisher, Pauline Hager, Alice and Paul Horschel, Betty Lagergren, Caroline Lagergren, Joanna Nashem, E.J. Newcomer, Bob Prather, Connie and Roger Ryan, Harold Vredenburgh, and Jack Whitnall) felt that there was a need for an Audubon chapter in the Yakima Valley.

On December 6, 1969, Hazel Wolfe of Seattle Audubon Society came over to help organize the local group and appointed the first officers: President, Lola Bartol; Vice-President, Pauline Hager; Secretary, Joanna Nashem; Treasurer, Connie Ryan; Membership Chairman, Roger Ryan; Education Chairman, Betty Lagergren; Program Chairman, Caroline Lagergren; Conservation Chairman, E.J. Newcomer; Publicity, Jack Whitnall; Field Trips, Bob Prather and Ellis Bowhay.

Many early activities and programs were coordinated through the Washington State Game Department, by which some members were employed.

As membership in the local Audubon group increased, bylaws were written and, together with an application for recognition as a chapter of National Audubon Society, were submitted to national headquarters. The group was recognized as a chapter of National Audubon Society with the granting of a charter on December 1, 1972, and became officially known as Yakima Valley Audubon Society.

Commencing in 1971 the local chapter has annually prepared a booth in the Hobby Building at the Central Washington State Fair to put the Audubon message before the public.

In 1975 the Society received permission from the City of Yakima to use a tract east of the Arboretum as a Nature Study area in return for developing and maintaining it. The area is easily accessible and is the habitat of several species of animals, birds, and plants. Boy Scouts planned and developed trails and built a bridge and a viewing stand as their community service project for their Eagle Scout rank. Identifying signs have been placed by various plant species in the area.

February 1982 found several members busily assembling bluebird nesting boxes from kits prepared by Bill Thoren (a member who has been interested in bluebirds since childhood) and installing them on fence posts and trees on Game Department land. More than 100 boxes are built each year to extend our bluebird trail and to replace boxes stolen or vandalized. Each year brings the fledging of many western and mountain bluebirds as well as mountain chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches, tree swallows, and house wrens from the nesting boxes along our bluebird trail. It is quite probable that most of these insect-eating birds would not exist without the assistance of the nesting boxes because they are cavity nesters and few dead trees exist in which nesting holes can be made. The boxes may be sponsored by individuals for a fee of \$5 for two years. The name of the sponsor is placed inside the lid of the nesting box assigned to that sponsor, and sponsors receive reports on the activity at their boxes. Rental money goes toward the purchase of materials to build more nesting boxes.

In October 1983, as a part of National's "Adopt-A-Refuge" program, our chapter adopted the Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge. A committee was appointed and plans were made to commence a study of the wildlife of the area in the spring.

From the time the Yakima Greenway Foundation was organized and plans began to take shape for the Greenway Park, the local Audubon chapter has supported the project, first with contributions from individual members matched by funds from the chapter treasury for a total of \$1000, then by recycling newspapers and aluminum and turning the proceeds over to the Greenway Foundation. Recycling efforts have so far

resulted in more than an additional \$1200 being turned over to the Greenway Foundation by Yakima Valley Audubon Society.

A highlight of our activities for 1984 was the construction and dedication of the Audubon Picnic Shelter in John Sherman Park, part of the Yakima River Greenway Park. Logs for the shelter were donated by Fred Westberg from the woods around his mountain cabin. Construction was by Youth Corps members from plans furnished by the National Forest Service. The shelter was dedicated on July 14, 1984, at an open-air ceremony attended by Audubon members and other local residents.

#### 1987

In 1987 YVAS joined the movement to limit logging of old growth timber in order to maintain the balance of the ecosystem and preserve resources for further generations.

#### 1988

YVAS members in the Ellensburg area withdrew from our chapter and formed Kittitas Audubon Society. This was an idea whose time had come, and we wish them well.

The road on which the YVAS Bluebird Trail is located has been renamed by the county and is now Audubon Road.

The Greenway Foundation installed a display case in John Sherman Park, and YVAS members Zelia "Zee" Butler and Fred Westberg kept the case supplied with pictures of birds of this area. After the Westbergs moved to the coast, Arlene Wood and Helen Wilson joined Zee in keeping the case supplied with nature pictures and informative material about the species displayed.