

# Charlotte Hilton Green

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Although John H. Grey Jr. was the first to suggest the formation of a statewide bird club in North Carolina, Charlotte Hilton Green probably did more than anyone else to ensure the success of the project. As president of Raleigh Bird Club, an active member of the Raleigh Woman's Club, and nature columnist for *The News and Observer*, Mrs. Green had the right connections to call together the founders who met in Raleigh on 6 March 1937 and to publicize the activities of the fledgling North Carolina Bird Club.

Now living in The Albemarle Retirement Community at Tarboro, N.C., Mrs. Green at age 97 remains concerned about the conservation of natural areas. Failing hearing and eyesight curtail her activities, but she still maintains personal and business correspondence with the assistance of her friend, Elizabeth Moye.

Born in Dunkirk, New York, on 17 October 1889, Charlotte Hilton started teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in the hills of Chautauqua County, overlooking Lake Erie (Earley 1983). She had about 50 students in eight grades, plus the chore of cleaning the classroom. This was the 1909-1910 school year, and her salary was \$10.50 per week. It was a year of hard work and many problems, but there was also the excitement caused by the appearance of Halley's Comet. The young teacher and a few of her students arose at 3:30 on a bitterly cold morning in March of 1910 to view the comet.

Upon learning that Cornell University had published a series of leaflets for distribution to rural schools, Miss Hilton sent for a supply. The class started with "Learn A Bird A Week." From the beginning the young teacher had a talent for guiding the attention of restless students to the birds outside the classroom window. Most youngsters in those days were used to shooting birds, not studying them, but Charlotte made nature study a fascinating subject.

In 1913 Miss Hilton received a matching grant from Grange No. 1 in Fredonia, N.Y., to attend summer school at the Chautauqua Institute. That year Cornell was starting a special series of classes to encourage agriculture students to come to the university. Ruby Green Smith gave a course in nature study. While at Chautauqua, Charlotte met her future husband, Ralph W. Green—Dr. Smith's brother.

After a corn roast given by one of the directors for his Cornell students, Mr. Green walked Miss Hilton to her dormitory and asked if she would be interested in going on a canoe trip the next evening. She accepted. It was, she still recalls, a wonderful night, with a full moon and the music of a band concert in the distance. Not realizing how late it was, they returned to the campus at midnight and were arrested. (Students had to be in the dorm by 10:30 p.m.) Mr. Green explained the situation to the authorities and persuaded them to return Miss Hilton's season ticket. That called for other dates, and during the summer the two met regularly to share the pleasures of walking, talking, and boating. "His wide reading and traveling opened new worlds to me," she said. Ralph and Charlotte were married 4 years after the day they met.

"The nature study movement started at Cornell University early in the century. My husband's family was tied up with it," Mrs. Green recalls (Earley 1983). Anna Botsford Comstock, called the mother of the nature study movement, wrote a very popular handbook of nature study. Liberty Hyde Bailey was also one of the originators of the

nature study idea. At Cornell during that exciting period were Arthur A. Allen (pioneer in color photography of birds and the recording of bird songs, and later founder of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology) and Louis Agassiz Fuytes, the great wildlife artist. Through her husband's family, Mrs. Green came to know most of the early leaders in the popularization of bird study in the eastern United States.

During World War I, Ralph Green was with the Division of Publications in the Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. Because of the wartime housing shortage, the Greens had to buy a small place in East Falls Church, Virginia. "It was our first home, and we called it One Acre," Mrs. Green said. While living there, she taught fifth grade for 2 years.

#### MOVED TO RALEIGH

In mid-1920 the Greens moved to Raleigh, N.C., where he was with the N.C. Department of Agriculture and was also connected with N.C. State College. During the summer of 1920, Mrs. Green and 25 other faculty wives formed the N.C. State College Woman's Club.

One of the first places Ralph Green visited upon arrival in Raleigh was the State Museum of Natural History. During a meeting with H.H. Brimley, the curator, Mr. Green mentioned his wife's interest in bird study. Brimley gave him a copy of *Birds of North Carolina*, which had been published the previous year. The authors were T. Gilbert Pearson and the brothers C.S. and H.H. Brimley. Later Mrs. Green toured the museum with H.H., and both brothers became her good friends. Little did she realize upon first acquaintance that she and these two immigrants from England would become instrumental in the founding of a state bird club.

In 1923 the Greens built a home on White Oak Road, which was practically in the country at that time. Woodhaven was the first of several homes they owned in the same neighborhood. Mrs. Green promptly set about improving the natural environment around her home by putting up bird boxes, providing bird baths and feeding stations, and planting vegetation that would attract wildlife. The Greens operated one of the early bird-banding stations in North Carolina, and visitors soon came to their home to learn more about the birds. They joined Mrs. Green on walks along Crabtree Creek and through nearby woodlands.

