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In her own words: Lorrie Otto and the fight to ban DDT

Updated October 2, 2018



Lorrie Otto. Photo by Ney Tait Fraser

Spring is upon us here in the Northern Hemisphere, and for many birdwatchers, it's time to start thinking of improving our yards for the birds — with native plants, water sources, and the like. We have published several [\(https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/featured-stories/backyard/\)](https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/featured-stories/backyard/) articles [\(https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/tag/backyard/\)](https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/tag/backyard/) over the years about gardening with native plants for the benefit of birds, and you can certainly find many books and other resources on the subject.

Did you know that one of the earliest proponents of native landscaping was Lorrie Otto

<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/beginners/bird-friendly-yards/lorrie-otto-and-the-fight-to-ban-ddt/>

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorrie_Otto)? She was a Milwaukee-based environmentalist who worked to ban the use of DDT in the United States and was one of the people who established the Environmental Defense Fund (<https://www.edf.org>). In 1979, after hearing Otto lecture, a small group of women began to meet monthly to discuss natural landscaping. They wanted to promote the use of native plants to landscape city and suburban yards, and they called themselves the “Wild Ones.” They soon founded an organization of the same name (<https://www.wildones.org>) that now has chapters throughout the United States.

Otto died

(<http://archive.jsonline.com/news/obituaries/95479219.html>) in 2010 at the age of 90, but her influence lives on in countless ways. A friend of Otto’s, Ney Tait Fraser, published a book in 2015 titled *Mending the Earth in Milwaukee* (https://www.amazon.com/Mending-Earth-Milwaukee-Tait-Fraser/dp/B073ZMLRRJ/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1520967125&sr=8-3&keywords=Ney+Tait+Fraser), which features stories about gardeners who replaced monocultures of lawn with biodiverse communities of native plants to sustain birds and other wildlife. (It’s available on Amazon.com (https://www.amazon.com/Mending-Earth-Milwaukee-Tait-Fraser/dp/B073ZMLRRJ/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1520967125&sr=8-3&keywords=Ney+Tait+Fraser).)



Lorrie Otto (left) with author Ney Tait Fraser

Fraser has granted us permission to excerpt a part of the chapter “Who Killed Cock Robin?” here on BirdWatchingDaily.com. It’s the story, told by Lorrie Otto to Fraser, of the fight to ban DDT. I think it’s a story worth reading today, in 2018, when politicians are rolling back protections for clean air and water, endangered species, public lands, and wildlife populations. — *Matt Mendenhall, Editor*

Lorrie Otto, in her own words:

My husband’s job took us back to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where we purchased a house in Bayside. My concern about DDT started when it was sprayed for mosquitoes. Very rapidly, it escalated to spraying elm trees. People stood on the ground shooting hoses of DDT up in the air. New thinking was to spray DDT with helicopters. People were warned that they should cover birdbaths and put cars in the garage, because of spray damaging the finish of cars and getting on windshields.

Our concern built up gradually. At that time, we had immense warbler migrations. All of a sudden, there were hardly any birds in the trees during migration seasons. The robins did not sing. If you saw any robins at all, they would be in convulsions on the edge of lawns beating their wings against the grass. Do you recall how robins used to sing after summer showers and enjoy bathing in the puddles of rain? After the use of DDT, not only was there no sound, there were no robins. Insectivorous birds were affected by DDT, whereas birds that ate grains — quails and pheasants, for example — were not affected. It was just the insectivorous birds and then raptors such as eagles.





(<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/photos-and-community/photo-galleries/us-and-canada/bald-eagles-53/>)

An adult Bald Eagle feeds its chick in 2015. Such a sight was quite rare during the era of widespread DDT use.
Photo by Tony Joyce (<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/author/tonyjoyce/>)

We had 63 eagles' nests around Lake Michigan. Then there were only three nests. Eagles were not able to produce young because eggshells were thin or missing completely. It was seriously disturbing to observe what was happening. If you really knew what was happening, it became frightening. All the rivers, lakes, and waters in Wisconsin were tested including Lake Michigan. DDT was present in every fish tested. One summer, there were reports of high concentrations of DDT in Lake Michigan's chubs. Seagulls regurgitated food contaminated with DDT into their young offspring. Advisories were sent out to warn people against eating fish. Clearly, DDT was going up the food chain. Here we were spraying trees to kill an insect and we were killing birds and fish. This great long chain of life was being destroyed.

