

Quotes from James Zimmerman (1924-1992)

“Leopold asked me in his first oral quiz how I recognized a field sparrow without hearing it first. I didn’t remember the pink bill! I’ll always remember that! He conducted these personal oral quizzes so that he could get to know you. As an example of his charm, instead of sitting there like he was going to grill you, he’d come in and first ask you for your advice on something. Once, when I came in, the first thing he said was, ‘You’re working with Fassett over in botany, and I’ve got a problem with my research on plants near the Shack. Can you tell me what this plant is?’ He was extremely clever at putting you at ease, and he was sincere, too; it wasn’t just a put-on for show. He did want to know, but he wouldn’t ask the student who knew the most about the question, but the student who would grow the most in answering that question.”

“Leopold’s teachings sparked my interest in phenology. I have maintained a daily record of natural events continuously from 1943 to the present. They’re a variety of records from in and around Madison. At the arboretum, for example, I kept records for eight years from the late ‘40s through the ‘50s, after taking Leopold’s course. I biked to the arboretum twice a week and tried to cover every part and then started over again. I watched over 800 species of plants. I kept records of their unfolding, blooming, seeding, and fall color. I kept records of the arrival, hatching, fledging, and song dates of over 75 species of birds. I also observed turtles, frogs, snakes, and insects. Leopold knew this was good training.”

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“What I value most about my work as a naturalist is reaching other people, turning them on. The hope is that they then become more involved. It’s a matter of getting one naturalist per every 100 people and you’d have most of our environmental problems solved. This was conservationist Paul Olson’s idea. He had me teaching Reading the Landscape [by May T. Watts] for 10 years as part of the Madison School Forest program in Verona, and it became extremely popular. We figured we reached 2,000 people in 10 years, many of whom are now business people and doctors on city councils and county boards. People’s interests are more emotional than intellectual – so give them good contact hours in the field!”

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).

