

**MARGARET
MORSE
NICE**
1883-1974



**BIRDS
OF
OKLAHOMA**

Margaret Morse Nice pioneered field studies in ornithology. Her nontraditional path toward scientific progress meant she had to reach the highest pinnacles of achievement in order to gain prominence in her chosen field. Luckily for the talented, ambitious, and creative Nice, she was more than up to the challenge.

Margaret Morse was born in December 1883 in Amherst, Massachusetts. Early in life, she developed an intense love of the natural world, especially birds, through frequent countryside excursions. Margaret received her first book on birds at age seven and published her first work, a small booklet on birds in fruit orchards, five years later. Her botanist mother even taught her names of wildflowers. By age thirteen, she kept meticulous notes on her sister's brown leghorn hens – “who pecked whom” and “who bossed whom”, long before Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe coined the term “pecking order”.

At Mount Holyoke College, Margaret enjoyed studying live birds in the fields more than stuffed specimens in her zoology classes. She improved her aptitude in languages while taking a year off to travel to Europe with her family and graduated with a degree in French in 1906.

She convinced her parents to let her attend Clark University to study child psychology and zoology. There she met graduate student Leonard Blaine Nice, who was pursuing a Ph.D. in physiology. They married in 1909. She put her career on hold to support her husband. In 1911, they moved to Harvard Medical School.

Two years later they arrived in Norman where he taught at the University of Oklahoma. In 1915, for her master's thesis at Clark, Margaret produced the first comprehensive study on the diet of the northern bobwhite. She also published eighteen articles in child psychology between 1915 and 1933. These included conversations with children about nature and bird study. From 1913 to 1927, Margaret studied Oklahoma birds, publishing “The Birds of Oklahoma” (1931), a comprehensive 122-page survey of Oklahoma species, with her husband.

Next, they moved to Ohio State University. Here Margaret produced her best-known work, an eight-year study of song sparrows. She studied their songs, learning abilities, territoriality, nesting habits, and social behavior, publishing her two-volume work “Studies in the Life History of the Song Sparrow” (1937), which earned her worldwide recognition in scientific circles. Unable to find a journal to publish her lengthy study, it was eventually published in German in 1933-34.

A complete list of her publications doesn't exist. It is estimated she published over 250 articles in scientific journals, seven books, and over 3,000 book reviews. She couldn't have accomplished as much without her working knowledge of multiple languages. She was also made an honorary member of the British, Finnish, German, Dutch, and Swiss ornithological societies.

She never earned a Ph.D. or was a university faculty member. Her contributions without these presumed necessary requirements makes her achievements all the more noteworthy. Margaret Nice died in June 1974 at age 90 in Chicago. The Wilson Ornithological Society awards the Margaret Morse Nice Medal annually for work in ornithology.