

# Birding at Eloise Butler during the Martha Crone Years

## As noted by Curator Martha Crone in her journals

### Background on Martha Crone

Martha Crone was self-taught on birding and was a careful observer of bird activity. Her Garden Log always contained references to bird activity, to the coming and going of the hummingbirds and the warblers. The issues of the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden newsletter, *The Fringed Gentian*<sup>TM</sup>, when she was editor, always had a section on birds.

Bird feeders were maintained at the Garden. One of the frequent Garden visitors was Lulu May Aler. Miss Aler had set up and maintained a large bird feeding station at the back side of the Garden, where the asphalt path bisected the north meadow from the southern section of the Garden (the current Garden space is that southern section), so she would visit several times a week to maintain it. In later years when Miss Aler was too old to do it, the station was maintained by the Minneapolis Bird Club, then by Audubon. [Details on Miss Aler and the Bird Feeding Station are in a separate article.]

The Garden became so well known for bird activity the Dr. Thomas S. Roberts brought his University of Minnesota classes to the Garden for outings. Roberts published his 2 volume *Birds of Minnesota* in 1932 and contributed some copies of the illustrations for display in the Garden Office. The Roberts Bird Sanctuary at Lake Harriet is named for him.



Professor Thomas S. Roberts,  
University of Minnesota.

The official name for the Garden includes “and Bird Sanctuary” and that has its own unique history. The Garden was re-named in 1929 from “Native Plant Reserve” to “Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden” in honor of its first curator. Up until 1948 Martha referred to the Garden as the “Eloise Butler Native Plant Reserve” and usually just as “the Reserve.” In 1939 she added the words “and Bird Sanctuary” but then dropped those words in later years. (1) In 1968 “and Bird Sanctuary” was officially added to the name. [More details on the Garden Name in another document]

### Martha’s Notes about Birds.

[For the flavor of what Martha wrote about regarding birds, here are some extracts from her writings.

1938: In her annual report to the Board of Park Commissioners dated Dec. 10, 1938, Martha remarks that “The protection of the birds is being encouraged (sic), because they constitute the main check against the reproduction of insects. The opportunity for bird study here is unlimited.” In this remark she echoes the thoughts of Eloise Butler 25 years earlier in her annual report to the Park Board of 1914 when she wrote that “more and more birds felt attracted to the protection of the Garden.”

1939: Martha made many bird notes in her log during May and concluded the May bird notes on the 28th with this:

Reserve filled with bird song such as Oriole, Red-breasted Grosbeak, Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, Crested Fly-catcher, Veery, and Cuckoo. Followed two Connecticut warblers about for some time, they were singing their beecher, beecher, beecher, be song, somewhat like an Oven bird yet on one level instead of ascending. Hummingbird performed the pendulum swing.

Note: The pendulum swing is an aerial dance where the male bird moves in an arc in front of the female, wings buzzing, to show off his control.

Log June 4, 1939: Mrs. Ure [a birder] found a pair of Blue-gray Gantcatchers building a nest in a white oak tree on hill near SW corner of Reserve, about 20 feet from ground, beautifully constructed similar to a Humming-birds nest, but a little larger and thicker.

Martha noted those birds are very rare here.

Log July 2, 1939: A Mr. Yelick came in and took down the Gnatcatcher nest after the young had fledged and sent it to Dr. Roberts at the University. On the last day of August Martha wrote:

A blue-winged warbler flew up to the N.E. window while I closely observed it. It was hanging upside down on the leaves of the Dutchman's pipe vine. It was a splendid opportunity to note it in detail being only a few inches from me.

1941: Martha made many birding notes in her log this year but this one about the chickadees is particularly interesting:

June 3: "Chickadee pair inspecting the unpainted cheese box house east of office."

June 5: "At noon the Chickadees started to build in the house. Both very busy."

June 8: "Chickadees still come to the bird house every day."

