

The Call of the **Wild**

Mabel Norman was happiest among the wildlife at her peaceful Middletown home.

Today, the fields and forests of her *Norman Bird Sanctuary* are a place of wonder and solace for us all.

BY CHRISTINE SCHULTZ

The most impressive puddingstone is Hanging Rock, a dramatic overhang scratched by glaciers some nine thousand years ago. Hanging Rock draws more people to hike the sanctuary than the birds themselves. From the rocky height of seventy feet you can see out over Gardner Pond and Nelson Pond (the reservoirs that Mabel's father created a century ago by damming the outlet to the ocean and lining the ponds with rock quarried from the property). You can see past the marshlands to Sakonnet River and the Rhode Island Sound. It is a dramatic place, one that, for a moment, restores the spirit. The words of Barry Lopez come to mind again: "It is not so quiet or so removed that you can hear yourself think, that you would even wish to; that comes later. You can hear your heart beat. That comes first."

The refuge is full of heartbeat moments. Many times last winter de Leiris came up the trail by the food plot — a thicketed, grassy area surrounded by woods — and surprised a hunting harrier flying low with its talons clutched around a fat rabbit. "I kept thinking this is way too cool," says de Leiris.

Then, during the January owl prowl, when she led a group into a wooded area near the pond and played recorded owl calls, de Leiris had the good fortune of eliciting the voice of the Eastern screech owl, a chilling tremulous whinny. Thinking that another owl had moved in on his nest hole, the bird of prey spread his wings and swooped startlingly close to de Leiris and the others. They were thrilled down to their toes. "All the adults had been saying, 'Is it okay if we bring the kids? The kids will be too noisy,'" de Leiris recalls. "When the owl flew in, the kids were awesome. The adults were out of control."

Magic moments like those were what de Leiris had in mind when she first volunteered at the bird sanctuary in the 1970s. She continued to volunteer for harvest fairs and so forth. Then in 1989, she got asked to be on the board. "I thought, oh, that would be nice — birds," says de Leiris. "I don't know a lot about birds, but they have feathers and they sing. Right? Great idea. At the time I had two little kids and I had been a lawyer, and I thought, who could fight about birds? It would be calming."

Within six months the organization was involved in a controversy over the buildings on an eight-acre parcel at Paradise Farm.

For years nothing had been done to keep up Mabel's old farmhouse and barns. Mabel's will specified that they must be left available for her daughter to live in, should she so choose. She never did. The buildings deteriorated. The mission Mabel had left the organization was simple: be stewards of the land, teach about the environment. It said nothing about maintaining old buildings. After much discussion, however, they decided that if they lost control of the buildings, they could never be sure they weren't going to be used in a way that would adversely affect the sanctuary. In 1997, after years of negotiations, the organization acquired titles to the buildings. For the first time they could put together a master plan and a fundraising campaign for renovations.

They hope now to finish raising \$3 million by the middle of 2003 so that they can complete a list of improvements already in the works. In what was once Mabel's art studio, there is now a natural history library and meeting room. There are also sunny classrooms and teachers' workspaces. In the back of another barn a lab is being built for the rehabilitation of injured birds. In the dairy barn there will be an environmental learning lab with hands-on displays, changing museum installations and a permanent natural history collection. Mabel's historic farmhouse will be

brought to its former elegance to house environmental conference-goers and visiting birders. Her ornamental gardens will bloom once more. With those and other improvements, there'll be more space to teach people about the wilderness without the risk of over-running the very land they are trying to preserve. With some 8,000 visitors coming each year to Mabel's refuge, it hasn't yet been a problem, and now may never be.

The biggest controversy that remains concerns a piece of property containing a defunct beach club, nine shacks and a small house on the Sound. That piece was inherited by Mabel's five grown grandchildren. They want to sell the property as developable beachfront real estate for \$5 million. The sanctuary has won right of first refusal, but as a nonprofit can't afford what works out to about \$217,000 per acre — a price the sanctuary group believes is grossly inflated. The grandchildren contend that the parcel was wrongly zoned open space and should be valued as developable beachfront, making it worth that. The sanctuary holds that with so much marshland, a tidal creek, a coastal barrier beach and the abutting public water supply, the land should be protected. They are hoping public protest will help sway Mabel's descendants in a different direction.

