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# Early History of the North Dakota Natural Science Society

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A year ago, Paul Kannowski, editor of *The Prairie Naturalist*, asked me to write a short history of the formative period of the North Dakota Natural Science Society (Society). Finally, a year later, I accomplished the task. It seems that the history of the Society might be a little tedious to current readers of *The Prairie Naturalist*. However, the history of an organization that has succeeded for 25 years is worthy of documentation. Also, I take some comfort from the thought that many "old-timers" and prior North Dakota residents still belong to the Society and presumably take an interest in its history.

## FORMATIVE PERIOD

My knowledge concerning the formation of a "birding group" in North Dakota started in 1965 when I joined the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center (Research Center) at Jamestown as a Wildlife Biologist. During the first years, I met Frank Cassel, Professor of Zoology at North Dakota State University; Ann and Robert Gammel, long-time banders and birders from Kenmare; and biologist Bob Randall with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Like my colleagues Bob Stewart, who wrote *Breeding Birds of North Dakota* and *Birds of Maryland*; Hal Kantrud; and Tom Klett, these individuals shared with me a strong interest in the biological world with a particular curiosity about birds. In our discussions, we noted the absence of a state organization that stressed the study of birds, mammals, plants, and other natural history. Many of us already belonged to groups such as the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, which publishes *The Loon*, or the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, which publishes *The Blue Jay*.

As a result of several conversations, we decided to form an organization whose members could enjoy, study, preserve, and chronicle the natural history of North Dakota. The formative meeting was held on 30 July 1966 at Lake Metigoshe in conjunction with the summer meeting of the North Dakota Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

This first, brief gathering was attended by 17 interested persons and resulted in the formation of a temporary executive committee. The committee included Ann and Robert Gammel, Frank Cassel, Forrest Lee (Wildlife Biologist, Research Center), Chuck Schroeder (Waterfowl Biologist, North Dakota Game and Fish

Department), Esther Swenson (Theodore Roosevelt Nature and History Association and mother of Carolyn Godfread, President of the Society in 1986-87), Bob Seabloom (Professor of Biology at the University of North Dakota), Bob Randall, Bob Stewart, Larry Barney (Park Ranger, Theodore Roosevelt National Park), and Ted James (graduate student in biology, University of North Dakota) as Secretary-Treasurer. I was appointed chairman.

The executive committee agreed to meet at an early date to make plans for the formation of the new organization. One dollar was collected from each person at the first meeting to obtain working capital. The dollar was to be subtracted from the person's first-year's dues. One dollar does not sound like much, but it was enough for lunch in 1966.

The executive committee met at the Research Center on 22 October 1966 to lay the groundwork for the new organization. During the meeting, committees were formed to develop various aspects of the association. Frank Cassel and Harvey Nelson (Director, Research Center) chaired the constitutional committee, I chaired the program committee, Robert Gammell and Bob Randall chaired the editorial board, Frank Cassel chaired the legal committee, Ted James and I chaired the publicity committee, and Bob Seabloom, Larry Barney, and Esther Swenson chaired the membership committee.

The group also decided that the organization should focus on all aspects of the natural world and not just on birds. To reflect this broader perspective, the name North Dakota Natural Science Society was chosen. Names that were considered but not selected were North Dakota Naturalists and North Dakota Natural History Society.

### **FIRST YEAR AS A SOCIETY**

The first formal meeting was set for 7 and 8 January 1967 but was postponed until April due to a severe blizzard. I remember the delight of one television newscaster reporting that the meeting of a new environmental group was cancelled due to severe environmental conditions.

About 40 people attended the first meeting on 15 and 16 April 1967 at the Research Center at Jamestown. Among them was a delegation from the Manitoba Natural History Society, who helped us establish our own Society. These included Robert Nero, Laurie Smith, John Jack, Harold Hosford, and Herb Copland. Bob Nero presented the feature program at the evening banquet, entitled "Comparative behavior of red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds." Bob and Sue Randall, who were supportive of the Society during its formative years, brought four of their friends from Bismarck to the first meeting. These included Bill Buresh (President of the Society 1972-73) and his wife Genevieve and Ken and Adele Johnson.

