

AOU Elective Member and Auk contributor being honored in Canada: Louise de Kiriline Lawrence

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

AOU Elective Member and *Auk* contributor being honored in Canada: Louise de Kiriline Lawrence

Steve Pitt

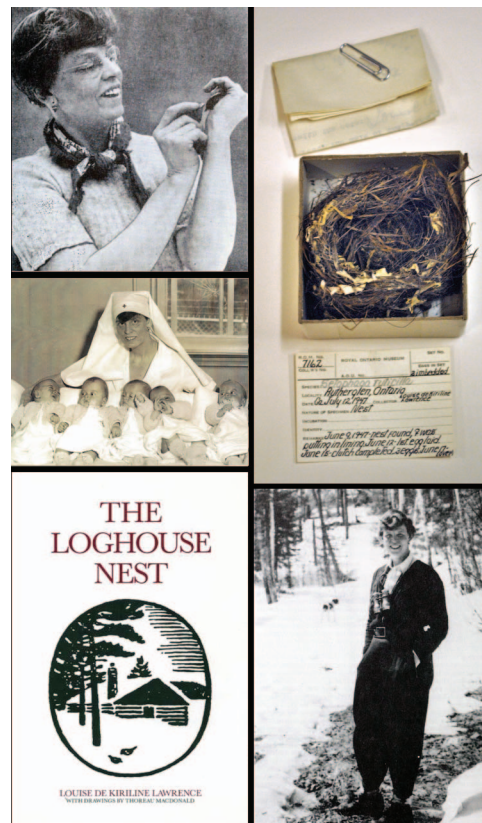
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I am pleased to inform the American Ornithological Union that Louise de Kiriline Lawrence, a former Elective Member of the AOU and a frequent contributor to *The Auk*, will be honored with an Ontario Provincial historical plaque this May. The plaque will be erected on the south shore of Pimisi Lake near Rutherglen, Ontario, just a few hundred yards from where Ms. Lawrence spent more than five decades studying nature and writing. If I merely mentioned Ms. Lawrence's accomplishments as an ornithologist, naturalist, and author, few would doubt that a plaque should be created in her memory. However, before Ms. Lawrence ever picked up her birder binoculars and pen, she had already lived a remarkable life that seems like the invention of a Hollywood screenwriter.

Ms. Lawrence was born Louise Flach in Sweden on January 30, 1894, to a wealthy landowning family with connections to the Swedish royal family. Even at a young age, Louise revealed a keen love of nature. She was an inseparable walking companion to her gentleman farmer father, Sixten Flach, who daily explored the forests and fields of his estate. It was expected that when Louise became a young adult, she would marry well and spend the rest of her life as a pampered member of the leisure class. Instead, Ms. Flach opted for a life of adventure and danger and service.

Although Sweden remained neutral during World War I, Louise enrolled as a Red Cross nurse at the age of seventeen and volunteered for war service. After months of rigorous basic training, Louise was dispatched to Denmark to tend to wounded Allied soldiers. There Nurse Flach met, fell in love with, and married a Russian lieutenant named Gleb Nicoleyevich Kirilin. When the Russian Revolution erupted in 1917, Gleb returned to his homeland to serve in the White Russian Army. Louise (now Nurse de Kiriline) remained behind in Denmark for safety, but after a few months of not hearing from her husband she decided to follow Gleb into chaotic revolutionary Russia.



Traveling alone by troopship, train, horse-drawn sled, and even on foot, Louise miraculously found her husband, but their joyful reunion was short-lived. The White Russian Army was eventually defeated by the Bolsheviks and Gleb and Louise were imprisoned in separate concentration camps. The Bolsheviks released Louise only after they discovered that she was a Swedish Red Cross nurse. Hoping to see Gleb eventually freed as well, Louise stayed in Communist Russia to manage an army hospital. In 1922, she was sent by the Swedish Red Cross into the

Volga region in response to a massive famine that eventually killed an estimated six million people.

Nurse de Kiriline finally left Russia after learning that her beloved husband Gleb had been secretly executed by the Soviet authorities years before. She returned briefly to her family in Sweden where she could have resumed her life as a wealthy socialite. Instead, she volunteered to serve in a new Red Cross initiative in Canada. In the 1920s, there was a dire lack of hospitals and even doctors throughout much of rural Canada. The Red Cross's answer was to establish tiny stations in isolated communities where a single Outpost Nurse would provide all frontline medical care ranging from delivering babies to patching up injured farmers and foresters. Louise's extensive service in Denmark and Russia, plus her ability to speak French and English fluently, made her an ideal fit for the township of Bonfield, in northern Ontario. Arriving in 1927, de Kiriline soon became a familiar sight in the area doing her medical rounds by Model A Ford in the warm months, and by dogsled in the dead of winter. Her skills as a healthcare professional became so highly regarded that Nurse de Kiriline was immediately hired as head nurse when the Dionne Quintuplets were born in the nearby village of Corbeil in 1934.

Louise retired from nursing in 1935 to marry a local carpenter named Len Lawrence. They purchased a ten-acre patch of Canadian Shield wilderness and built a cozy Scandinavian-style log cabin that overlooked Pimisi Lake. The Lawrences had barely moved in when war broke out in Europe once again. Len immediately enlisted in the Canadian Army and Louise suddenly found herself alone in the wilderness cabin with no idea when or even if she would ever see her husband again. To pass the time, Louise rediscovered her love of nature-watching she had first enjoyed as a little girl in Sweden. A friend gave her a copy of *Birds of Canada* by Percy A. Taverner, head ornithologist at the National Museum of Canada. Louise was so taken with

Taverner's book that she wrote him a fan letter. To her delighted surprise, Mr. Taverner wrote back. The two never met face-to-face but they became lifelong pen pals. Taverner encouraged Louise to take up ornithology seriously, and he sponsored her to become an accredited bird bander.

Over the next five decades, Louise de Kiriline Lawrence would observe nature and write. In addition to seven books, she wrote numerous scientific articles for *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, *The Wilson Bulletin*, and *The Auk*, and dozens of popular articles for numerous periodicals including *Audubon Magazine* and *Living Bird Magazine*. She joined the AOU in 1946 and became an Elective Member in 1954. Her study, *A Comparative Life-History Study of Four Species of Woodpeckers* was published as *Ornithological Monograph No. 5* by the AOU in 1967 and was favorably reviewed in the highest scientific circles, including *The Auk* in 1968. Louise Flach de Kiriline Lawrence died in North Bay, April 1992, at the age of 98.

There are many seniors in Northern Ontario who have first-hand memories of seeing Ms. Lawrence in her later years still prowling the woods with her binoculars, or they have family stories of Nurse de Kiriline arriving at their ancestors' cabin door by dogsled to attend to a medical emergency. Unfortunately, her memory is slowly fading among younger generations and as newcomers continue to settle in this area.

To remedy this, a Northern Ontario conservation group called the Nipissing Naturalists have taken it upon themselves to create a historical plaque to preserve Louise de Kiriline Lawrence's memory. I'll inform the AOU when an exact day for the dedication is determined. The cost of the plaque will be five thousand dollars which the Nipissing Naturalists are in the process of raising. If any AOU member wishes to contribute toward the cost of the plaque, please send your check to Fred Pinto, President of the Nipissing Naturalists, at 2163 Pearson Street, North Bay, Ontario, P1B 6V2.