



100 Years

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100-Years Ago Today: In the Path of a Giant

Story by John Cebula

PEOPLE DRIVING north on Main Street in Glen Ellyn from downtown, passing the large, period houses, may not pay much attention to the wooded ravine just north of Hawthorne Boulevard. If they slow down, they may see a sign stating that the ravine, which has a small stream running down its middle, is the Benjamin Gault Bird Sanctuary. Someone walking on the west side of Main Street might also notice that the large house, designated an historic site by the Glen Ellyn Historical Society, on the southwest corner of Main and Hawthorne, was the home of Benjamin True Gault.

The term “citizen-scientist” has recently come into vogue to describe the activities of amateurs, such as myself, who participate in scientific research and allow scientists to accumulate more data than they could alone. For example, thousands of bird watchers record their observations on eBird.com, allowing scientists to monitor bird populations.

Gault (1858-1942) was born in Decatur with the family moving to Chicago in 1890. Gault lived in Glen Ellyn, boarding in various houses, until his death. Traveling the world to observe birds, Gault never seemed to have had a job that earned him a living, although he was offered a job at the British Museum in 1924, which he declined. He claimed his father knew Abraham Lincoln personally, and he himself claimed to have witnessed the great Chicago Fire.

Gault was a bird watcher's bird watcher, although he engaged in activities that today would be an anathema to most people. Gault collected bird eggs, a hobby known as oology, and bird skins, a practice that was widely accepted until Roger Tory Peterson published *A Field Guide to the Birds of the Eastern United States* in 1934. The collections of eggs and skins Gault made were donated to The Field Museum and the Chicago Academy of Sciences (now the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum), where they are still used by scientists. Gault was also a prolific writer and note-taker: his personal papers, now housed at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, comprise more than 10 feet of shelf space and consist of notes, correspondence (often with the leading scientists of the time, such as another noted Illinoisan ornithologist, Robert Ridgway), and photographic material. Gault published his observations in several journals, including 24 published in *The Wilson Bulletin*, one of the oldest publications dedicated to birds in the United States. Gault was an avid amateur photographer, and among his photos



In one Illinois Audubon Society Bulletin story Gault recalls how rural Chicago was in the 1870s and 1880s, describing cornfields along where California Avenue is today and uncultivated expanses of land around Glen Ellyn. Gault recalled seeing prairie-chickens nesting at what is today Garfield Park.



is one from 1910, taken in Glen Ellyn and showing a stretch of prairie.

I made my first visit to the Glen Ellyn sanctuary during a Spring Bird Count many years ago. The sanctuary was established in 1932 by the Glen Ellyn Park Board. In 1937 his many admirers formed the Benjamin T. Gault Bird Club. There is a bench in the sanctuary and a sign with a brief biography of Gault and his record of birds he saw in Glen Ellyn with notes on when he saw them and how common they were.

Gault's article "The Passenger Pigeon in Atkin County, Minnesota, with a Recent Record for Northeastern Illinois," published in the American Ornithological Society's *The Auk* in 1895, reported that a correspondent of Gault's had seen a flock of 500 pigeons in his "sugar bush" (a stand of sugar maple trees). Noting that the passenger pigeon had become "extremely rare in Northeastern Illinois," Gault wrote that the last pigeon he had seen was three years earlier on September 4, 1892, in Glen Ellyn. The bird was picking seeds out of horse droppings.

Gault's contributions as a citizen-scientist continue to this day. The eggs and bird skins he collected are still used by researchers. His writings provide us with an insight, a baseline, as to what the county's natural history was like scarcely 100 years ago and how much it has changed. Gault was an early member of the Illinois Audubon Society and served on its Board of Directors for several years; he was also an Honorary Director of the group. The *Bulletin* began reporting Gault's observations in its Winter 1918-1919 issue. Gault contributed a number of "Mid-Winter Field Notes."

Benjamin True Gault passed away on March 20, 1942 and is buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Glen Ellyn. His grave is marked with a large, pitted grey stone, an eroding inscription with his name, his dates and stating "Naturalist." Today the marker is easily overlooked, but I try to find it once a year during the annual Spring Bird Count. There, I silently thank Benjamin, and people like him, who appreciated and loved nature, and who set an example for me to follow. ■



BIO

John Cebula retired from the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn. This article is an excerpt from his upcoming book *Wild DuPage: A Natural (and Personal) History*.



Osprey Tower

Story & photos by Bob Andrini

IN MARCH 2019, four Kane County Audubon Society (KCAS) members, three members of the Kane County Forest Preserve District and one Illinois Audubon Society board member, Michael Campbell, joined to erect an osprey nesting platform at Oakhurst Forest Preserve in Aurora.

This day got its start several years ago when the late KCAS member Jerry Hope proposed an idea to erect an osprey tower in a local forest preserve. For several years, osprey have been nesting in nearby Fermi Lab, and we had hopes that the young from Fermi might choose a platform in Kane County. Considerable discussion took place among the partners and Campbell, who has a lot of experience erecting osprey platforms and became the 'go-to' guy for questions. We were ready to put up the platform.

Site selection was one of the first priorities, and Oakhurst Forest Preserve was chosen. KCAS was given a donation from Masonic Lodge #48 in honor of Hope being a Mason for 60 years. He earmarked the money for osprey towers. Once the paperwork and site selection were complete, Campbell started building the tower framework.

How does one put up a tower in the middle of a frozen pond? After dragging the tower to the middle of the frozen pond, the locations for the four legs were marked and cutting of the 'leg-holes' began. A plume of icy water rose as the chain saw cut through about 8 inches of ice. Once all four holes were cut, the legs were lowered through the holes. Five-gallon pails filled with concrete were attached to the leg supports. From dragging the platform on the ice, to standing back and admiring our work it took about 3 hours.

Campbell's 'non-stop' actions while we gave him encouragement, and his experience of knowing what to do when, were invaluable. When the pond ices up this winter the platform can be installed, and with luck, the first inhabitants will arrive in the spring and successfully rear a clutch of osprey chicks.

KCAS thanks the 'youngsters' from the Forest Preserve District for their strength, endurance and the ice cleats that allowed us to walk on the ice. ■



The participants were: from KCAS – Bob Andrini (not shown), Vernon Lavia, Don Mueggenborg, and Chuck Petersen; from Kane County Forest Preserve District – Mike Brien, Bill Graser and Taylor Joray; and Mike Campbell (from IAS).