At that time, the media called protesters "bird lovers" or "conservationists," not "environmentalists." We would appear at village meetings requesting that spraying of DDT should be stopped. This was really grim. The newspaper would report that "bird lovers" were at the village meeting. When I showed them a basket of dead robins, officials said, "Waddayawant? Birds or trees?" So, we tried to get a bill through our legislature, but failed to do so.

The agriculture people made you think that the entire economy would collapse if DDT was banned. All the cabbage leaves would turn to lace. We would destroy the canning industry. The tourist industry would collapse. There was so much fuss about this that finally the Department of Agriculture formed a committee of 17 people. One represented the parks and recreation of Wisconsin. One represented the municipalities responsible for saving the elm trees in cities and towns. One represented the fruit growers in Door County. One represented the canning industry. One came from the Department of Natural Resources.

Another represented the Wildlife Department of the University of Wisconsin. Dr. Joseph Hickey, from the Wildlife and Ecology Department of the University of Wisconsin, was world-famous. He begged for a ban on the use of DDT. Seventeen people voted as to whether we should continue the use of DDT. The man from the Department of Natural Resources abstained. Dr. Hickey from the Ecology Department said that we absolutely must stop this. All the rest of those men voted that we should continue to use DDT. Reading that outcome in the newspaper made me furious.

A week or two before, I had read about a group of scientists and one lawyer on Long Island, New York, who were going to court to try to stop the spraying of DDT against mosquitoes on Long Island. I thought, "I'll get those scientists to come here to Wisconsin."

In Wisconsin, we have a special ruling that citizens can go before the hearing examiner of the Department of

Natural Resources. We had to gather supporters and witnesses along with a lawyer to litigate against the Department of Agriculture. I flew out to Long Island and asked to meet the scientist Dr. Charles F. Wurster. I said, "If we wait any longer, there is not going to be anything to save." The timing was good. Any earlier, people would not have been upset enough to financially support an effort to ban DDT. They decided they would come to Wisconsin. I can remember Dr. Wurster saying, "We have all the marbles. We just have to lay them out in front of the judge." I said, "You come to Wisconsin and lay out those marbles, please."

I had to find a lawyer who would admit their lawyer into the courts of Wisconsin. In addition, I had to provide money to pay all the scientists to travel to Wisconsin and testify. I was not experienced in fundraising. Eventually, I persuaded a man named Fred Ott to help me. He was superb. Ott raised most of the money, almost a hundred thousand dollars, from his German friends in the Milwaukee area. Many people made small contributions of \$10, \$15 or \$20. Big money came from wealthy people with estates who had noticed the disappearance of birds. Wrens did not sing in the summertime anymore. There were no wrens in the wren houses. Those wealthy people forked out money to ban DDT. The world as they had known it did not exist any longer.

We brought in a scientist from Sweden, Dr. Göran Löfroth, Institute of Biochemistry at the University of Stockholm, who had found DDT in human milk. Robert Risebrough from the Institute of Marine Resources, University of California, Berkeley, came to Wisconsin. Dr. Robert L. Rudd, a University of California zoologist, had worked on the effects of pesticides at the same time Rachel Carson did. His book reached the same conclusions that Carson cited in her book *Silent Spring*. Robert Van den Bosch, a biologist from Berkeley, California, traveled to Wisconsin. Charles F. Wurster, Jr., a molecular ecologist from State University of New York at Stony Brook, was there. Professor Donald A. Chant was recruited. Chant had been Chair, Department of Biological Control, at the University of California, Riverside. I invited him to testify. He came to Wisconsin from the University of Toronto, where he served as Chair of Zoology from 1967 to 1975. The following men came from UW-Madison: William Reeder, Ph.D., Orie L. Loucks, Ph.D., J.J. Hickey, Ph.D., and Hugh H. Iltis, Ph.D. I can't remember the names of the Environmental Defense Fund scientists from New York. Most of them are now dead or retired.



