

by AMY T. MONTAGUE
Director, Museum of American
Bird Art at Mass Audubon

Plumed Tales



Passenger Pigeon by Edmund Sawyer (1880-1971) appeared in a 1911 educational leaflet issued by the National Association of Audubon Societies.

Editor's Note: The recipient of Historic New England's 2017 Prize for Collecting Works on Paper, Eddie Woodin has been a bird enthusiast since childhood. He began collecting materials related to his passion in the 1980s. The image on the cover and those accompanying this article are part of his collection.

When Eddie Woodin talks about his collection, his enthusiasm lights up the room. Whether you spend an hour or a day with him, you are keenly aware that if you had more time, Woodin would have many more stories—and each one just as fascinating as the last.

Woodin's collection is unrivaled, astonishing both in size and depth. At its center are more than 600 original artworks that were used as illustrations in a wide variety of publications about American birds—their identification, natural history, and conservation. Beyond the art, he owns thousands of related books, periodicals, handwritten letters, ephemera, and artifacts. The collection fills the walls, in salon-style hanging, of both his home and his office building, with additional items tucked away in file cabinets and stacked in every spare corner.

His stories range from anecdotes about artists to, not surprisingly, the way he ferreted out rare pieces from obscure locations and persuaded the owners to part with them. But each of those accounts is a part of what Woodin calls *The Story*: the critical role that art played in the American conservation movement from the 1890s through the 1960s.

The collection includes Roger Tory Peterson's revolutionary 1934 publication, *A Field Guide to the Birds*, which ignited interest in birdwatching across the country. Other publications range from the popular to the scientific: bird identification cards; educational leaflets; *Bird-Lore*, the journal of the National Association of Audubon Societies; *The Birds of New York*, published by the state; and *The Auk*, the journal of the American Ornithologists' Union.

One example from Woodin's collection is Edmund Sawyer's 1910 watercolor of a passenger pigeon used to illustrate an educational leaflet published in 1911,

just three years before the last passenger pigeon died. The extinction of the passenger pigeon, once seen in sky-darkening billions, became a clarion call for bird protection.

Woodin's passion for this subject, his vision for a comprehensive collection, and his tireless zeal to pursue the next acquisition are extraordinary. Remarkable, too, is his keen desire that this collection will inspire people of all ages to take an interest in birds and in the conservation of the natural world. For him, this is a spiritual endeavor, and it ties closely with his other philanthropic efforts. Woodin loves to connect children with nature, especially birds. He invites children's groups into his home to see the collection and he has supplied binoculars and field guides to local organizations to encourage children's nature study.

Concerned about the decline of the brown bat and tree swallow populations due to the plunge in insect numbers, Woodin has been instrumental in establishing regulations to limit pesticide use, both in the town where he lives and in the nearby city of Portland, Maine, where

one of the most stringent pesticide ordinances in the country was recently passed.

Collecting is deeply ingrained in Woodin. He remembers buying his first baseball card at the age of five with a nickel his parents gave him. His enthusiasm for birds and bird art stretches back nearly as far. He grew up in West Concord, Massachusetts, and credits his childhood surroundings for his appreciation of history. Woodin has fond memories of paging through illustrated bird books in the public library and of learning the names of common birds from a set of National Audubon Society bird identification cards in his home. He began birding at the age of nine and readily acknowledges that birding is a form of collecting.

Woodin has logged more than 11,000 hours over the past fifteen or so years pursuing objects for his collection. Now he is refining his holdings. But he isn't done yet. His eye is always out for the next thrilling acquisition that will help him tell The Story in the most compelling way. 🐦

LEFT Canadian artist Allan Brooks (1869-1946) painted *Red-tailed Hawks*, which was used in *Hawks of North America* by John B. May, published in 1935 by the National Association of Audubon Societies. **RIGHT** *Whip-poor-wills*, painted in 1917, is the work of American wildlife illustrator Robert Bruce Horsfall (1869-1948).