June 14: "No sign of the Chickadees since a week ago yesterday, so proceeded to open the box to check against Cowbird intrusion, when out flew the female Chickadee, no doubt she is incubating. Later both were noted, he feeding her, a rare performance."

July 8: "Chickadees still feeding, the young clamoring loudly. Young Chickadees come begging for food, but receive none. Apparently they are of the first brood."

July 16: "Chickadees left the house this morning before I arrived, The adults came back several times as tho making sure that all were out."



Blue-gray Gantcatcher. Photo  
©John Crawley.



The Bird feeding station at the Garden needed replacement and Martha noted on Sept. 23, 1939:

Ben Johnson early and he came in to get orders for replacing Miss Aler's bird feeding station and chest for storing food. Had a nice visit. (2)

Ben Johnson was a Park Board Employee who later became Supervisor of Maintenance for the Park Board. She also noted that she updated a pheasant feeding place in the Garden, noting it "real firm and substantial this year." (3) Pheasants had long nested in the Garden. Eloise Butler noted finding eggs and nests on a number of occasions.

### **"Record breaking birding"**

1942: At the end of April, on the 28th, an event occurred which would be strange to us today. A Mr. Milton Thompson [head of the Science Museum at the Minneapolis Public Library] was in the Garden and "collected" a male Cooper's Hawk, but couldn't get the female. On the 30th there was a thunderstorm, very quiet in the Garden and Mr. Whitney Eastman left a card saying "they had collected the female hawk and found 2 eggs in the nest, thereby establishing an early record for the State." (4) This is the second note about Mr. Eastman who would later become a director of the Friends of the Wildflower Garden; Martha had noted a visit from him in 1941.

Robert Dassett Jr. was in on the 16th of May. He was a young teacher who loved the Garden and birding, later joining the Friends of the Wildflower Garden in 1960, becoming a board member in 1970 and President in 1971. The next day he was back with Whitney Eastman to join in the great birding. (5)



Robert Dassett

Birding was the best in May of 1942. Martha wrote on the 19th:

A red letter day. The birds have been here 7 days now feasting upon the many Canker worms. Noted Towhee, 4 thrushes Olive-backed, Gray-cheeked, Wood and Veery. Oven-bird, Oriole, Grosbeak, both Cuckoos, Indigo, Tanager, Wren, Whip-poor-will, Gnatcatcher, Verios - Red-eye, Warbling and Yel-throated. Warblers - Golden-wings, Parula, Canada, Caye May, Mourning, Yellow-throat, Blk-throated green, Blackburian, Red Start, Magnolia, Blk & White, Wilsons, Tenn., Nashville, Myrtle, Chestnut-sided, Black-poll, Bay-breasted, and Connecticut which was singing beautifully all day north of office. The Olive-backed thrush sings much like veery, except that it goes up and is thinner than the veery, it was singing everywhere. Also heard the tiny song of the Canada and the weal little peep of the Bay-breasted. The Tenn. came down on the Clematis within a few feet of me. Also noted Phoebe, Least Fly-catcher and crested Fly-catcher, Wht.-throated sparrow and both kinglets. This was record breaking birding. Came across 2 pheasant nests not far from path. (6)

A day later Miss Aler recorded 86 species including 22 warblers, all eating canker worms which were terrible that year, eating all the leaves off the trees. The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was again sighted nesting near Birch Pond during May and June.

1943: During May the elusive and rare Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was sighted again, this time in the Garden on the West Path. It was first seen in the area in 1939. (7)

The last notable event of May 1943 was on the 30th when she wrote in her log:

Many birds noted, also a most unusual find, a "western tanager" discovered by Mr. Whitney Eastman, south of upper gate just west of deep hole. We observed it a long while. It was traveling with a number of scarlet tanagers.

