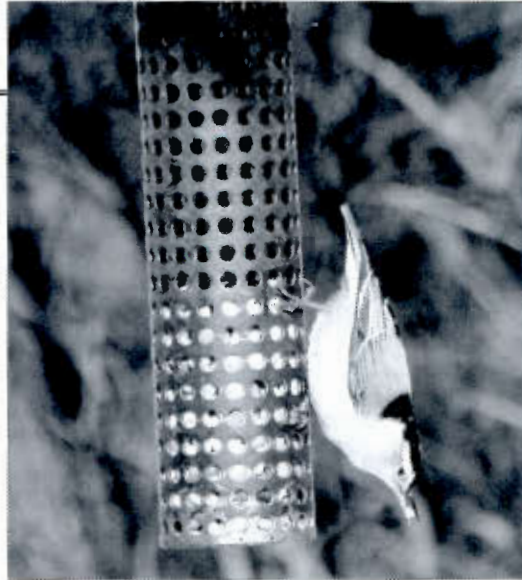


# An avian census of Lowell Park

By Pete Oliver



Overlooking the Rock River from its western bank in northern Lee County, Lowell Park is a 200-acre wooded parcel full of history. It changed ownership many times after surveying was completed by Col. William Hamilton, son of Alexander Hamilton. Charles Russell Lowell purchased the property for \$1,375 in 1860 after visiting the estate immediately adjacent to the south. He was married in 1863 to Josephine Shaw but died a year later at the Battle of Cedar Creek following his enlistment during the Civil War, leaving behind a pregnant wife who gave birth to Carlotta Lowell six weeks later.

Josephine moved to New York City in 1874 and was an acquaintance of Frederick Law Olmsted, landscape architect of New York's Central Park and Chicago's Riverside Landscape Architecture District. Like Olmsted, Josephine held the beliefs that parks have social and spiritual benefits. After her passing in 1905, Carlotta Lowell, in memory of her father and mother, offered the property to the City of Dixon. Initially this gift was not met with thankfulness; the city council strongly opposed the gift, deeming it too expensive to maintain and too remote for the citizens to enjoy. It was only after a change in state legislature and many discussions with local merchants that the gift, Lowell Park, was accepted in 1907.

Years later in 1926, fifteen-year-old Ronald Reagan applied to be a lifeguard along the river. After his first season of 12-hour days, he asked to be kept on the following year and continued for seven seasons overlooking the beach. Over those seven years, Reagan watched over some

Commission more city parks to maintain. Unable to afford park plans written by the Olmsted Brothers of Boston, Lowell Park commissioners sought out a superintendent with a background in landscape architecture who was willing to create plans and perform park duties.

In February of 1908, Arthur C. Comey was hired as the park superintendent. Within his first month, Comey wrote an article for the local newspaper describing a sample of "commoner" winter birds in the park so that identification of migrants would be easier in the spring. His tenure as superintendent lasted a mere six months when he was asked to resign for not fulfilling his caretaker duties in August. Comey agreed but was contracted to finish his incomplete plans for \$300.

In the "First Report of the Lowell Park Commission," Comey submitted a personal letter on the future of the park, detailed drawings of the park's historic stone structures and a list of bird life in the vicinity of the park, which is most interesting. In those six months as the superintendent of the park, Comey documented nearly 150 species in the vicinity of the park. There is a bit of uncertainty, as his report did not define the "vicinity" in which he observed his documented species but in other writings, he mentioned that "on the way, too, you may find one or two sorts of birds that you will not see afterwards in the park itself" (Comey, 1908). It is possible that Comey only recorded birds while traveling between the park and Dixon but in his letter to the Lowell Park Commission, dated January 6, 1909 from Utica, NY, Comey is well

## White-breasted Nuthatch was among the most numerous birds spotted at Lowell Park during a recent survey.

Photo by Sheryl DeVore.

1,000 bathers each day and is reported to have saved seventy-seven people from the Rock River.

In 2008, forty-nine acres of Lowell Park were dedicated as an Illinois Nature Preserve. Prior to completing habitat modifications to facilitate ecological health, additional surveys were deemed necessary to better understand the inhabitants of the park and create a control to compare to after changes are made to the plant community. An outdated survey, finished in the park's infancy, was put on file a century ago and depicts an area much different than it is today.

## The 1908 Survey

With a new piece of property to maintain, the Dixon City Council created the Lowell Park Commission to manage the park, later giving the