

Quotes from George Becker (1917-2002)

“When I started out at the university, I started out in music for two years down there at Milwaukee State Teachers College, but I found out very quickly that this was not my ball of wax. I transferred, then, to Madison and finished my undergraduate work in Madison, all in languages, all of those three years. I was so deep into German at the University of Wisconsin when I transferred that I continued a year longer, and that got me the master’s in Germanic philology. Toward the end of that year, 1939, somebody mentioned a guy over in the Game Management Department by the name of Aldo Leopold. Well! That was the beginning of my death right there!”

“Oh, I’ve got tears in my eyes now because I went to that first lecture in Game Management, and he made such an impression on me. I could never lose it. And this man, he just gripped me. I don’t know why it would be that way, but it was so sincere, and he was teaching these people the whisper songs of birds and testing them in class. You could tell by what he was doing that it was special. No place else would you get the same kind of treatment, would you get the same kind of education. It changed me completely. I suddenly realized that I was in the wrong area.”

“At the end of December, 1939, a census of the pheasant occurred in University Bay. Aldo invited the entire class to come along and watch this census, how it was being taken, and so on. Well, on the morning of the census, Becker was the only one who showed up. The reason why is that nobody knew my telephone number, and they couldn’t tell me that this had been called off. Well, Aldo Leopold took real pity on me. He reached into his book cabinet, and there he had about 12 new copies of *Game Management*. He reached down for a copy, and then in his inimitable way, opened it up and inscribed, ‘From Aldo Leopold to George Becker.’”

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“There was no book on fishes in Wisconsin outside of a 1935 issue by Willard Green, and it did not include a number of specimens that were in the state. So this is where the root of my book began. In my mind, Wisconsin had to have a fish book. I felt embarrassed because Minnesota had several fish books already. And Michigan ... Iowa and Illinois had a fish book, but not Wisconsin.”

“I started my book [*Fishes of Wisconsin*] in 1958 and finished it 25 years later. At the end, it actually took three years of straight writing, getting up early in the morning and working until late at night. Over those 25 years, the family was together a lot, and they were helping out. Up until 1967, my sons, Kenneth, Dale, and David assisted me in collecting thousands of specimens. This was long before the book was anything of shape or substance. I remember the first collecting period. I had built this equipment, and then we would tackle some of the streams in the immediate vicinity of Stevens Point. We began to learn what was in the stream and how to use that electro-fishing equipment properly.”

Quotes are from an interview by author, Sumner Matteson, printed in *AFIELD, Portraits of Wisconsin Naturalists, Empowering Leopold’s Legacy* (Little Creek Press, January 2020; littlecreekpress.com).

