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Remembering a conservation giant

Bill Berry | state columnist

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Ruth Hine

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STEVENS POINT — One of nature’s great choruses will soon echo again across the verdant woods and wetlands. The spring peepers, wood frogs and their fellow amphibians will be at it again, carrying on one of nature’s most glorious and resonant

love fests.

Across Wisconsin, volunteers will fan out to record the sounds on 120 routes, all of them part of the Wisconsin Frog and Toad Survey coordinated by the Department of Natural Resources.

But for the first time since the survey's inception in 1981, the woman who initiated it and nudged it along for many years won't be among us. Ruth Hine, whose natural resource accomplishments were legend among those who knew her, died a few weeks ago.

Hine won't be attending the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame induction April 24 in Stevens Point, either. But she learned before her death that she would be inducted, along with longtime Madison conservation activist Emily Earley and the late Stevens Point biologist and environmental firebrand George Becker, author of the voluminous "Fishes of Wisconsin."

Hine came to Madison from the East Coast to study zoology at UW-Madison. She was the first woman to earn a doctor's degree in zoology at UW, in 1949. It was a man's world in that field and many other areas of the sciences then. Hine would encounter her share of gender bias throughout her career, rising above it with class, dignity and excellence of work.

She landed a job as a technical editor in what was then the Wisconsin Conservation Department, eventually rising to chief of the research, information and publications section of the bureau of research at the DNR. Those who know the history of it all note that Hine was passed over for promotions more than once. Jobs went to men who were less qualified.

But her successes couldn't be ignored, and newspapers took note. A headline for a 1959 Milwaukee Journal article on Hine proclaimed: "Woman finds place in conservation work." Many other women found a place, too, thanks in no small part to Hine.

Ruth Hine was humble, unassuming and, by the way, uncommonly talented. She was doing something she loved, and she went about the business of helping researchers produce impeccable reports, hundreds of them before she retired in the mid-'80s. She did her share of writing, too. Hine was a hybrid combination of scientist and journalist. Her stated goal was to make the materials produced by the DNR understandable for as broad an audience as possible. Squeezing that out of researchers took special talent.

She also went well beyond her job descriptions. The frog and toad survey is an example. Its importance has grown over the years as we've come to understand that amphibians are indicators of ecological health or the lack of it. Frogs, she noted shortly before her death, "were essentially overlooked. We didn't pay any attention to them." Among other things, the survey has clearly identified the decline of several amphibian species in Wisconsin.

She also had a major role in developing the Wisconsin endangered species program, pushing the effort forward long before the state had a formal program. Eventually, the Legislature established the DNR's Bureau of Endangered Resources.

A few hundred words in a newspaper column don't do justice to someone like Ruth Hine, but I guess they will have to do. Let's allow her to finish. A woman of deep faith, she said this in an interview years ago:

"As a Christian, I look upon the world as a magnificent, living organism created by God and sustained by God. Human beings are part of that creation, part of nature, if you will. I think it's very important for human beings to realize that we're part of the earth. We forget that sometimes. We set ourselves up above everything else, but we're just a part of the earth."

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