

Meeting Joe Hickey (1907-1993)

Growing up in a one-room house in a poor section of The Bronx in New York City would not seem a promising start in life. But meeting a scoutmaster as a youngster would instill in Joe Hickey a lifelong love of birding.

Garbage dumps where gulls and shorebirds would gather also drew a group of boys who discovered their mutual love for birds. They called themselves “The Bronx County Bird Club,” and their serious work to identify birds and record their sightings attracted the attention of a scientist at the American Museum of Natural History. He invited the teenagers to come listen to noon-hour talks at the Museum where ornithologists and other naturalists shared professional findings. From this incredible educational experience, all 9 members of the Bronx County Bird Club (and one was Roger Tory Peterson) would go on to distinguished careers in ornithology.

Joe’s own path started in a slightly different direction. After getting a college degree in history, he got a salesman job for Consolidated Edison. But his love for the out of doors made him hungry for more education, so he enrolled in night school at New York University to get a second degree in biology.

At age 30, a chance meeting at a party would mark another change in his life. There he met Iowa native son and renowned conservationist, Aldo Leopold. The two connected, and Aldo soon wrote

“If you are interested in the job, I would rather have your intelligence than most people’s training.”



Joe, offering him a job conducting a soils survey in western Wisconsin. It paid \$1,000 a year. Joe came to Wisconsin, where he began work on a master’s degree with Aldo. He wrote a book called *A Guide to Bird Watching*, which he submitted as his master’s thesis. It was immediately published. Chapters included How to Begin Bird Study, The Lure of Migration Watching, Adventures in Bird Counting, Exploration in Bird Distribution, The Romance of Bird Banding, and The Art of Bird Watching. Out-of-print copies are still for sale online.

Joe pursued a doctoral degree based on survival studies of banded birds, at the University of Michigan. (At left, he holds a just-banded screech owl.) Aldo then invited Joe to return to the University of Wisconsin in Madison and join him as a teacher. After Aldo’s untimely death in 1947, Joe took over his teaching duties and soon became the head of the department.

Joe loved teaching. Over nearly 30 years, his classes in wildlife ecology grew from a few students to 475 in 1976 as the fledgling environmental movement drew students to his lectures. In a pre-computer era, Joe would type up and hand out detailed notes at the beginning of every class. He laid out museum mounts of birds (shown at right) for students to look at on their way into class. Then slides were shown for the rest of the hour. Joe was proud of the fact that during a 16-week course, the lights were never on. He strived to make his classes “enjoyable intellectual experiences,” wanting his students to be drawn in by the images and not have to take notes. On Friday evenings, students signed up, then came over to the Hickey household (8 at a time) for one-on-one conversations. Joe’s classes were the highlights of many students’ college years. He stayed connected with many, helping them find jobs, even serving as best man at one student’s wedding.



Joe’s research interests in birding took him to far-flung places where he studied various aspects of bird populations. These travels included studies of songbirds in managed German forests, recovery of bird populations after strip mining in Wyoming, and seabirds along Alaska’s Pribilof Islands. His most notable contribution would be his efforts to unravel the connection between declines in bird populations and pesticides such as DDT.

Joe was also an active conservationist outside of the academic arena. He helped found The Nature Conservancy. He served on boards of directors for dozens of conservation organizations including The Nature Conservancy and the National Audubon Society. He was also the recipient of many national awards for his scientific accomplishments.

Teaching was by far Joe’s greatest pleasure. At right, he is delivering his last University lecture in 1976. It is fitting that part of Joe’s estate will be gifted to the Osborne Nature Center. This gift will help start a permanent endowment for the Center and will support nature education for future generations.