(<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/photos-and-community/photo->

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DDT hit songbird populations hard, including that of the widespread American Robin. Photo by Joan Wiitanen (<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/author/mommawheats/>)

The scientists I brought together had read one another's reports in scientific literature. They all moved into my house in Bayside. It was like an enormous scientific meeting. One scientist had worked on the decline of Brown Pelicans in New Orleans. Another had written about the decline of falcons in California. They talked all night long before falling asleep. Although I had convinced my neighbors to put up these scientists, the guests would not separate from each other. They stayed here to talk and talk and talk. They were intoxicated with each other.

When I came downstairs to cook their breakfast, I would stand on the balcony looking at all these individuals asleep in my drawing room. I had to step over their bodies to get to my kitchen. That group put the whole story of DDT together. We went to the State Capitol in Madison. The hearings opened in the Wisconsin State Capitol Chamber on December 2, 1968. There was full and sympathetic coverage from the newspapers. *The New York Times* sent a reporter. NBC sent a camera crew. It was a David-and-Goliath battle. Young, obscure research workers were up against representatives of the giant DDT manufacturing industry including manufacturers, agrarian scientists, and doctors headed by the Industry Task Force for DDT of the National Agricultural Chemical Association. We told the story to the judge. Then our evidence was rebutted. We returned to rebut our opponents. The verdict of the hearing was not handed down for months, perhaps a year.

News coverage was so strong and the reporting was so excellent that within two weeks legislators were educated about the perils of pesticides. They passed a bill forbidding any further spraying of DDT in Wisconsin. The Environmental Defense Fund — which is what the gang of scientists and the lawyer became — decided that banning DDT state by state would be too slow. They went straight to Washington to stop the use of DDT in the entire United States. In Washington, they convinced Dr. William D. Ruckelshaus, who was the first director of the Environmental Protection Agency, that DDT should be banned in our country. In 1972 it was banned. However, it takes a long, long time for the environment to heal itself. Robins did not return for 20 years. Now, when I see a young robin with a speckled breast, I do a little curtsy and say, "Welcome, but for me, you wouldn't be here, little bird."

