

Frances Hamerstrom 1907–1998



Frances Hamerstrom—pioneer wildlife biologist, longtime member and past president of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology—died following a long illness near her Plainfield, Wisconsin, home in August 1998 at the age of 90. She and Frederick (or Hammy), her late husband and co-researcher of almost 60 years, were internationally recognized biologists who were both mentored by renowned University of Wisconsin ecologist and philosopher, Aldo Leopold. Frances was the only woman to receive a graduate degree under Leopold's supervision, and only the second woman employed as a wildlife professional in Wisconsin.

Fran and Dr. Frederick Hamerstrom were perhaps best known as biologists whose collective work on the Greater Prairie-Chicken spanned several decades. Their efforts probably prevented this bird from local extinction in central Wisconsin through their novel solution of using a landscape technique of scattered grassland reserves to curtail the further loss of chicken habitat. Highlights of this successful preservation effort can be found in "The Prairie Chicken in Wisconsin" (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Technical Bulletin, No. 64, 1973). For this progressive management approach, they received in 1970 the prestigious National Wildlife Federation Award for Distinguished Service to Conservation.

Fran Hamerstrom, formerly Frances Flint, was born into a privileged childhood near Boston, Massachusetts. After dropping out of high school and flunking out of an eastern college, Fran received her B.S. degree from Iowa State in 1935 under famed biologist Paul Errington. In Iowa, she and Hammy studied

pheasant breeding biology, the winter ecology of the Northern Bobwhite, and raptor food habits. In this latter vein, their paper "The Great Horned Owl and its prey in north-central United States," co-authored with Dr. Errington, won The Wildlife Society's first Terrestrial Publication Award in 1940. In that same year, Fran obtained an M.S. degree in wildlife management under Professor Leopold. For her outstanding contributions in wildlife research, Fran was awarded an honorary doctorate of science from Carroll College in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in 1961. The Hamerstoms were both adjunct professors of wildlife biology at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

Fran was especially well-known for innovative techniques in her extensive field studies with birds of prey, and in particular with the Northern Harrier and the American Kestrel. Indeed, she was one of the first raptor biologists in the world to run cross-generation studies involving individually-marked breeding adults. Although her initial objective for such study was focused on the question of whether harriers mate for life (they don't), her subsequent longstanding studies encompassed a wide range of factors related to kestrel and harrier populations, including the shortage of natural cavities as nesting sites for kestrels, and the influence of population fluctuations of the harriers' main prey, the meadow vole. By providing nest boxes, she was able to increase kestrel populations. She also discovered that vole abundance determined the harriers' mating system. This latter discovery, presented in her co-authored article "Effect of voles in mating systems in a central Wisconsin population of harriers," won the Edwards Prize for best paper of 1985 in the *Wilson Bulletin*. More of her fascinating insights and overall work on this raptor were published in her book "Harrier, hawk of the marshes, the hawk that is ruled by a mouse" (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986).

Fran and Hammy's pre-Civil War house, near Portage County's Buena Vista Marsh, served as a headquarters for more than 7,000 field assistants and birders hosted by the Hamerstoms over the years. Although the house had few amenities, it did have a resident population of feral house mice and free-flying "captive" Great Horned Owls. This setting was always flavored by Fran's infectious zest for life, quick wit, abject candor, and marked skills as a raconteur. Indeed, a colleague once remarked that evenings at the Hamerstoms' usually resulted in some of the most enlightening and colorful dinner conversations imaginable. Fran maintained this enriching discourse through her final summers of life, as her last apprentices assisted her with her nearly 30-year study of kestrels. Above all, in Fran's mind and in Hammy's, too, I believe, was an unstinting refusal to tolerate second-rate science, and Fran was ever quick to correct students and even other professional colleagues when she felt the need to maintain scientific rigor.

In total, Fran authored or co-authored over 100 technical articles and books, including several popular children's books, such as "Walk when the moon is full" (Crossing Press, 1975). She made innumerable local, national, and international appearances, and, along with her husband, received many honors, including both the Silver and the Golden Passenger Pigeon Awards from the WSO, the President's Award from the Raptor Research Foundation, and induction into

the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, located in the Schmeckle Reserve at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point. Noteworthy as these accomplishments are, it would, however, be difficult to measure the tremendous ornithological role that Fran and Hammy played because of their selfless, inspirational, and dedicated efforts on behalf of avian wildlife, and the exemplary support they provided to so many ornithologists, young and old, practicing or aspiring. Fran will be sorely missed and remembered fondly by the many, many assistants, artists, biologists, readers, and friends that she touched. She left our world a better place for her efforts and truly was one of Wisconsin's treasured natural resources.

She is survived by a son, Alan, of Arnold, Maryland; a daughter, Elva, a well-known wildlife artist, of Roseburg, Oregon; and two grandchildren.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd., Stone Ridge Drive, Waukesha, WI 53188-1188, or to the Fran and Frederick Hamerstrom Fund, Raptor Research Foundation, Inc., 14377 117th St. South, Hastings, MN 55033.

(Photograph of Frances and Frederick Hamerstrom was taken at their home in 1980 by Sumner Matteson.)

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Common Redpoll by Jack Bartholmai