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DORIS H. SPEIRS

Editor's Message

This issue of *Picoides* contains three major articles. First Ian Barker's timely piece on Lyme disease, its symptoms, etiology, and distribution in Canada. Stuart Houston has added another chapter to his series on early naturalists in North America, with a report on Humphrey Marten. Finally, I am pleased to be able to publish the fine tribute to Mrs. Speirs written by Bruce Falls. Our society owes much to her interest in birds.

Earlier issues of *Picoides* included virtually everything authors provided me by each print date. I feel we have turned a corner of sorts as I now have a

backlog (albeit small) of articles. We all measure success differently.

Many thanks to Donna Reilly, Steve Fisher and Carolyn Lilgert for their production assistance and Bob Kidd for his editing help on this issue.

I had a letter brought to my attention recently, entitled "Sparrows doomed" which appeared in the May 1989 edition of "Farm Light and Power." In it, and in a subsequent update in the Dec-Jan 1989/90 issue, a resident of Niton, Alberta, reports that an Australian passerine introduced into British Columbia to control bug pests is

eliminating his House Sparrow population. He predicts the rapid demise of sparrows in central Alberta. Attempts to reach the author have failed. There are a lot of unlikely aspects to this intriguing story, not the least of which is an Australian bird out-competing House Sparrows during the -40°C Alberta winter. Pass the Fosters, mate.

W. Bruce McGillivray

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Doris Huestis Speirs 1894 - 1989

Doris Huestis Speirs died on October 24 1989, shortly before her 95th birthday. She was a remarkable woman, an ornithologist to be sure, but also an artist and poet. Her broad interests were inspired by a love of beauty, especially in nature, and a desire to help others in whom she saw evidence of creativity.

She was proficient as an artist before bird study became her consuming interest. In 1919, as Mrs Doris Mills, she pioneered the picture rental system, approaching members of the Group of Seven to lend their pictures. Soon, with the encouragement of A. Y. Jackson and J. E. H. MacDonald, she herself was painting. Her pictures had a directness and simplicity as well as the bold use of colour and design that characterized the work of her mentors. Her subjects were taken directly or indirectly from nature. Beginning in 1926, she exhibited with the Group and continued to do so with the Canadian Group of Painters. Although her work appeared in later exhibitions and 11 of her paintings are in Canadian and international galleries, she stopped painting in 1937 as her attention turned more and more to the study of birds. She never lost her interest in art, however, and continued to collect the works of young painters. Among those she encouraged were Robert Bateman and Barry Kent Mackay.

As early as 1916 she described herself as a bird watcher, and in that year, she identified 56 species in and around Toronto. In 1936 she began to keep a regular diary, recording her observations of bird behaviour. In 1937, while visiting her friends, Lawren and Bess Harris in New Hampshire, she

saw her first Evening Grosbeaks. "They were as brilliant as a tree full of parakeets" she wrote in her diary, and went on to describe their plumage and behaviour. She did an oil sketch of one seen from a window. Thus began her serious observation of birds.

Shortly after this she met Murray Speirs, who was pursuing graduate studies in ornithology, and they were married in 1939. Over the next fifty years they helped each other with bird studies. Doris pursued her interest in Evening Grosbeaks, observing them in the field and spending long hours watching nests in the blackfly season. She also compiled information from the literature and from her many correspondents.

She wrote a number of articles on birds, beginning with a note in *The Auk* in 1937. About half her contributions dealt with Evening Grosbeaks and most of them appeared in local publications including the Jack-Pine Warbler, the Toronto Field-Naturalists' Club Newsletter, the Wood Duck, the Bulletin of the Maine Audubon Society, the Blue Jay, the Ontario Field Biologist, the Thunder Bay Naturalists' Club Newsletter, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Bulletin, and the Curlew. Her major work in ornithology was undoubtedly the accounts of Eastern, Western and Mexican Evening Grosbeaks in Bent's Life Histories of North American Cardinals, Grosbeaks, Buntings, Towhees, Finches, Sparrows and Allies, published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1968. With her husband Murray, she co-authored the account of Lincoln's Sparrow in the same series. Much of the latter work was based on field studies which the Speirs carried out in Northern Ontario in 1956. These articles amply demonstrate the

thoroughness and attention to detail that characterized Doris Speirs' observations of birds as well as the wide network of correspondents with whom she kept in touch.

Among those she met and corresponded with, three were particularly influential. As early as 1940, Doris knew Margaret Morse Nice and was greatly impressed by her critical approach. In 1952 when Doris was instrumental in founding the first women's group devoted to bird study, it was named appropriately the Margaret Nice Ornithological Club. At that time women were excluded from the Toronto Ornithological Club. In 1979 she edited the autobiography of Margaret Nice "Research Is a Passion with Me", and still later (1983) edited "An Address Book for Naturalists", featuring quotations collected by Margaret Nice.

In 1958, Doris and Murray visited Louise de Kiriline Lawrence who was studying birds and would later write both articles and books on her experiences. Lawrence learned from them "the best and proper way to study birds", and through them met Margaret Nice. This was the beginning of a close and enduring friendship between Doris and Louise.

In 1958, Doris began to correspond with the noted Finnish ornithologist, Dr. Lars von Haartman, who shared her interest in art and also wrote poetry. She was so intrigued with his poems, which were written in Swedish, that she taught herself the language and translated them. The result was of such quality that a volume of her translations entitled "The Forehead's Lyre" was published by the University of Toronto Press in 1962. Later (1976) a

