

# THE WEMYSS SISTERS: SASKATCHEWAN'S FIRST LADY BIRDWATCHERS, 1898-1940

C. STUART HOUSTON, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 0J8.

From the records in the United States Fish and Wildlife Service files, it would appear that Wiseton, Saskatchewan had more birdwatchers than any other place of its size in North America. The first lists of spring migration dates from Wiseton were sent to the Biological Survey in Washington, D.C. back in 1915, with at least five different women contributing in succeeding years.

When Mrs. Marguerite Wilson as compiler of the Wiseton local history book was looking for more information about the contributions of Mrs. Margaret M. Dickson, she wrote on August 16, 1980 to the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) in Ottawa. Because current bird censusing in Canada is coordinated from the Maritimes office by Tony Erskine, the request went to Sackville, New Brunswick. With good government buck-passing, the request logically came back to Bernie Gollop in the Saskatoon office of CWS. Knowing that I had collected many of the old migration dates from Washington, Bernie forwarded the request to me.

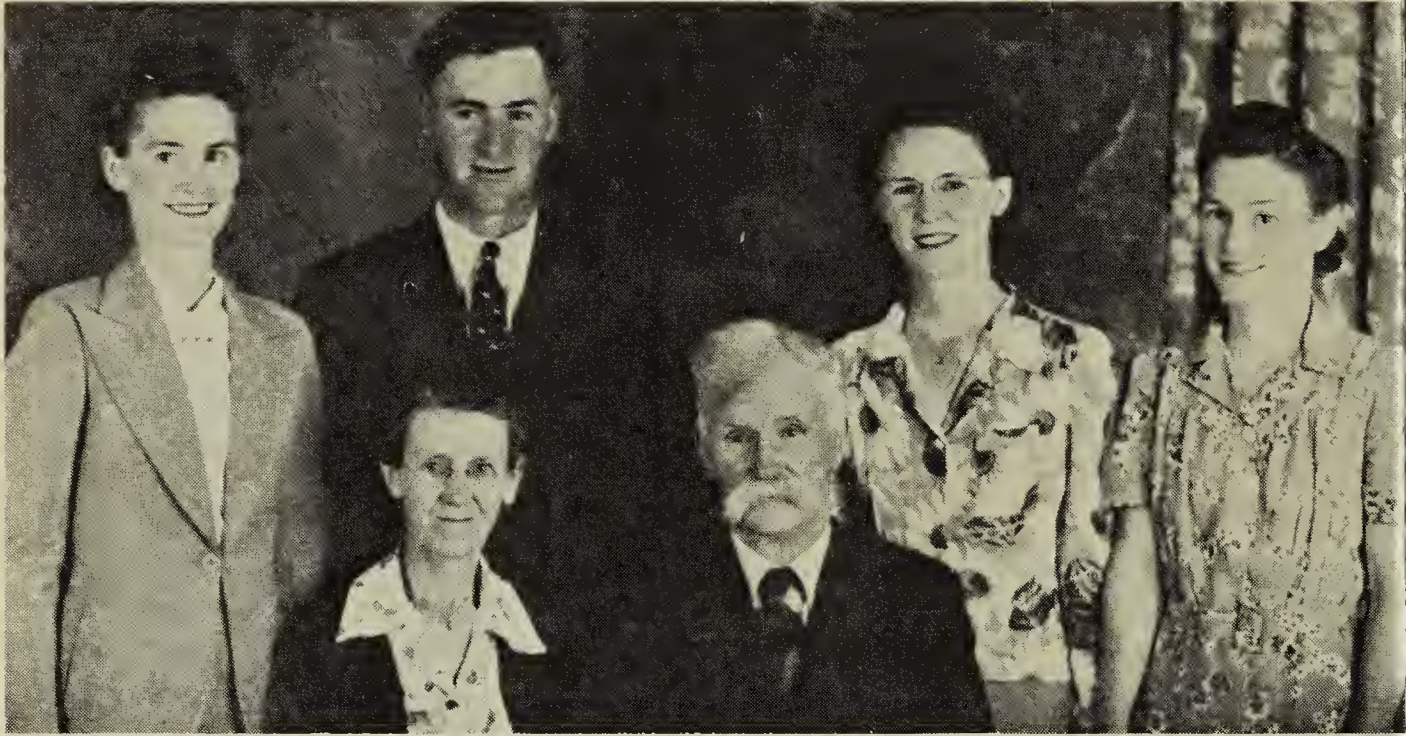
Indeed, I already had in my files electrostatic copies of the long sheets of original records from Wiseton for many years, submitted by the five Wiseton women. For 1915, 1917-18-19 and 1921, the spring records were sent in by Miss Ethel Belle Capling, 4-TWP28-R12-W3. In 1923 and 1924 records were compiled by Miss Beryl

Dickson of "Vistamere" farm, 32-27-12-W3, 3 miles north of Wiseton. Miss Esther Dickson sent in another set of records in 1924; the early dates were the same and later ones different. Although observations from Wiseton continued, copies of later reports are not available.