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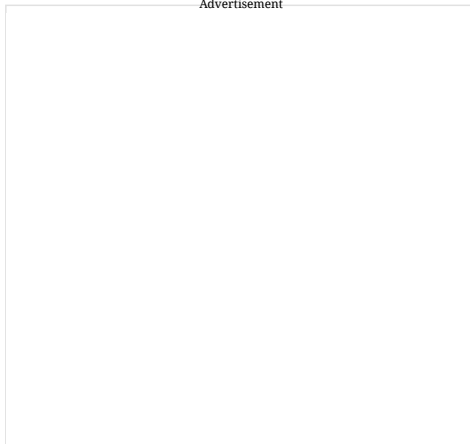
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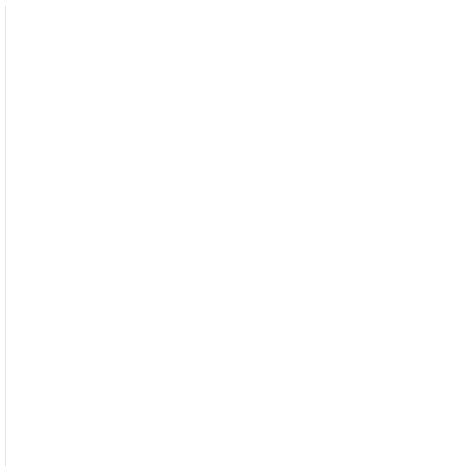
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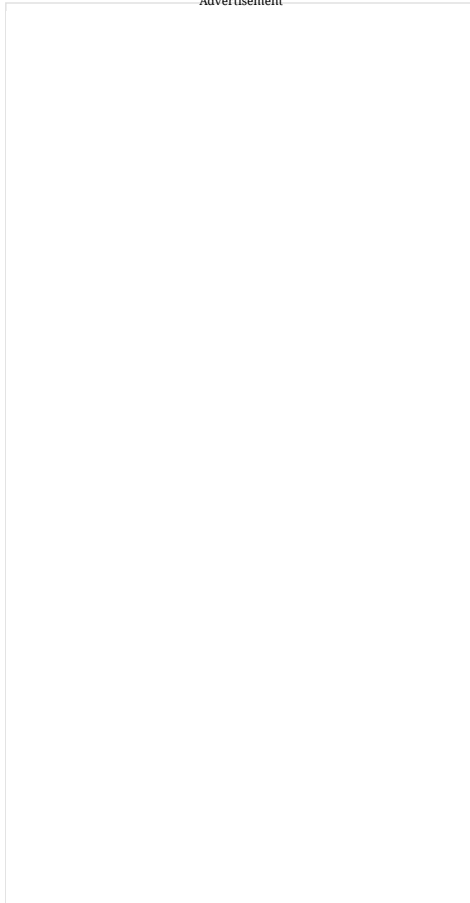
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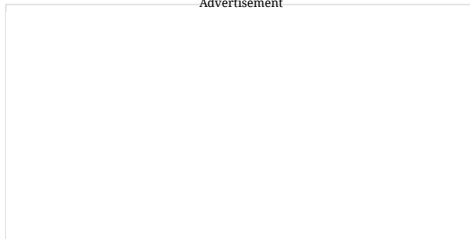
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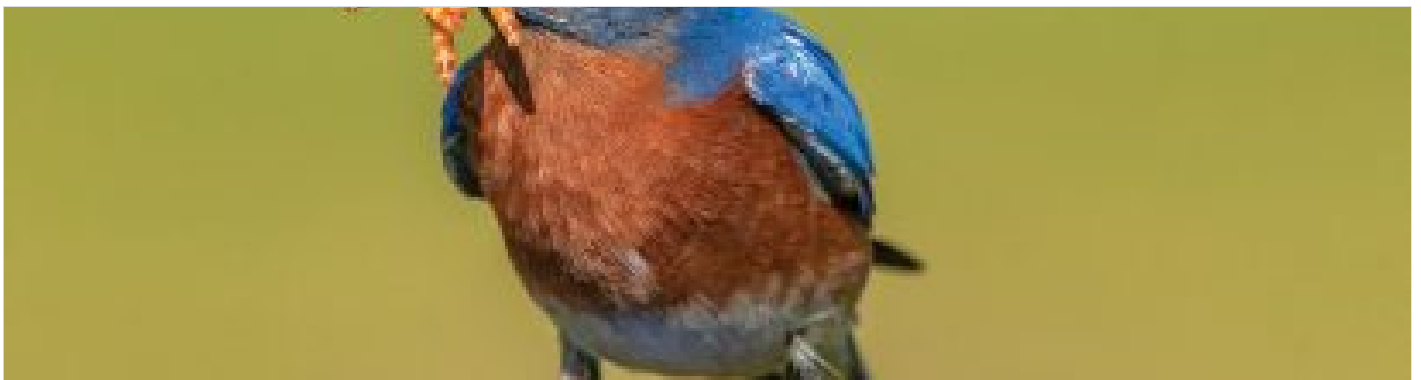
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The blue beauties prefer wide-open spaces, nest boxes, and the occasional mealworm.



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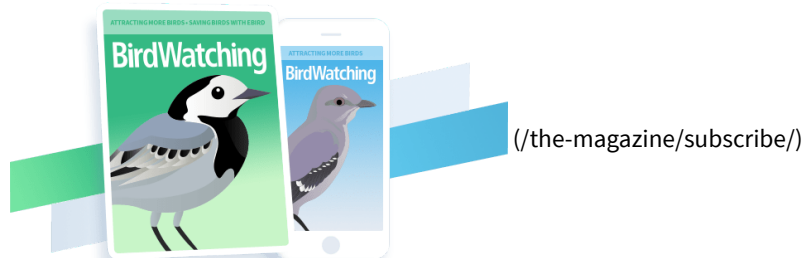
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