

The Beginnings of DFO
By Carol Cochran
2010

Recently I spent a few hours in the Archives at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, reading the early history of DFO. As a DFO member and former employee of DMNS, I was interested to learn that the close relationship between the two organizations has been there from the beginning. Neither organization had its current name back in 1935, when on January 27 the as-yet unnamed bird club met at the Colorado Museum of Natural History. Twenty-two people came together then; most or all were students in Mr. Robert J. Niedrach's ornithology class at the University of Denver who wanted to continue their study of birds in a group or club.

Members proposed names for the club at this first meeting. Their suggestions were The Robert J. Niedrach Bird Club, The Robert J. Niedrach Ornithology Club, and The Robert J. Niedrach Nature Club. These suggestions are evidence of the admiration and affection club members felt for their "guide and counselor." Niedrach was an important figure in the history of the club, of the museum, and of early ornithology. He was a high school drop-out who came to Denver in 1910 as a young taxidermist. Two years later he became an assistant to Frederick C. Lincoln, Curator of Birds at the Museum. There he stayed for nearly 60 years, serving as Preparator, Curator of Birds, and Assistant to Museum Director Alfred M. Bailey. Along the way, this self-educated ornithologist was awarded an Honorary Masters Degree in Science and an Honorary Doctors Degree in Science from the University of Colorado, Boulder. He was widely published, was responsible for a number of Colorado's first state records, (including a Scissor-tailed flycatcher, a Chestnut-sided warbler, and a Cerulean warbler, all in the DMNS collection), was well-travelled, and was a befriender of wildlife, most notably of his companion, Dick, the raven. Niedrach was serious about education: he developed a traveling exhibit of specimens which visited schools, conducted Saturday morning programs on birds and wildlife, mentored Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls, and initiated the Museum's education department in 1969. It's little wonder then that Niedrach was behind the founding of DFO.

Minutes of that first club meeting, recorded by Secretary Margaret Pritchett, note that Niedrach appreciated the gesture of a club in his name, but thought it more appropriate that the word "bird" appear most prominently in the title. At the next meeting, members named their organization The Colorado Bird Club. Mrs. Pritchett records other business of that first meeting. "Mr. Niedrach advised that the club keep out of political wrangling which has been detrimental to a number of outdoor organizations, but that the group should stand back of [that is, support] laws for bird protection." Helena K. Wosnuk was elected President; dues were set at \$1 per year, and the group decided to look to the Colorado Mountain Club for information on starting a non-profit organization.

Meetings were held every month, except the summer months, at 8 pm at the Museum; they included a business meeting, a talk, reports of bird sightings, and refreshments.

During the April 1935 meeting, the group approved a letter to Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes supporting the establishment of wildlife refuges as part of the Taylor Grazing Act. Also at this meeting, Miss Tate passed around an object she'd acquired in Mississippi which she thought might be unfamiliar to members: it was the skin of a European starling. That was a sign of the times, as was this item in the minutes of a 1936 meeting: the Club had posted a sign on 32nd and Kearney warning that the burrowing owls in that vicinity were under the protection of the Colorado Bird Club and the Museum. (Other evidence of Park Hill's prairie ancestry is the mount of a black-footed ferret taken in that neighborhood in 1912 and now in the Museum's collection.)

In an undated recollection, Margaret Pritchett sent these words to all of us: "Those of us who have been members of the Club longest hope that the people who attend the meetings now and who go on field trips will continue to derive the same inspiration and keen pleasure which the first members always enjoyed through their earnest observation and faithful pursuit of Nature's wonders in the out-of-doors, particularly in the study of birds."

DMNS has DFO minutes and other records from the beginning to the present, thanks to the careful preservation and donation of people like Warren Finch, long-time DFO historian. These records are easily accessible at DMNS, and many have been scanned and will soon be on-line. They are a lot of fun to read, and provide important historical and ornithological information. You are welcome, and in fact encouraged, to view them for yourselves—and to contribute your own portion of the history of DFO and Colorado birding with donations of your field notes, check lists, photos, scrapbooks and other materials.