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## "Book Review," from Nebraska Bird Review (December 1996) 64(4)

Hazel Scheiber

*Nebraska Ornithologists' Union*

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BOOK REVIEW

Sherman, Althea R. 1996. *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard*. Edited by Fred J. Pierce. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, IA. Paperback \$13.95. (First published in hardback, 1952.)

This book contains 18 essays based on observations Miss Sherman made on a farm in northeastern Iowa six miles west of the Mississippi River, near McGregor. The essays were given at meetings of scientific societies (she belonged to 15) or were published in their journals, and included such titles as "Feeding Winter Birds" and "Experiments in Feeding Hummingbirds During Seven Summers." She was recognized for her knowledge of birds, and her forceful and pungent wit.

Miss Sherman was born on the Iowa farm in 1853 and died there in 1943. She was an artist and teacher for the first 20 years of her adult life. She received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Oberlin College, Ohio, and taught in an Iowa country school for a few years. One former student said, "She took us into the woods. Showed us how flowers grew; how seeds ripen; how leaves are constructed and how they breathe; how to know trees by the bark." Later, she went to the Art Institute in Chicago and the Art Students' League in New York City, then taught art in a number of locations. She attained recognition as an artist, and some of her illustrations are in the book. In 1895 she was called home to care for ailing parents. Her sister, Amelia, a doctor, returned in 1902 to practice rural medicine, and they lived on the farm for the rest of their lives. Amelia often helped Althea with bird studies.

In 1913-14, Althea travelled around the world for almost 10 months, visiting 20 countries in Europe, North Africa, and parts of southern Asia. She arose at dawn to observe birds for two hours before breakfast. When she returned, she wrote four articles about her bird observations during the trip.

In 1915, Miss Sherman drew wide attention when she had a 28-foot-tall Chimney Swift tower built, with a winding staircase and four observation towers. She built a wooden blind for bird observations in a nearby marsh. Of all the species she observed at great length during many years of bird study, the Northern Flicker was her favorite. When flickers entered the barn to nest, she nailed boxes with observation holes above the nests, and took very interesting notes on egg sitting and feeding of nestlings. Among bird species she considered to be pests were the Eastern-Screech Owl because 20% of its food consisted of songbirds, and the House Wren because the male destroyed the eggs of many species.

Barbara Boyle, who is involved in developing a bird sanctuary, including the Chimney Swift tower, and an interpretive center in Miss Sherman's memory, wrote in an introductory statement, "Althea Sherman is increasingly being recognized in historical exhibits and in the literature of ornithology, history, and nature."