Mrs. Green continued her college studies after moving to Raleigh and earned a bachelor's degree in 1932. She later took courses at the University of North Carolina, Cornell University, the University of Colorado, and the University of Mexico.

#### COLUMN BEGUN

Mrs. Green's first contribution to *The News and Observer* was a long article about the reconstruction of Williamsburg, Va. In 1932, she began writing her "Out-of-Doors in Carolina" column for the Raleigh newspaper. During her 42 years as a nature columnist, Charlotte Hilton Green touched upon nearly every field of the biological sciences, supported numerous conservation causes, and explained complex environmental issues in laymen's terms. Frank Smethurst of *The News and Observer* told Mrs. Green, "Be accurate as far as you go but for God's sake don't get too technical. Our John Farmer just can't take it" (Earley 1983). Heeding her editor's advice, Mrs. Green worked very hard to emphasize the human-interest angle. Her first goal was to develop in others an appreciation of "God's good Earth" (Harrelson 1986).

Soon after the column first appeared, Hattie S. Parrott of Kinston, then state director of primary education, began recommending "Out-of-Doors in Carolina" as supplemental reading material. Ms. Parrott suggested that the columns be collected and published in a book. *Birds of the South*, issued by the University of North Carolina Press in 1933, was an instant success, and it was republished by Dover Publications in 1975. The introduction to this book was written by C.S. Brimley. *Trees of the South*, with an introduction by J.S. Holmes, the state forester of North Carolina, came out in 1939. It was the first book that outlined the leaf, fruit, and flower of southern trees. Some people criticized the tree book because it was written for children to study and understand, but Mrs. Green still believes that her approach was a good one (Harrelson 1986).

Each chapter in Mrs. Green's two books begins, as did her columns, with a few lines of appropriate poetry to help the reader get into the mood for the text that follows. The idea of using nature poems in this manner came from Ms. Comstock. Most of the poems used in Mrs. Green's books were written by North Carolinians who permitted their creations to be used without fee (Harrelson 1986).

Mrs. Green was always an independent woman who thought nothing of traveling alone to New York City for the annual National Audubon Society meetings. Each fall for many years she renewed friendships with Audubon leaders such as Carl Buchheister and Roger Tory Peterson. During the early 1930s she and her husband traveled extensively together, riding on muleback down the Grand Canyon and touring California. In 1938 she drove alone to Colorado to attend the University of Colorado, and the next year, accompanied by Ms. Parrott, she drove to Mexico for the summer session at the University of Mexico.

#### GREENACRES

In 1938 the Greens purchased a large tract of land on White Oak Road. Developers had refused to buy the acreage, saying that Raleigh would not grow in that direction. Although the new owners intended to sell some of the land as building lots, Mrs. Green began developing Greenacres into a wildlife sanctuary and arboretum. Her consultant in this project was Dr. B.W. Wells, a professor of botany at N.C. State (Green 1939) and the author of *The Natural Gardens of North Carolina*. Forestry students from the college treated damaged trees, and neighbors helped remove refuse, fallen branches, and undesirable plants. The area became a special place to the many children who loved to play on the rocks and hills, to follow trails once traveled by Indians, and to build dams in the stream. Greenacres is still visited annually by horticulture classes from N.C. State University (Newsom 1986).

Ralph and Charlotte Green built the first house in Greenacres and called it The Willows. The handsome structure—with extensive additions now one of the finest homes on lower White Oak Road—proved unsuitable for their needs; so the Greens built a simple residence called Brookside. This small but very attractive house was Mrs. Green's favorite. Here they lived throughout World War II. R.W. tended his war garden, and Charlotte kept on with her work and writing. After the war, military veterans rapidly increased the enrollment at N.C. State College; so Mr. Green returned to help with registration. He became ill and was an invalid for 6 months prior to his death on 15 June 1946.

Realizing that, as much as she loved it, she could not keep Brookside alone, Mrs. Green made plans for another home. On the last vacant lot remaining in Greenacres, she

built a small, two-story dwelling. She lived in the upper story among the trees—hence the name Treetops—and rented the lower level as a furnished apartment.

Once she was settled in Treetops, Mrs. Green decided that if she was ever going to see the world, she had better get started. Seeing the world had been one of her ambitions since childhood, when she would lie awake in her bed listening to the train whistles echoing through the night. Her travels eventually took her to Europe, Africa, Japan, the Galapagos Islands, and other parts of South America. During one of two trips beyond the Arctic Circle, she spent a weekend with Eskimos in Kotzebue (Harrelson 1986). On one of the many occasions when, in her eagerness to enjoy new experiences to the fullest, she fell behind the group, she found herself locked up in a museum in Budapest, Hungary (Earley 1983). Mrs. Green also continued to explore North Carolina. At age 60 she accepted an invitation to accompany a group of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts on a 2-day canoe trip from Raleigh to Kinston.

