

# The history of bird photography: What can it teach us?

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Image 1: John Dillwyn Llewelyn, "Piscator, No. 2," 1w856. Albumen Silver print. Open Access, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/270835>

## **The research of Karla McManus, Associate Professor at the University of Regina, explores the history of bird photography and discusses its lessons, including the evolving technology of photography and the printing press**

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In the late nineteenth century, bird enthusiasts began photographing their subjects. An explosion of books, magazine articles, and how-to manuals promoted bird photography as a way to connect with nature. Karla McManus, from the University of Regina, wants to understand why.

The first successful photographs were extremely long exposures: studio photographers in the 1840s often had to prop up their subjects on chairs and use clamps to hold their heads still so that the portraits wouldn't be blurry and lead to dissatisfied customers. The idea of photographing an animal in movement, like a bird, seemed impossible.

In fact, the earliest photograph of a bird that we know of, by the Welsh photographer John Dillwyn Llewelyn, taken in 1856, was staged: the albumen silver print known as "Piscator, No. 2" [IMAGE 1] shows a taxidermied heron posed in a pool of water, surrounded by rocks, ferns, and rushes. According to the artist, the exposure time was around twenty minutes.

By the 1870s, the idea of capturing an object in motion was no longer unfathomable, although it was still difficult. With the introduction of gelatin dry plate photography, which allowed the use of pre-prepared glass plate negatives, and the significant improvements in light sensitive chemistry, photographers were better equipped to shoot out in the field and capture movement. Alongside the development of half-tone reproduction processes in the 1880s, which allowed for the accurate mechanical reproduction of photographs in print, bird photography was poised to become a phenomenon.





Image 2: Emma Louisa Turner, Photograph of a Young Bittern, 1911. Image scanned from a glass plate. Copyright Emma Turner Archives, British Trust for Ornithology.

## History of bird photography research

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My research on the history of bird photography asks why there was such a fascination with photographing birds at this time. What drove people like Emma Louisa Turner, an active English bird photographer from 1900 to the mid-1930s, to take up bird photography? [IMAGE 2] I argue that the practice of bird photography came at an important moment and coincided not only with the development of printing and photographing techniques but also grew apace with the rise of ecological awareness worldwide.

Birds were everywhere, on mountaintops and in jungles but also parks and backyard gardens, and many people were drawn to the new hobby of bird watching being promoted in the print press as a way to connect to nature in an increasingly urban and industrialized world. Alongside the growing discipline of ornithology, there was another area of increasing interest: the transatlantic conservation movement and its fight against the feather or plumage trade.

On both sides of the Atlantic, women and men were strongly concerned about declining bird numbers, but their roles differed based on their social, educational, and political power in society. For men with access to academic training, there was a clear concern that specimen collecting was putting bird populations at risk. Some, including Frank Chapman, Curator of Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History, Editor of the popular Audubon-published magazine "Bird-lore," as well as a practising bird photographer, saw the photographic documentation and collecting of birds as a way for amateurs to get their bird counts in without taking a life.

For most women who were fighting to protect birds, such as the group of upper-class reformers who founded the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK, including Emily Williamson and Etta Lemon, the appeal to sentiment was their weapon of necessity and choice.

In my survey of the history of bird photography, which is by no means complete, it is very clear that while amateur and professional photographers took thousands of photographs of birds, men, and some women from the 1880s onwards, most of the evidence of this photographic richness is today found in libraries, not archives, bound in cloth, not framed or collected by museums or galleries.

While some collections hold a small number of these early photographs, in the form of prints but also glass negatives and lantern slides, a lot of these early photographs were not collected. My research argues that the hybrid nature of bird photography, not just artistic and not quite scientific, has made it a difficult genre to collect and preserve and, therefore, to study.

## **The evolving technology of photography and the printing press**

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The history of bird photography goes hand in hand with the evolving technology of photography and the printing press, and each played a role in shaping and disseminating ecological knowledge to the public, alongside the words and observations of scientists and amateurs.

Along with the massive number of field guides, historian Mark V. Barrow estimates over a million copies sold of various types by 1933, (1) the wealth of books, magazine articles, and other printed ephemera aimed at bird-lovers makes clear that learning to watch and identify birds was supported by their photographic reproduction.

Popular science and photography found their way into the hands of bird lovers, and some of them even took up the practice of bird photography, as taught to them in print form, by people like Frank Chapman in his 1900 book *Bird Studies with a Camera*. The trend doesn't seem likely to end. Bird photography, as the bird identification app on my phone attests, is here to stay.

## References

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## Footnote

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1. Barrow, 165.