In early 1936 the Biological Survey began producing the mimeographed *Bird Migration Memorandum*. This had observations for 1935 from Miss Catherine Dickson, but subsequent annual reports for 1936 through 1940 were all by Mrs. Margaret M. Dickson, the woman who had masterminded these submissions from the very beginning.

I knew that the birder most familiar with the Wiseton area today is Bill Richards, who moved to Wiseton with the C.N.R. in 1948. I phoned Bill to ask whether any of the Dickson daughters were still alive. Not only was Esther, Mrs. Murray Johnson, living in Rosetown (I phoned her that evening), but to my astonishment the earliest reporter from 1915, Ethel Belle Capling, now Mrs. Downs, was living in Saskatoon!

A few hours later Mary and I took Mrs. Downs to a turkey supper and exchanged information later. I showed her the copies of her 1915 reports. We found to our surprise that Mrs. Downs was in the midst of writing contributions to the Wiseton history — Mrs. Wilson's enquiry had ended up



*The Dickson family of Wiseton. (From left to right, back row: Esther, Wemyss, Bery Catherine. Sitting: Margaret Maitland (Wemyss) Dickson and David C. Dickson.)*

with another member of her own committee — it had come full circle.

But what was this bird record keeping all about? It all began with Wells W. Cooke, a professor of agriculture first at the University of Vermont and later at the University of Colorado. Cooke felt that birds were the farmer's best hope in controlling harmful insects and noxious weeds, but he first needed to know what birds were present in each locality and for how long. He began getting reporters in each state to collect these dates in the spring of 1882. By 1885 he had included Canada and had three observers in Manitoba. In 1893 an American, Will C. Colt, who spent the year at Osler, about 15 miles north of Saskatoon, was the first to report from this part of the North West Territories. These reports, from 1885 on, were collected by the Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture in Washington. Professor Cooke joined this government service in 1901 to

give full-time supervision to his project.

The most consistent support for this project in the Canadian West came from the Wemyss family (pronounced "Weems"). They came from Scotland to Winnipeg in 1880 and moved onto a farm near Reburn, Manitoba in 1884.

M. Maitland Wemyss began submitting bird migration dates from Reburn in 1892. When the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1941 gave credit to the members of the Wemyss family for their consistent contributions over fifty years, surpassing that of any other family on the continent, they still did not realize that Margaret M. Wemyss and M. Maitland Wemyss were one and the same person.

In 1896, Margaret sent records as "Margaret M. Wemyss" from Neepawa, Manitoba, where she was now teaching school. Her brother George C. Wemyss took over the

Reaburn reports yearly until 1903, but ceased after moving to Winnipeg in 1904.

Meanwhile Margaret's sister, C. Esther Wemyss, sent reports from Reaburn, then Neepawa, and in 1898 and 1899 from Qu'Appelle, Assiniboia, where she was teaching at Starr's Point School. By 1901 she had become Mrs. Esther Cates and was reporting from Bonnie Brae farm, nine miles south of Qu'Appelle. She continued these reports through 1941 as the longest continuous reporter to the scheme. I had copies of her records through 1923 in my files, too, missing only the years 1913 and 1916.

Margaret Wemyss married D. C. Dickson and settled on 32-27-12-W3, nine miles north of Wiseton, in 1908. This farm was on the south shore of Barber Lake, fringed with willows and surrounded by a strip of pasture. It was an ideal location for observing prairie birds.

Ethel Capling Downs recalls that, when Mrs. Dickson enlisted her at the age of 14 years to keep bird arrival dates, she knew little about birds. Mrs. Dickson obviously felt that giving responsibility to Ethel first, and later the three Dickson daughters, would stimulate them to learn. Each girl received the credit, with the submissions under her own name, not Mrs. Dickson's name. Ethel recalls trying to identify each bird from Chester A. Reed's little field guides in the school library. She did not own binoculars.

Ethel Capling's 1915 list contained 60 species, of which 35 were undoubtedly correct identifications; by 1921 she listed 71 species. She had learned well. Her only errors were to call the Ring-billed Gull a Herring Gull and to give the summer Cedar Waxwing the name of the winter Bohemian Waxwing, common errors for birdwatchers at the time.

Beryl Dickson in 1924 had a list of 66 species. Her Barn Owl was almost certainly a Short-eared Owl, her Grasshopper Sparrow a Clay-colored Sparrow, and her Yellow-breasted and White-eyed Vireos were no doubt Warbling and Red-eyed Vireos. Records for the Prothonotary Warbler and Rock Wren are also questionable, but the remainder of her list was credible.

