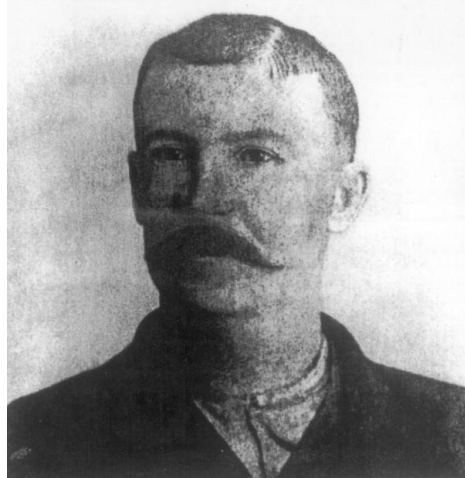


Birds of a Feather Died Together: The Fight to Protect Florida's Birds

R. Boyd Murphree, April 21, 2017



Portrait of Monroe County Game Warden Guy M. Bradley [Courtesy of Florida Memory](#)

It is important to note that the work of protecting the environment has often been difficult, depressing, and even deadly. These aspects of environmental history came together in turn of the century Florida with the killing of Guy Bradley, a game warden who had fought to protect Florida birds from the ravages of plume bird hunters. Called "America's First Martyr to Environmentalism," Bradley was one of a handful of people who were willing to put their lives on the line to protect endangered species (McIver, xi). His actions were part of a nascent bird conservation movement headed by the newly formed Audubon Society and President Theodore Roosevelt, whose lifelong love of nature, especially of birds, drove him to create the nation's first bird reserves as well as a multitude of national forests, game preserves, national parks, and national monuments. Florida newspapers covered Bradley's death and many other episodes in this early environmental struggle.

Killing birds for their decorative feathers was an age old practice, but it did not become an industry until the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the extraordinary growth of the American economy during the Gilded Age combined with a fashion craze among wealthier women for hats adorned with colorful bird plumes created a profitable market for the plumes of egrets and herons. By the late nineteenth century the last sanctuaries of these beautiful birds were the coastal wetlands and the Everglades of South Florida. Plume hunters scoured these areas for the birds' rookeries, where the nesting birds presented an easy target for skilled marksmen. A plume hunter could receive as much as ten dollars per plume. In 1886, the American Ornithologists' Union estimated that as many as five million birds were being killed each year for the supply of the millinery industry.

Although 1886 saw the first organized attempt to educate the public about the devastation of the plume bird population, it was not until 1900 that Congress passed the Lacey Act, a law that prohibited birds taken in violation of state laws from being transported across state lines. The Lacey Act was largely the result of the efforts of women who learned of the terrible toll the plume trade was having on the nation's birds. Harriet Lawrence Hemenway and Minna Hall led this effort and organized the first state Audubon Society in Massachusetts in 1896. Four years later, the Florida Audubon Society was created and lobbied the state legislature to pass Florida's first bird protection act in 1901. The law provided for the protection of plumed birds by outlawing the killing of such birds or the sale of their plumage, imposing a fine of five dollars per bird on anyone in violation of the act and up to ten days imprisonment. Unfortunately, the law did not provide any resources for enforcement. It was up to private philanthropists to come up with the funds to pay for at least one warden to police the coast of South Florida for plume hunters. The job was given to Guy M. Bradley, a former plume hunter who had been hired by the Audubon campaign to save the plumed birds. In 1902, Bradley took up the post of warden for Monroe County.