Mr. Eastman later joined the board of the Friends of the Wildflower Garden in 1961. When he was invited back to the 25th Annual Meeting of the Friends on June 4 1977 he told the story about that tanager - as reported in the Friends Minutes:

He believed he was alone in the Garden when he spotted a Western Tanager which had no business in this area. He looked around excitedly to find someone to vouch for his identification and called to a man who appeared nearby --Western tanager! Western Tanager!!. The man disappeared hurriedly and Mr. Eastman didn't know whether the man was an escapee from Stillwater [State Prison] or thought he was.



Whitney Eastman

1944: Large waves of birds were noted coming through the Garden May 18-21. The Audubon people checked off 100 species. The first Hummingbird was sighted May 12th. (8)

1953: Martha wrote:

The singing of the birds reached its climax during June, the sweetest month of the year. In July it has almost ceased and by August they are mostly silent, the season of nesting is over and they are no longer inspired to sing. (9)

1955: The Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was again seen adjacent to the garden where it nested some years ago. It had not been noted in this locality for many years. Her first report about the bird occurred in 1939. It appeared again in her 1942 diary notes and 1943 log.

1958: Martha writes of Winter birds:

The mess-tables are in full operation in the Wild Flower Garden. The feeders are filled with sunflower seeds every day. Beef suet is hung nearby and peanut butter placed in convenient

places. Millet seeds and crushed grain are placed on the ground in sheltered places for the Juncos. Save the seeds of Zinnias left over in the garden, the Goldfinches are very fond of them. (10)

1968: One hundred years ago, the Northern Cardinal was unknown in most of Minnesota. Martha made this observation from her cabin on the North Shore:

It was most interesting to observe a male cardinal the last week in October feeding in the drive of our cabin along the shore of Lake Superior, a mere 15 miles south of the border of Canada. He was in company with an immature female Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and many Juncos, Black-capped Chickadees, Fox Sparrows and various other sparrows. The Cardinal, the State bird of Kentucky, has been extending its range northward and westward. Records of its appearance in the north have been few until recent years these occurrences have increased.



Female Northern Cardinal

About 35 years ago it was confined as a resident bird to the southeastern portion of Minnesota. At that time it was considered a newcomer into Minnesota, and still is an object of special interest. At first it seemed to have met with little success in its attempts at nesting in the north and hopes for its survival were given up. Yet slowly they adjusted to a cooler climate and changed source of food. In the Wild Flower Garden they eagerly feed on sunflower seeds when the insects are gone but it was noted that these seeds were ignored by those in the north and they took only an assortment of smaller seeds.

Since cardinals are friendly, choosing by preference cultivated lands and coming freely into your yard, it perhaps has a better chance for survival. They are likely to be year-round residents and many depressing winter days are brightened by their presence. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a relative of the Cardinal which originally had lived in the deep forests, today is completely at home among the shade trees of towns and really seems to enjoy his contact with mankind. But he doesn't like cold weather and, in the winter, travels south to Central America and parts of South America. The observation of bird life is a delightful pastime and is certain to increase rapidly. (11)

References: Notes: "Log" refers to Martha Crone's Garden Log - a set of notes she made each year she was Curator. Copies of *The Fringed Gentian*<sup>TM</sup> are found in the Newsletter Archive.

1. Martha Crone's Annual Report to the Board of Park Commissioners, dated December 12, 1939.
2. Martha Crone's Diary, 1941, in the Martha Crone Collection, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).
3. Diary, October 3, 1941.
4. Diary, April 28, 1942.
5. Diary, May 16, 1942.
6. Garden Log, May 19, 1942.
7. Garden Log, May 9, 1943.
8. Garden Log, May 12, 1944.
9. *The Fringed Gentian*<sup>TM</sup>, Summer 1953, Vol. 1, No. 3.
10. *The Fringed Gentian*<sup>TM</sup>, January 1958, Vol. 6, No. 1.
11. *The Fringed Gentian*<sup>TM</sup>, January 1968, Vol. 16, No.1.