



Dr. Johan C. Hvoslef on his daily walk through Lanesboro, sometime between 1900 and 1905. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

Perhaps no one man did so much to develop a knowledge of the bird-life of a single locality in the state as did Dr. Johan C. Hvoslef. . . . Fortunately he recorded carefully and accurately everything that came under his notice, and Minnesota bird-students owe no small debt of gratitude to this retiring but accomplished and hardworking man of science.

Thomas J. Roberts
The Birds of Minnesota

By NANCY OVERCOTT

L

anesboro, May 1903, 5 a.m., Dr. Johan C. Hvoslef arrived at his office. After finishing notes in his diary from the day before, he walked up Church Hill to the cemetery where his little daughter, Agnes, was buried.

Northern bobwhites were calling, and prairie chickens were booming in the distance. Wood anemones, buttercups, and other woodland wildflowers were in bloom.

Though this route remains, forest and dirt roads have given way to houses and paved streets. The wildflowers have retreated too. Bobwhites disappeared in the 1950s, after large farms with row crops replaced small pastures and hedgerows. Prairie chickens disappeared in the 1930s because of overhunting and habitat loss.

This bucolic town in southeastern Minnesota was much different in Hvoslef's day. Yet Lanesboro owes its current vitality to its enduring natural beauty. The town was founded in 1868 by investors attracted by the railroad and the water power provided by the Root River. Investors lured both settlers and tourists to the town with newspaper advertisements stating: "No place in Minnesota presents more natural attractions than Lanesboro, surrounded as it is by beautiful coves, shady retreats, splendid boating, fine drives, and breathtaking cliffs that tower above the charming valley."

Lanesboro's population, mostly Norwegian and Irish, quickly rose to 1,600. A dam, built to supply water power for flour milling, also

*What can we learn from the diaries
of a doctor who walked the countryside?*

A Sense of Place

Blufflands Journal

created Mill Pond Lake for boating and fishing.

It was into this setting that Johan Hvoslef—a Norwegian immigrant fresh from medical school in Chicago—moved in 1876. He practiced medicine and observed nature here for 44 years. From 1881 to 1918, he filled 56 notebooks, the first 38 written in Norwegian and the last 18 in English, with accounts of his daily activities, world events, local weather, birds, and plants.

Many of Hvoslef's observations took place on daily walks to the Lanesboro cemetery, after his 6-year-old daughter died of pneumonia in 1898.

After Hvoslef's death in 1920, his wife presented the diaries to what is now the Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota. In 1932 museum director Thomas S. Roberts made extensive use of Hvoslef's observations in his seminal work *The Birds of Minnesota*. In 1941 the first two notebooks were translated into English. Although several people reviewed them, the diaries mostly remained in storage for the next half-century. Today, wildlife scientists and students are reading the diaries as they study the area's natural history and recent changes to the landscape.

In His Name. In 1997 Kinsey and Lilica Anderson donated property 14 miles south of Lanesboro to the Department of Natural Resources for use as a wildlife management area. The 233 acres include grasslands, limestone bluffs, bottomland and upland deciduous woods, springs, a pond, and a designated trout stream.

"August 3, 1896. I saw an *Ectopistes migratorius* [passenger pigeon] near Ole Bendikson's. This was the last wild pigeon I ever saw."



Kinsey Anderson, an experienced birder, asked that the WMA be named for Hvoslef.

Creation of Dr. Johan C. Hvoslef WMA sparked renewed interest in the diaries. Carrol Henderson, DNR Nongame Wildlife Program supervisor, spearheaded a project to transcribe them as a historical record of the area's nongame species.

The diaries offer an opportunity to compare past and present natural history. For example, in a May 1903 entry, Hvoslef said he checked a loggerhead shrike nest in a brushy field and found two eggs. He heard lark sparrows singing nearby. Both loggerhead shrikes and lark sparrows have declined in recent years, and now breed farther west in areas with more fields and open woods.

The doctor walked across a native prairie, where Indian-paintbrush, hoary puccoon, prairie cinquefoil, and other wildflowers were blooming. No flowers grow there now; today golfers stroll over the mowed grass of a golf course.

Hvoslef followed a path into a forest of maples, elms, and willows, where ruffed grouse were drumming. He stopped to look at showy lady's-slippers. Today ruffed grouse still drum in the Root River valley, but lady's-slippers are more difficult to find.

On that walk, Hvoslef saw his first Nashville warbler of the season. Over the years he identified 30 species of warblers in the woods. Though 30 species still visit southeastern Minnesota, the numbers of these birds have decreased dramatically, largely due to deforestation in Central and South America where they winter.