Game Preservation

Law Prohibiting Sale of Game at All Times Proving a Potent Aid

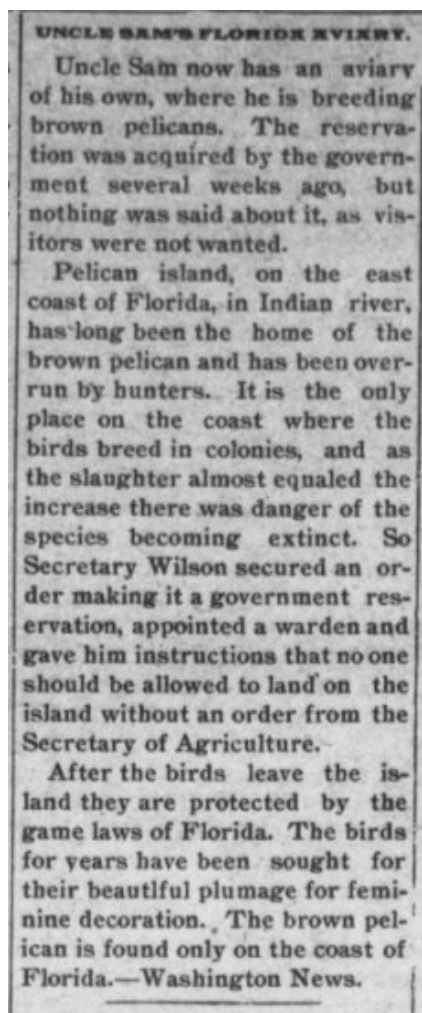
By Dwight W. Huntington

THE best blow for game preservation was struck when laws were enacted prohibiting the sale of game at all times. A difficulty was encountered at first, owing to the conflict of laws in the different States. Birds were offered for sale in a State where the sale was illegal, and the evidence was always at hand that they were killed in another State where the shooting season was open. The words "wherever killed" were soon added to the laws prohibiting sales, and these were supplemented by laws prohibiting the transportation and exportation of game, and making it a misdemeanor to have it in possession in close seasons.

The National Congress recently enacted a law (known as the Lacey law) enlarging the duties and powers of the Department of Agriculture so as to include the preservation, distribution, introduction and restoration of game birds and other wild birds. This law was passed "to aid in the restoration of such birds in those parts of the United States adapted thereto where the same have become scarce or extinct, and also to regulate the introduction of American or foreign birds or animals in localities where they have not heretofore existed." It prohibits the transportation by interstate commerce of game killed in violation of local laws. That a sentiment has developed in favor of the execution of the game laws is well known, to their sorrow, to many innkeepers, common carriers and dealers. Constitutional questions have been raised, and cases growing out of the killing of a few partridges have gone to the Supreme Court of the United States. It is gratifying to the sportsmen that the laws have usually been upheld. This has always been the case excepting where too little care was exercised in their framing. There was much bungling in the earlier legislation. There is some to-day.—The Century.

[From The New Enterprise, December 10, 1903](#)

Florida bird conservation received national attention in March 1903, when President Roosevelt backed legislation establishing Pelican Island in the Indian River Lagoon as the first federal bird reservation. Roosevelt needed little urging to take this step as he was appalled that so many birds were being killed just so their plumes could adorn the hats of fashionable women. After his friend Frank M. Chapman, ornithologist and curator of the American Museum of Natural History, laid out a detailed plan for the establishment of the reserve on the island, Roosevelt signed off on the project and agreed to appoint Paul Kroegel, an Indian River farmer and longtime bird enthusiast, as the first national wildlife refuge warden for Pelican Island.



[From The Chipley Banner, August 6, 1903](#)

Meanwhile, Bradley began his work as game warden in Monroe County, where he focused his efforts on protecting the nests of the great white heron. Plume hunters had made the white heron their favorite target as the heron's feathers were among the most prized feathers of the plume hat business. The Audubon Society supplied Bradley with a boat, which he used to police the islands off Cape Sable. His efforts soon paid off. Due to his vigilance, the number of plume birds taken in the area dropped dramatically; however, the resulting drop in supply only raised the price of the feathers as the millinery industry tried to meet the still widespread demand.

Plume hunters had already shot at Bradley, who put his life on the line every day he was on duty. On July 8, 1905, he paid the ultimate price when a group of plume hunters known as the "Smith Gang" resisted Bradley, who approached them as they were shooting double-breasted cormorants. The gang refused Bradley's order to stop the hunt. An argument ensued and Walter Smith, the leader of the gang, shot and killed Bradley.



[From the Los Angeles Herald, September 17, 1905](#)

A grand jury refused to indict Smith, who had powerful allies in the county, where plume hunting was a popular and lucrative business. Bradley's murder and the mysterious disappearance of DeSoto County warden Columbus McLeod in 1908, encouraged the National Audubon Society to increase its efforts to end the plume trade. In 1911, New York became the first state to pass a tough plumage bill. This law was followed by federal efforts to restrict the trade. Although the business continued in Florida until World War II, stricter state enforcement ended plum hunting in the 1950s.

Citations and Additional Sources

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Portrait of Monroe County Game Warden Guy M. Bradley. Between 1902 and 1905. State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory Website. Accessed April 17, 2017. <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/13858>.