On her travels the writer-naturalist picked up good material, and exciting personal experiences, to share with the readers of her columns and magazine articles. Mrs. Green has been a contributor to numerous newspapers and magazines, including *The Washington Post*, *Nature*, *Progressive Farmer*, *Hollands*, *The Woman*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Wildlife in North Carolina*. She also wrote for *The Chat* (Green 1943, 1948, 1952) and edited the "Among Our Members" feature for about a year.

#### CBC PRESIDENT

In 1957 Mrs. Green was elected president of Carolina Bird Club (Potter 1986). In her four "President's Page" articles, she supported forming Audubon Junior Clubs and sponsoring Audubon Screen Tours (Green 1957a), donating nature books and conservation magazines to school and community libraries (Green 1957a,b; 1958), cooperation of CBC with other conservation-minded organizations (Green 1957b), investigation of ways to reduce bird mortality at airport ceilometers and TV transmitter towers (Green 1957c), distribution of hawk leaflets (Green 1958), and enlarging and improving *The Chat* (Green 1958). "We must not forget that we have created something fine over the past 20 years and we want to strengthen it still more in the years ahead," she concluded (Green 1957b).

As CBC president, Mrs. Green put to use her long experience as a clubwoman. A member of Raleigh Woman's Club since 1920, she served as chairman of committees on Conservation, Literature, and International Relations. She also held similar positions in the N.C. Federation of Women's Clubs. She has held memberships in Delta Kappa Gamma, of which she is now a state honorary member, as well as in the N.C. Writers' Conference, Raleigh Natural History Club, and N.C. Shell Club. She is one of the founders of the Wake County Democratic Women's Club.

In 1972 Mrs. Green (1972a-d) wrote "Carolina Bird Club—Past and Present," a four-part article for *Wildlife in North Carolina*. While telling the history of the bird club, Mrs. Green revealed a great deal about how she used her influence with friends from other states to promote nature study in North Carolina. For example, when ornithologist Arthur A. Allen traveled southward in the early 1930s to record for the first time the songs of southern birds, he stopped over with the Greens in Raleigh. As a courtesy to his host and hostess, Dr. Allen disregarded his usual fee and presented his film-illustrated lecture at State College "for whatever we could take in" (Green 1972a).



Charlotte Hilton Green, ready for a CBC field trip, stands outside the Pisgah Inn, May 1971. (Photo by Robert C. Ruiz)

Mrs. Green used her nature column to try to stop the needless slaughter of birds, especially the migratory hawks. Soon the garden clubs and the North Carolina Bird Club were distributing flyers showing that most hawks eat rats and mice in preference to the farmer's poultry (Potter 1986). Mrs. Green was also a strong supporter of the Municipal Bird Sanctuary movement.

Because of her many services to the people and wildlife of North Carolina, Mrs. Green received the Conservation Communications Award from the N.C. Wildlife Federation and the National Wildlife Federation. Shortly afterwards she was featured in the "Carolina Profile" section of *Wildlife in North Carolina* (Earley 1983). At that time she was in the midst of packing many years of memorabilia in preparation for the move to Tarboro, but she was thinking about young people and the future.

"I'm disappointed in that there's no longer an Audubon Junior Club. Eleven million children went through the Audubon Junior Club. That's where Roger Tory Peterson got started," Mrs. Green told Lawrence Earley. "Children are too glued to their TV today. They are not getting out of doors now; they are not learning about the out of doors. I think parents themselves ought to be more interested," she continued. "The study of nature opens up a whole new way of life. There's always something of interest. Everywhere you go there's something to see."

Currently a group of Raleigh residents is conducting a campaign to raise funds to help the city purchase a 9-acre tract near Mrs. Green's former home on White Oak Road.

The additional land will enhance and preserve the natural area she often described in "Out-of-Doors in Carolina." Supporters of the proposed park want it to be named in honor of Charlotte Hilton Green because she is, in the words of William Joslin, "the one person in the Raleigh community most clearly identified with conservation of natural areas."

Mrs. Green always proudly claimed to have been among those who "brought the nature study movement" to North Carolina. The thousands of North Carolinians whose lives have been enriched by her enthusiasm for natural history now have an opportunity to say "thank you" by establishing a park that will enable future generations of city children to grow up appreciating and respecting "God's good Earth."

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributions to the park fund are tax deductible and may be addressed to The Charlotte Hilton Green Park Association, P.O. Box 19173, Raleigh, N.C. 27619. The tract to be purchased will connect two neighborhood parks to the Raleigh Greenway on Crabtree Creek.]