



Illinois Audubon Society's Next Acquisition The Gremel Wildlife Sanctuary

STORY BY Tom Clay
PHOTOS courtesy Francis O'Byrne

On April 10, 2016, the Illinois Audubon Society began its 120th year of operation. When I think about how much our world has changed through the course of these years, I cannot help but wonder; how and why has Illinois Audubon endured? The short answer is, of course, we have endured because of the support of our dedicated membership. That answers the “how” of our enduring history but, it does not answer the “why.”

Why do our members support Illinois Audubon? I think the story I am about to tell you of one long-time Illinois Audubon member might help answer that question.

Russ Gremel was born in Chicago in 1918, and since 1922, he has resided in the home his parents purchased in Chicago’s Portage Park neighborhood. Russ’s childhood was not easy as the Great Depression hit his family hard and making ends meet was a challenge. He began every day at 4 a.m. starting the furnace, delivering newspapers, searching for spilled coal along the railways and eventually making a two mile walk to school.

In the midst of such difficult times, Russ became active in scouting and developed a sincere appreciation of nature. He would eventually fish the Canadian boundary waters, and as a recent high school graduate left home to explore the western United States. He fished the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon and camped along side Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park. He worked as he traveled and told me he returned to Chicago



Scout Master Russ Gremel leading Chicago's Boy Scout Troop 979.

from his travels with more money than he had at the beginning of his adventure.

To this day, Russell maintains his position as a Scout Master—a position he's held for 65 years. In fact, as the leader of Chicago's BSA Troop 979, he has "turned out" 175 Eagle Scouts. I had the pleasure to meet some of these scouts. Two of them serve as his estate executors and many others remain in close contact with Russ. When they speak of him and the influence he had on their lives, voices crack and tears form. He was their mentor as young men, and so many years later he remains their friend.

Russell Gremel is a World War II and Korean War veteran. He was drafted as a private in March 1941. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he attended Officer Training School and soon thereafter Lieutenant Gremel would serve on the Mariana Islands of Saipan and Tinian. He went to war in 1941 and would not return home to see his family for the next five years.

When Russ returned from the Pacific Theater, he immediately enrolled



Russell Gremel (left) has enduring friendships with many of the 175 Eagle Scouts he mentored in his 65 years as a Scout Master.

in Northwestern University because, according to him, "I was born to be a lawyer." He told me he practiced "Abraham Lincoln law" in that he would take on all types of case work including criminal and civil cases. Regardless, that did not stop the Army from calling Russ back into service for the Korean War. Because his father had recently passed, and because of the length of time he previously served overseas, Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen pulled some strings, allowing Russ to remain stateside and serve in Washington, D.C.

Following his service, Russ was promoted to Captain Gremel and honorably discharged. Returning to his Chicago home, he practiced law, was active in scouting and spent as much time as he could fishing and camping.

Although he "did alright" practicing law, Russ determined life was too short for the rigors of every day work. For that reason, at age 45, Russell "walked away from work and surrounded himself in nature." In order to do so, he made some wise investments and scaled back his needs to align with his income. It was during this time that Russ became disgusted by how people were treating the environment.

Returning to Yellowstone he discovered bleachers erected at Old Faithful. He witnessed first-hand the deplorable and toxic condition of Lake Erie. He saw a degraded Des Plaines

River and noted the absence of birdsong from his Chicago neighborhood. Russ was appalled by man's treatment of the environment and more than ever before, he realized the critical need for environmental education and awareness. While continuing to instill in scouts the importance of land conservation and

stewardship, he also became keenly aware of the need for land protection. And, in 1965, Russ Gremel joined the Illinois Audubon Society.

When I asked why he joined the Society, Russ said he was interested in our cause and believes we care more about the results of our work rather than the reward. As a member of our Fort Dearborn Chapter, Russ attended many bird hikes and was struck by the expertise and patience demonstrated by hike leaders. Admitting he's not the world's greatest birder, he said the chapter members made him feel welcome and comfortable.

With his 98th birthday approaching this September, I asked Russ about the remarkable life he continues to lead. I wanted to know his secrets for his many successes. With a sly smile, a look that precipitated his scouts to call him "the old fox," Russ said he's lived his life by following two important virtues—"to never be envious of others and to never hold a grudge." As for Russ remaining single, he said he was engaged multiple times but decided he was not the marrying type. Besides, he said he "didn't want anyone telling him he had to go to a sister-in-law's home for Sunday dinner."

As for his other life's secrets, Russ claims knowing a "scout's pace and knowing how to use a compass" helped him a lot during his military service. He explained a scout's pace involved a



IAS Executive Director Tom Clay met with Russell Gremel to discuss his land conservation desires.

repeated combination of walking and trotting, thus covering a lot of ground while intermittently recovering your breath. Russ also lives by a simple rule; “never do anything that you wouldn’t want printed in the Chicago Tribune.”