The submissions in the late 1920's and 1930's are not available, but in the *Bird Migration Memorandum* from 1936 through 1941, first-seen dates were reported from the four or, sometimes, five Saskatchewan observers: Mrs. Dickson or Catherine Dickson, Mrs. Cates, George Lang of Indian Head, Laurence Potter of Eastend, and sometimes E. H. M. Knowles of Regina.

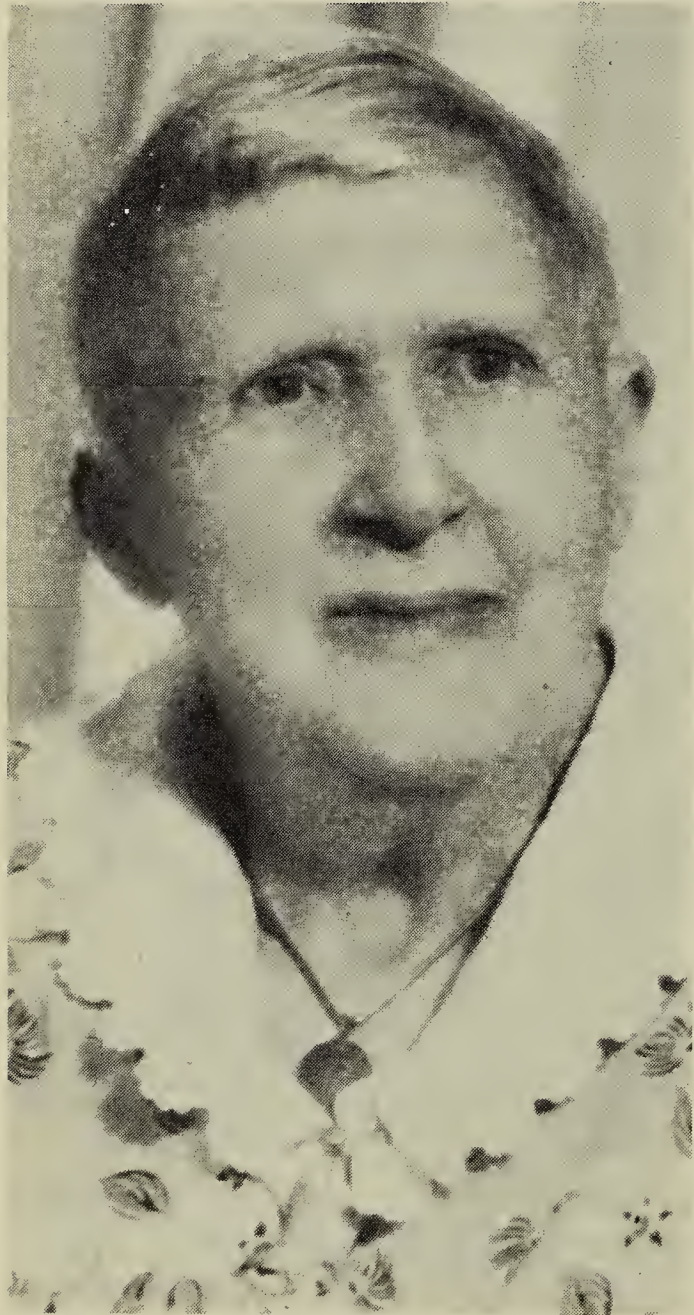
Because of her location beside Barber Lake, Mrs. Dickson consistently had the first-seen dates for two of her favourite birds, the Willet and the Marbled Godwit. Dates for the Willet were 29, 28, 30 and 26 of April and for the Godwit 26, 27, 26, 26 and 23 April in successive years.

There are several interesting Wiseton records among these arrival dates. The first sight record of the Parula Warbler for Saskatchewan was made by Beryl Dickson at Sovereign on 10 May 1935, and was the basis for the only record for Saskatchewan mentioned in the Fifth edition of *The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds* in 1957. Another interesting record was the single Gray Partridge seen near Wiseton by Beryl Dickson on April 13, 1923, the first for the area.

Ethel Capling made no mention of the House Sparrow in 1915, but in 1917 recorded it as "here all winter." This introduced species had reached Carnduff in 1900, Yorkton in 1901, the Cates' farm near Qu'Appelle in 1903,

and Eastend in 1907. One would have expected few of these sparrows at Wiseton prior to construction of the first grain elevator there in 1913. Wintering sparrows on district farms were probably not regular even in 1919, when Ethel noted the first two on the Capling farm on 6 March and several more on 14 March; they then became regular and common on 22 March.