Yet, there are changes that Mabel, as a product of a wealthy family at the turn of the century, could not have envisioned. She could not have foreseen, for instance, how important outreach to lower income inner city kids would be; that a butterfly garden built by the students and staff at John F. Kennedy School for their outdoor classroom could change their outlook on the natural world; or that a nature walk on the grounds of the Sullivan School in Newport could teach students to identify trees and plants in their own urban backyard.

"So long as all we are doing is being stewards of the land we own, our impact is limited," says de Leiris. "The key to our making a difference with this legacy is for us to play a role in creating new generations of advocates who see that nature has relevance to their everyday lives in much less pristine locations than this. The very nature of what we do has changed because the world is so different now."

On the day my father and I visited the preserve, the seventh graders from St. Michael's School were eating their lunch on the bridge at the sanctuary pond. Each week they had been coming here for hands-on study, taking water samples, observing the pond's zones, the wildlife activity, the seasonal stages. They noted how many wood ducks survived the snapping turtle attacks. They watched the family of Canada geese nesting in the spring, heard the mallards squawk, saw the muskrat lodge take shape. It made an impression on the kids, sure enough.

They were alive with chatter as we stepped by them on the bridge. A boy pointed at the water below.

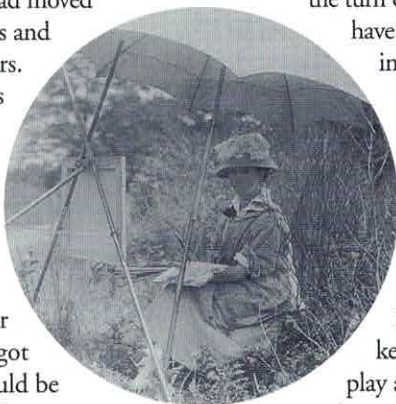
"What did you find?" his teacher asked.

"A dead fish," he said. "Can I get it?"

"If it's not too terribly decomposed, you can bring it up, okay?"

We left them to their studies and finished our walk. Later, we returned to the wooden bench overlooking the pond. We watched the fog brighten behind the autumn trees, and the ducks skim across the water's surface. I looked down. A paper lay among the leaves. It was a child's record of all he had observed. It said: Fish.

I like to think he learned a lot that day, though his notes were incomplete. Instead of taking inventory, he took the place back with him — the smell of fish on his fingers, a soggy sneaker on his foot, fresh air scenting his shirt. That is, after all, how we remember best what the landscape is about, and surely that is what Mabel Norman would have wanted. ■



Mabel Norman on a painting expedition. Photo courtesy Newport Historical Society.

Though I never met Mabel Norman,

I have seen the sanctuary she left behind and heard the stories about her, and it seems to me that anyone so crazy about birds that she would carry them with her in a hatbox when she traveled, must have been worth knowing. She was the youngest daughter of nine children, born in 1875 (or thereabouts) to George Norman, a wealthy entrepreneur who built Newport's first Water Works. Though Mabel was a direct descendant of William Bradford, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, she made a name in her own right through preservation of the largest protected open space on Aquidneck Island. Over half a century ago she had the foresight to will it to us all as the Norman Bird Sanctuary.

Mabel spent most of her growing up years at the family's Newport estate, Belair, but her heart was always north at Paradise Farm, in Middletown, where her family summered. There among the fields and forests, ponds and ocean overlooks, Mabel's shy nature took comfort among the creatures. She owned many pets — doves, dogs, chameleons, a butterfly, a monkey and birds of all sorts. She got so homesick for them when she went away to a private school in New York that she wrote, asking for a recount of her forty birds. She was never happier than when she was among them. Soon after she bought out her siblings' shares in Paradise Farm in 1910, Mabel issued passes to fellow birdwatchers and hikers, so they, too, could enjoy what she so loved.

In the old black-and-white photos that remain, Mabel appears to have a buoyant spirit. Here she is, a dark-haired lady in long skirts posing with a flying squirrel. Here, raking in the garden in a lace collar, long dress and stockings. Here, holding a baby goat, laughing with a lady friend. Here, painting on the rocks.

For, in addition to wildlife, Mabel enjoyed art and Italian. Her interests took her to the isle of Capri, where she met and later married an older Italian man named Dr. George Cerio. Together they adopted a daughter and split their time between a villa in Capri (where Mabel helped found an art institute) and Paradise Farm (where she had her studio in a converted sheep barn). Mabel's land, with its open meadows and views to the ocean, was the inspiration for many of the leading nineteenth-century landscape artists, including John LaFarge. Unfortunately, none of Mabel's paintings (except for one self-portrait) have remained with the estate. The sanctuary staff is eager to learn of any that still exist.