So, I’ve told you how the Illinois Audubon Society has endured for 120 years and I’ve told you why we have endured in the eyes of Russ Gremel, a Society member for more than a half century. That leaves one more thing to tell you and that’s why we’re dedicating an *Illinois Audubon* magazine article in honor of Russ (as if his life story isn’t enough).

Do you remember that I mentioned Russ making some sound investments? In 1953 he purchased 20 shares of his neighborhood pharmacy’s stock for \$30 per share. He told me he purchased their stock because they were locally based and because “women always need cosmetics and old people always need medicine.” Russ’s shares doubled and they doubled again and for the next 63 years, his number of shares and the stock’s value kept increasing. Well, a few weeks ago, Russell donated his once 20, and now 27,648, shares of stock to the Illinois Audubon Society.

In return for his amazing \$2.2 million donation, besides his wanting our organization to continue enduring, Russ would like for us to find and purchase the Gremel Wildlife Sanctuary. There, he hopes it is a place where scouts will always have a place to camp and fish. He envisions it as a destination where birds will always soar and sing, and where visitors of all ages and walks of life can open their hearts and minds to the wonders of nature.

Russ, we cannot thank you enough. You lead by example and you inspire us to be better—better people and better stewards of the land. You are absolutely a hero of this country and when your wildlife sanctuary gates swing open for the first time, a door will forever be opened in your honor and in honor of this nation’s Greatest Generation. ■



About Tom

Tom Clay is the Executive Director of the Illinois Audubon Society.



A Brand of Ignorance

Protecting Migratory Birds

100th Anniversary of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act

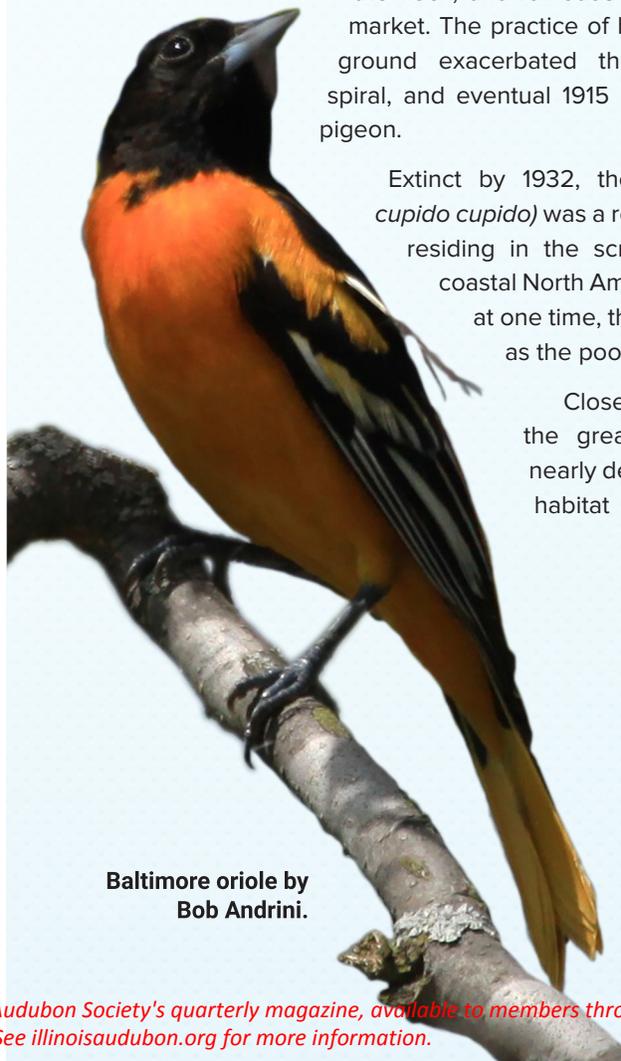
There was a time in our history when few people blinked an eye at the exploitation of millions of North American birds, some to the point of extinction.

The great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) was a readily available food for early settlers, was commonly used as fish bait, and the down was a highly desired commodity in Europe. As the bird became rarer, many individuals were motivated to acquire a skin and egg for their collection. Collectively, these actions drove the auk to its 1852 extinction.

In the mid 1850s, the Ohio legislature saw no need to protect the “wonderfully prolific” passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), as “no ordinary destruction can lessen them, or be missed from the myriads that are yearly produced.” Those sky-darkening pigeon flocks became easy targets for hunters. The advent of the telegraph enabled the commercial hunter to track the flock, and railroads carried scores of barrels to market. The practice of hunting birds on the nesting ground exacerbated the unbelievable downward spiral, and eventual 1915 extinction of the passenger pigeon.

Extinct by 1932, the heath hen (*Tympanuchus cupido cupido*) was a relative of the prairie-chicken, residing in the scrubby heartland barrens of coastal North America. So plentiful and cheap at one time, the heath hen became known as the poor man’s food.

Closer to home is the case of the greater prairie-chicken, a bird nearly decimated by overharvest and habitat loss. In 1912, *Tympanuchus*



Baltimore oriole by
Bob Andrini.