By sympathetic perusal of the migration dates submitted from Qu'Appelle by Mrs. Esther Cates, one can learn a great deal about the difficulties faced by pioneer birdwatchers, as well as a little about



*Mrs. Esther (Wemyss) Cates  
of Qu'Appelle.*

the changing patterns of the birds themselves.

First, Mrs. Cates for years did not own any bird book! Appended to her notes for 1906, after 14 years of record keeping, is the plaintive question: "Have you any pamphlets or other books with pictures of birds by which we could identify them?" Second, Mrs. Cates accepted observations and identifications from neighbors and, perhaps, even from children without question.

Terminology was a real problem, in the early years especially. It is a reasonable assumption that "Wavy" was the Snow Goose, "Chewink" the Rufous-sided Towhee, an "Skunkbird" the Bobolink. Further light was shed by noting in entries from later years that the "Diamond Duck" was the American Wigeon, the "Lifebird" the Horned Lark, and the "Lemonbird" the Goldfinch. Dates sometimes give clues, so the "Red-crested Sparrow" on April 6, 1898 was no doubt a Tree Sparrow and not a Chipping Sparrow. The "Blue-backed Swallow" on May 4 of that year was almost certainly a Tree Swallow. I had thought it would be difficult to mistake a Scarlet Tanager: "four on 28 May 1899, last seen 30 May breeds; two on 20 May 1901, last seen 22 June; two on 19 June 1905," until I was shattered by her comment after her June 1906 arrival date for the "Scarlet Tanager": "either that or a garden oriole." And an oriole it, no doubt was.

One might make reasonable guesses as to the identity of the "Tookey," "Cut-throat Sparrow" and "Tzee-tzee Sparrow," but how would one know which was which between "Gopher Hawk," "Hen Hawk" and "Chicken Hawk"? And what were the "Large Grey Linnet", "Little Brown Sparrow", "Large Sparrow", "Large Seagull", "Freshwater Gull", "Big Grey Owl", "Small Grey Owl", "Big

Brown Woodpecker", "Small Grebe"  
and "Lesser Grebe"?

One suspects that several names were sometimes given to one species. The "Blackcaps" on 12 March 1898, were chickadees, was not the "Phoebe" reported on 29 March 1889, merely the spring song of the chickadee — and what about the "Tom-tit" on 8 May 1899?

Mrs. Cates' identifications improved steadily over the years, although in 1920 she still spoke of a "Tzee-tzee Sparrow", probably a Clay-colored Sparrow. In 1922 she still spoke of "Lemonbird" and her 19 April date for a "Rose-breasted Grosbeak" was most probably a Pine Grosbeak. One cannot accept her identifications of species such as Field Sparrow, Summer Tanager, King Rail, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Roadrunner.

All identifications between 1935 and the last issue of *Bird Migration Memorandum* which listed species and dates in 1941 were plausible, with the probable exceptions of a too-early LeConte's Sparrow on 14 April 1936, an Orchard Oriole on 10 June 1937, and perhaps the Parula Warbler she reported from Qu'Appelle on 10 May 1935.

Mrs. Cates' important early notes on the arrival of the House Sparrow at Qu'Appelle in 1903 and further observations of this new species through 1907 have an authentic ring and have already been published. Her first-ever hummingbird sighting was on 10 June 1906. Bobolinks were unusually common in 1903, when they were first seen on 7 June, while the American Cootner was unusually numerous in 1910. The Black-billed Magpie, not common in the early days, merited mention in 1898: "Two of these birds have been here for two years and are this season breeding here."

## Epilogue

We have come a long way since the turn of the century, when field identification was so uncertain that only specimens shot and skinned were considered reliable proof of a species' presence. We often forget that birding with binoculars did not really become practical until publication of Peterson's first *Field Guide* in 1934. We forget that this "revolution" continues to advance as each new edition of the field guides becomes more helpful, and as better binoculars and telescopes with coated lenses, and more and more bird song records become available. In Saskatchewan, contacts fostered by the field outings of local and provincial Natural History Societies and our *Blue Jay* have allowed newcomers to greatly shorten the "apprenticeship period" and quickly surpass their more experienced mentors who are beginning to experience early decrements in sight and hearing.

We must not belittle the slow, halting progress of the Wemyss girls. Their full story has been pieced together because of a "Celebrate Saskatchewan" event, and it is only appropriate that we should stop and salute their dogged perseverance that in time conquered most of the difficulties faced by pioneer birdwatchers.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mrs. Esther Johnston of Rosetown for supplying photographs of the Dickson family and of Mrs. Cates, and to Chandler S. Robins of the Patuxent Research Center, Laurel, Maryland, who so kindly provided copies of the Capling, Cates and Dickson migration records. Additional help was given by Lloyd Rodwell of the Saskatchewan Archives, and by Roy McLaughlin, W. S. Richards, Mrs. Marguerite Wilson and Mrs. Ethel Belle Downs.