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Thomas Sadler Roberts and *The Birds of Minnesota*

by Penelope Krosch

Thomas Sadler Roberts' *The Birds of Minnesota* represents a life's work of observation of Minnesota birds spanning the years between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Published in 1932, *The Birds of Minnesota* was an immediate success and became a local best seller. Part of its appeal was the full color illustrations by artists such as Francis Lee Jaques, Major Allan Brooks and others. Appreciated by expert and novice alike, it struck an unusual balance between scientific thoroughness and a text which appealed to amateurs. The book continues to be an important reference, thanks to the depth of knowledge of its author, T.S. Roberts.

Roberts began his lifelong study of birds as a Minneapolis teenager. In



T.S. Roberts studying his bird collection, ca. 1915.

1874, when Thomas was sixteen years old, his father encouraged him to keep a journal of his natural history observations. Two years later young Roberts and a few of his like-minded friends formed their own natural history club. The Young Naturalists' Society met in and kept their collections in Roberts' bedroom.

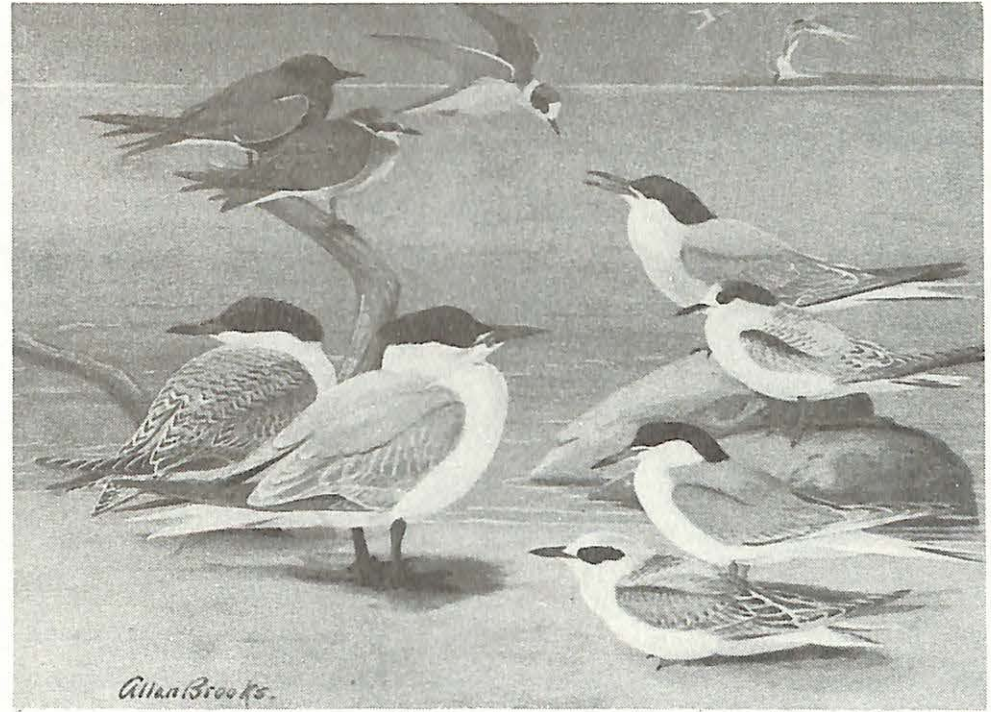
In 1877, Roberts enrolled at the University of Minnesota in the sciences. Health problems interrupted Roberts' academic studies in 1879. His father suggested the standard prescription for health problems, a vigorous outdoors life, and Roberts found work as a land examiner for the railroads from 1879 to 1883. Roberts camped out and tramped over each section of land granted to the railways, recording its features. The journals of his experiences in Minnesota and Dakota Territory are among the few records of this phase of railroad history. Because of, or in spite of this cure, Roberts' health improved and he took up his studies in 1882.

Roberts enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School and graduated fifth in his class in 1885. Roberts possessed a nearly perfect recall which led one of his instructors to believe he was cheating on an examination. This memory later proved invaluable when he began to assemble the data for *The Birds of Minnesota*. After his intern training in Philadelphia, he returned to Minneapolis in 1887. Roberts soon established a successful practice, married, and resumed his study of birds. While his practice was general, his chief interest was in obstetrical and pediatric medicine. The Mayo brothers considered Roberts one of the top five diagnosticians in the country. In 1900, he joined the University of Minnesota faculty as Professor of Diseases of Children, a position he held until 1913 when he joined the mass resignation from the Department of Medicine to assist in the reorganization of medical

education. Much to the dismay of his patients, Roberts retired from his medical practice in 1915 at age 57 to become Professor of Ornithology and Associate Curator of the Zoological Museum, now the Bell Museum. Roberts hoped that the University appointment would give him the opportunity to publish the data on Minnesota birdlife which he had collected since 1874. This second career lasted over thirty years.

Roberts' late-life career change made a significant contribution to Minnesota's natural heritage. As curator, Roberts transformed the old Zoological Museum from "a heterogeneous assemblage of mounted mammals" into a modern natural history museum. Roberts' second great gift to the state was his two-volume masterpiece, *The Birds of Minnesota*.