Harvey Nelson welcomed society members and gave a short history of the Research Center. Robert Seabloom reported on the previous formative meetings and noted that the Society presently had 153 paid members and a fiscal balance of

\$342.80. The large starting membership was the result of numerous mailed solicitations and personal invitations to potential members from those on the executive council. Robert Randall reported that a journal with a natural history orientation was planned, and each published page would cost about \$30. Frank Cassel then presented the draft articles of incorporation and bylaws to the members. After a lengthy discussion, both were accepted. Publications were discussed, and it was agreed that a newsletter be published at dates decided by the executive council.

Officers that were elected at the first meeting were similar to the initial officers, except that Gordon Christensen (Biology Teacher, Jamestown High School) was appointed Secretary-Treasurer. Gordon and I became well acquainted because we spent many evenings updating the Society membership and financial records.

The primary activities during the first year of the Society were increasing the membership, developing a brochure describing the organization, and obtaining an editor to publish a Society journal. Membership dues were raised from \$2.00 to \$3.00 per year, and the family membership was set at \$4.00 per year. Robert Burgess (Professor of Botany, North Dakota State University) also represented the Society at wilderness hearings regarding Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Summer field trips were an important part of the early activities. I remember one trip along the Heart River on a very hot day in July when members began suffering from the heat and dust. Finally, all the people near collapse were placed in the only vehicle with air-conditioning. The rest of us were saved by Hal Kantrud, who directed us to Tokach's Bar in St. Anthony. On another field trip near Kulm, some local folks thought that our long caravan of some 35 vehicles was a funeral procession.

## SECOND YEAR AS A SOCIETY

The second annual business meeting was held at Jamestown on 20 and 21 April 1968 at the VFW Club. There were 73 people in attendance, including Bob Nero and a group from Manitoba. During this meeting Phil Aus (Wildlife Biologist, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and Harold Duebbert (Wildlife Biologist, Research Center) pointed out the severe alteration of North Dakota's natural landscape from cultivation and drainage. Others voiced strong support for the preservation of natural areas. John Humke from The Nature Conservancy introduced the members to the Conservancy's expanding program in the United States.

As a result of the Society's concerns about natural habitats, we began an inventory of important natural areas in the state and began formulating legislation to preserve unique areas. Hal Kantrud assumed a prominent role in the listing of natural preserves and in drafting legislation to protect these areas. Later, in 1973, the Society was instrumental in having legislation introduced to preserve natural areas. The first bill was defeated, but in the next biennium Senate Bill 2424, introduced by Senator Stella Fritzell (mother of member Erik Fritzell, now at

University of Missouri-Columbia), passed. Much of this early work helped establish a basis for The Nature Conservancy's natural areas inventory and natural area preservation.

At the second meeting, Robert Burgess made an important announcement that Paul Kannowski (Professor of Biology, University of North Dakota) had agreed to serve as editor of the Society's new quarterly journal, *The Prairie Naturalist*. The first issue of *The Prairie Naturalist* of 16 pages was subsequently printed in spring 1968. Editor Paul had difficulty obtaining articles initially, and the concluding issue to volume one was not mailed until 15 May 1970. The stature, size, and quality of *The Prairie Naturalist* have continued to improve since these early beginnings.

The cover artist for volume one was Colleen Nelson (nee Helgeson), a friend of Charles Dane (Physiologist, Research Center). Colleen lived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, but was born in Bismarck and spent her early years in Burleigh County. She spent several winter days in 1967 at Jamestown using dried plants from the Research Center herbarium to draw the first cover for *The Prairie Naturalist*.

Charles Tighe, Lieutenant Governor of North Dakota, gave the luncheon address and Paul Springer (Assistant Director, Research Center) presented an illustrated talk on the black-footed ferret. The second meeting of the Society ended with the election of Bob Burgess as President, Larry Barney as Vice-President, and George Johnson (Bismarck physician), as Councilman. At the time of his election, Bob Burgess was leading a successful battle to halt the construction of the Kindred Dam.

The installation of the new executive council in 1968 spelled an end to the formative period of the Society. After 1968, the Society was led in various directions by presidents from across the state. The Society has persevered for 25 years and met many goals that we envisioned at the beginning. As a group, we visited and learned about many of the natural areas in the state, helped list and preserve natural areas of value, and through *The Prairie Naturalist*, published a variety of articles about aesthetics and scientific values of North Dakota and other prairie states and provinces. We shared many experiences as a group and came to meet and know others who share our deep appreciation for the natural world. The 25 years were an education and an enjoyable experience for me. I share the hope of others for 25 more successful years.