Ten days before she died in November 1949, Mabel had the foresight to write in her will that her "primary object is to preserve this as a bird sanctuary for the protection of animals and birds and for the enjoyment of lovers of nature and the public generally." The will also included such nuggets as this: "Experience has shown that cats are among the greatest enemies of birds." And so there would be no cats.

◆ *When I arrived at the Norman Bird Sanctuary*, a dozen Rhode Island Reds greeted me in the gravel parking lot, ensuring that no matter how bad a birdwatcher I might turn out to be, I could claim at least one sighting before I left. The sanctuary especially attracts families with children under thirteen. I was no longer under thirteen, but I had come with my father that day. He brought binoculars, a digital camera, a picnic lunch and a childlike bearing for our explorations.

In the loft of the mid-nineteenth-century dairy barn nearest the parking lot is a natural history exhibit of bird habitats. In the newly remodeled tool shed is the Barn Owl Shop offering nature gifts, books and trail maps. The sanctuary's staff of seven has their offices in back. We were met

by Betsy de Leiris, the executive director, who wore hiking boots to show us around the refuge. Eight miles of gentle trails wind through some 400 acres of fields, woodlands and ridges. Boardwalks cross shady groves. A wooden bridge spans a pond outlet. The birds, of course, are everywhere.

Not knowing one from the other, I must rely here on the reports of more knowledgeable birders. A regular crew goes out on Sunday mornings to tramp the woods or coastal shores. Along Sachuest Point in the winter they might see common loons, red-throated loons, horned grebes, red-necked grebes, black ducks, harlequin ducks, longtails, ruddy ducks. In their enthusiasm, the birders seem not to mind adverse weather. If it is

cold, gray and sleeting, they call it "perfect sea bird weather" and are glad to have the preserve to themselves. Their sightings read like refrigerator poetry, lyrical lists of birds in all colors and calls: song sparrow, swamp sparrow, Savannah sparrow, white-crowned sparrow, white-throated sparrow. It is a treat just to let their names flick off the tongue, let alone to catch a glimpse of them flicking through the forest. Reading through their fifty-two sightings or soundings in a two-hour walk, I begin to realize how wide the wild world is here. Granted, many of these birds are just passing through on their migration along the Eastern Flyway, but certainly they are attracted to this lush landing spot if only for a short time. Many more stay and make their niche here.

Mabel had hoped that future caretakers of the sanctuary would keep attracting more birds to Paradise Farm, and they have done just that. The 1740 farmhouse overlooks an open meadow with a sloping view toward Gardner Pond and on past the barrier beach to Rhode Island Sound. When Mabel lived at Paradise Farm, cows, goats and sheep kept much of the land opened to wide grassland stretches. Since then, hedgerows have grown up to divide the fields. Though de Leiris realizes that people love hedgerows, she says the sanctuary crew has been phasing them out in favor of wide open grasslands, so that the Savannah sparrows, bobolinks, upland sandpipers and woodcocks will return to nest in greater numbers again. Mabel would have loved knowing that the woodcock now has more room for his unusual mating dance in March. At dusk, you can hear the male squawking in the field. It is a funny foghorn sort of noise that continues for a minute or so. Then, in a burst, he takes to the air in big looping circles, climbing higher into the sky in a tightening spiral. At the zenith, he tucks his wings, turns his beak to the ground and like a whistling, dive-bombing rocket with a fluttering fuse, heads straight for the ground, where he begins the ritual again. It is fun to consider what birdbrain female would be wowed by such antics as you crouch at the field's edge, enchanted yourself. "With the loss of self-consciousness," wrote the naturalist Barry Lopez, "the landscape opens."

In Mabel's landscape there is no telling what you will see. We come across a shell midden, where Native Americans once discarded their trash. We come to a stone pound where farmers once rounded up stray livestock; to an ancient cemetery where stones mark the graves of unknown ancestors; to eighteenth-century stone walls made of purgatory conglomerate rock. There is history everywhere. If you know how to read the rocks, you can see back some 250 million years to when the ridges were formed. Mountains eroded into boulders, pebbles, sand and cobbles, jumbling together into what is called puddingstone or purgatory formation. De Leiris says when children see the lumpy gray mix deposited deep in the woods they often ask, "How did they get the cement mixer all the way in here?"



Mabel Norman, left, with goat and friend. Photo courtesy Newport Historical Society.