Hvoslef's diaries include early morning birdwatching from his boathouse on Mill Pond Lake. There he observed pelicans, cormorants, gulls, terns, 17 species of ducks, and 25 species of shorebirds. Over the

Nancy Overcott, freelance writer and birdwatcher, lives near Lanesboro. She transcribed the Hvoslef diaries written in English.

years the lake disappeared as it filled with farmland silt runoff carried by the Root River. All that remains is a meadow with the river running through it. Most of the water birds the doctor saw have disappeared from the area.

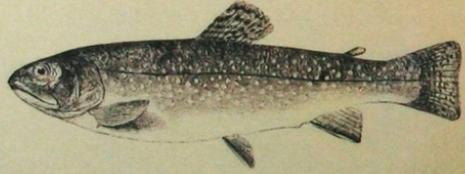
While traveling to see patients in the countryside, Hvoslef made other observations. His house calls often took him to the uplands, which still had some native prairies. There he found pasqueflowers, prairie smoke, leadplant, wild indigo, prairie-clovers, rattle-snake-master, and downy gentian. Today, corn and soybeans predominate.

Sometimes Hvoslef traveled near the WMA that would eventually carry his name, “up through those very remarkable ravines where the cliffs were covered with the flowering beautiful *Dodecatheon meadia*” (May 20, 1910). These flowers, commonly called shooting stars, still bloom there each spring.

New Species. In 2001 a DNR bird survey at Hvoslef WMA recorded three game bird species introduced since the doctor’s time: gray partridge, ring-necked pheasant, and wild turkey.

Also new is the rapidly expanding house finch, a Southwest native introduced in the East in the 1940s, and the tufted titmouse, which has been slowly moving north from east-central and southeastern

“January 28, 1906. I was told there were very many trout in the brooks further up in that wonderful valley of brooks. They get stocked every now and then with thousands of fry.”



“October 4, 1910. River high, almost perfectly clear. Beautiful. Reminded me vividly of a Norwegian Trout River.”

states for the past decade.

The DNR survey found good numbers of northern cardinals, which Hvoslef first reported seeing in 1898, and red-bellied woodpeckers, which he first observed in 1911. Both species have been extending their ranges since the early 20th century as their populations have grown.

Four species common in Hvoslef's time—red-headed woodpecker, wood thrush, black-billed cuckoo, and bobolink—now are among the species in greatest conservation need recently identified by the DNR. Their decline is primarily due to habitat loss. Nesting red-headed woodpeckers rely on old trees in open woods, especially oak savanna. Wood thrushes prefer deep deciduous woods. Black-billed cuckoos also favor deciduous woods, and they winter in South America where deforestation has destroyed habitat. Bobolinks nest in grassy fields and winter in the tropics.

WILD WORDS

Minnesota Wild Words brings the Hvoslef journals to schools. Part of the DNR Project Wild education program, it invites students in grades 6–8 to read the spring observations of Johan Hvoslef, keep their own wildlife journals, and compare their observations with those of the doctor. They explore how human presence and land-use practices have affected Minnesota's wildlife over time. To learn more, contact the DNR Information Center, page 57.

The DNR survey found one Louisiana waterthrush, a state-listed species of special concern, foraging on the banks of the Root River, where exposed tree roots provide nesting sites. Hvoslef occasionally recorded this species.

Eastern bluebirds, which the doctor recorded in migratory flocks of 100 or more, have since declined and made a comeback. Bluebird populations suffered from a reduction in available nesting cavities. Non-native house sparrows took over

some cavities, and other nesting places disappeared with the felling of dead trees and removal of wooden fence posts.



"January 15, 1912. Three Colinus virginianus [northern bobwhite] in the dreadful cold among the mountain-like snowdrifts. . . How I wished I had had some food to throw out to them."

Placement of nest boxes has bolstered recovery of bluebird populations. Today, the area has migratory flocks of 20 or more.

Comeback Trail. For more than 50 years after Hvoslef's death, Lanesboro continued as a small but stable agricultural community. By the 1970s, however, a decrease in family farms, exodus to cities, and abandonment of the railroad threatened the town's existence.

Then, in the 1980s, the DNR established the Root River State Trail on an old railroad line running through town. Tourists flocked to the area to hike and bike along the trail. Today, tourism is also booming off the trail, as Lanesboro has become a popular destination for canoeing, fishing, and birding.

Although Lanesboro's breathtaking topography and some of its natural bounty persist, all kinds of development have taken a toll on this rural community and the surrounding area. Urban sprawl from Rochester, an influx of new residents, large feedlots, and logging operations have all contributed to changes in the landscape.

The Hvoslef diaries remind us of what we have lost. Perhaps they will also inspire us to preserve and enhance what we still have. ●