

Who was Mrs. Gordon Mills?

By Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

On page 2 of the December 2009 *TOC Newsletter*, Mark Field mentions a report of January 28, 1939 where a Mrs. Gordon Mills traveled to the United States to gather information for her study of the Evening Grosbeak.

Who was Mrs. Gordon Mills? The former Mrs. Gordon Mills became Doris Huestis Speirs when she married Murray Speirs in 1939.



Doris Huestis Speirs in her art studio. Photo by Boris Spremo for the *Toronto Star*, March 1981, courtesy of John Sabean.

Biography

Doris Huestis was born on 27 October 1894 in Toronto and became well known in art and literary circles, and later in ornithology. She attended Havergal College in Toronto, where at a young age she kept a diary. She was related to the wealthy Gooderham family who went to Scarborough Beach in Maine most summers. There Doris walked through the woods and kept records of the birds she saw. She knew no other birders, but instinctively noted each bird's characteristics, habitat and behaviour.

Doris married Gordon Mills, an executive with the T. Eaton Company. In the 1920s she met members of the Group of Seven, becoming a talented artist herself. She fostered an interest in birds with group members Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald and A.Y. Jackson, and they reported sightings to her. Later, she encouraged young artists such as Robert Bateman who was a teenager when she met him in Algonquin Park in the late 1940s, and TOC member Barry Kent MacKay in the late 1950s.

From about 1934 to 1939 Doris spearheaded a birding club in Toronto called Humber Valley Bird Club. Murray Speirs and Farley Mowat were members. She often drove teenage birders. They liked to visit a bird sanctuary in Mississauga and traipsed all over the waterfront and through the ravines looking for birds.

In 1937, Doris visited Lawren and Bess Harris in Hanover, New Hampshire, where she saw a flock of Evening Grosbeaks coming to the feeders. In her diary she took meticulous notes of their plumage and behavior and seemed to know this would be her life-long passion. "They were brilliant as a tree full of parakeets".

Doris married Murray Speirs in 1939 and became known as Doris Huestis Speirs. They worked together and independently on bird research and publications. Doris continued her studies of Evening Grosbeaks and spent long hours in the field observing, making notes and studying everything about them. The fourth nest of Evening Grosbeak found in Ontario and the third in Algonquin Park was discovered by Cliff Hope of the ROM at the Wildlife Research Station in Algonquin Park on 12 June 1946, when it contained three eggs. Doris watched the nest continuously from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on 4 July 1946, at which time it contained three young, noting every move and action. In 1968 her Evening Grosbeak account was published in Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds*, and that same year the Lincoln's Sparrow account, which she co-authored with Murray, was also published.

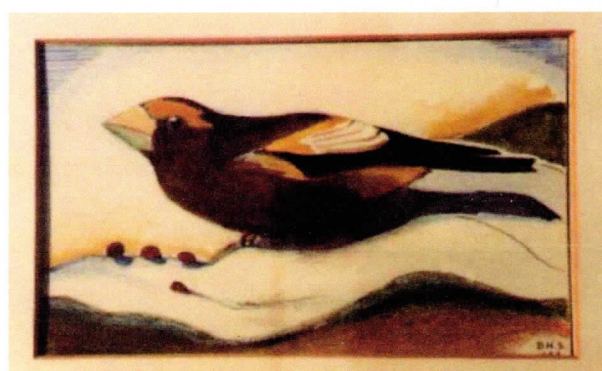
Doris perfected thoroughness and accurate recording from Murray's influence and from her contacts such as Margaret Morse Nice, a leading American ornithologist and authority on the Song Sparrow. Margaret Morse Nice thought women had great patience for keen bird observation and studying fine details, qualities that Doris displayed in her research. Another friend was Louise de Kiriline Lawrence of Pimisi Bay near North Bay, Ontario, who was self trained in her studies of birds. She became a famous ornithologist and author of many books and articles about birds.

In 1952, Miklos Udvardy, a European ornithologist, visited Murray and Doris. Miklos was going to a TOC meeting as Murray's guest and encouraged Doris to come along. She replied that women were not allowed at TOC meetings. He suggested she start her own club, and within a month Doris formed the Margaret Nice Ornithological Club for women, which lasted about 35 years. Doris and Murray founded the Pickering Naturalists Club and she generously supported other ornithological and nature organizations.

In 1986, the Society of Canadian Ornithologists initiated the Doris Huestis Speirs Award, which is presented annually for significant contributions to ornithology in Canada. Doris died on 24 October 1989 in Ajax at nearly 95 years of age. She led a fascinating and productive life in ornithology, art and literacy.



Doris and Murray Speirs in mid 1970s. Photo courtesy of Margaret Wilson.



Evening Grosbeak oil painting by Doris Huestis Speirs in 1964. Photo courtesy of Ann and Bruce Falls.

Acknowledgements

Alex Mills, author of *Birds of Cottage Country*, came up with the idea of a quiz after reading Mark Field's article in the TOC Newsletter. He wondered if readers knew that Mrs. Gordon Mills became Doris Huestis Speirs. Gordon Mills, her first husband, was related to Alex, probably his grandfather's cousin. We thank Bruce and Ann Falls, Margaret Wilson and John Sabeau for photos, information and insights about Doris. Ron Tozer provided information about Algonquin Park.

References

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