In 1929, several of Roberts' friends set up the Thomas S. Roberts Fund for a book on Minnesota birds. The generous fund (\$30,500) made it possible to begin preparing the text and negotiate with the artists. Louis Agassiz Fuertes was to have done most of the paintings, but was killed in a railroad accident in 1927. The only examples of his work in the book are the quail plate and the small drawing of Canada geese. Roberts next contacted Major Allan Brooks and George Miksch Sutton, established wildlife artists and illustrators. Walter Breckenridge, who was then preparator of the Museum, later did 14 plates and all of the sketches in the text. Roberts also approached Walter Alois Weber, a young artist whose work had been praised by Brooks. Late in 1929, Roberts completed his team of artists when he contacted Francis Lee Jaques. Jaques, a native Minnesotan, was on the staff of the American Museum of Natural History. Brooks approved of Jaques and suggested that he do the larger birds (such as the pelicans) which he handled exceptionally well.



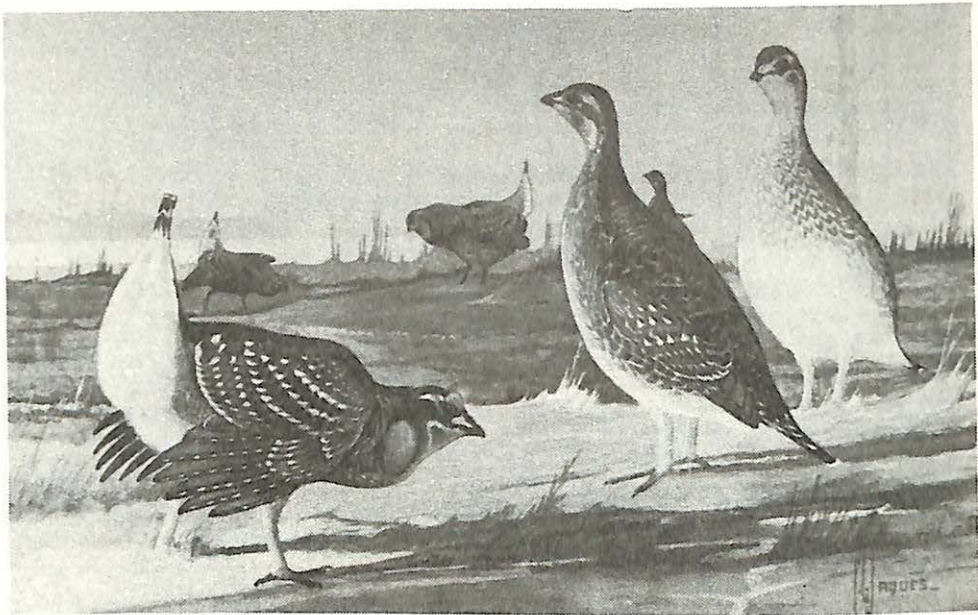
Terns: black, Caspian, common, and Forster's; plate 40, by Allan Brooks.

As the illustrations proceeded, Roberts began compiling his data on birds. Very early on, Roberts had developed a network of fellow bird lovers throughout Minnesota who dutifully reported their observations to him. In compiling *The Birds of Minnesota*, Roberts reviewed all of the correspondence and his journals and marked the information which would be used in the book.

By the spring of 1930 half of the 92 paintings were completed and proofs of the first ones had been completed by McGill Lithograph Company, using a seven color process. This process, which resembled older lithographic practices, was expensive and called for a fair amount of hand work. The University of Minnesota Press agreed to publish the book despite reservations regarding successful sales of a bird book during the Depression.

The book came out in 1932 in two bindings, a deluxe leather and a cloth. Roberts persuaded the Press to sell the book for \$6 per set, less than half the cost of production. It was extremely important to Roberts that the book be available to all who might be interested in birds.

Reviews and comments were universally complimentary. Roberts had worked hard to incorporate scientific integrity with a text which would appeal to amateurs, and was deeply touched by the compliments from professional ornithologists. The book balanced the work of young wildlife artists with the older and better known. It provides an important source of information regarding the ecological history of Minnesota, an area which includes both eastern and western birdlife. Roberts' observations span a time when passenger pigeons were still



Sharp-tailed grouse, plate 22, by Francis Lee Jaques.

common and prairie chickens could be heard booming on the site of the present day Twin Cities International Airport, to an era when budding concern was expressed about the dwindling numbers and varieties of wildlife.

The first edition of the book (5,000 copies) was exhausted within eighteen months of its release. Plans were soon underway to publish the prints accompanied by a description of each species. The successful *Bird Portraits in Color* was issued in 1934. Roberts thought that the text was more appropriate for schools and the general reader than the two volume work. By 1936, Roberts revised and updated the text and issued the second edition of the original two volume work. The book is now only available in used book stores and is considered a collector's item. The price varies according to condition and binding. The cloth bound edition, however, averages \$125 per set.

In 1938, the American Ornithologists' Union awarded Roberts the Brewster Medal at their annual meeting in

Washington, D.C. The medal and its honorarium were awarded "for the most meritorious work on American Birds." Roberts, however, never considered himself to be a professional ornithologist and maintained his claim as an amateur until his death in 1946 at age 88. However, his devotion to his subject and attention to detail made him the equal of any of his colleagues who he considered professional ornithologists. Roberts can truly be considered the father of Minnesota ornithology ■

Based on records of the Bell Museum of Natural History on deposit at the University of Minnesota Archives. Penelope Krosch is Archivist and Head of University Archives.

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