

# Ernest Fremont Swift 1897-1968

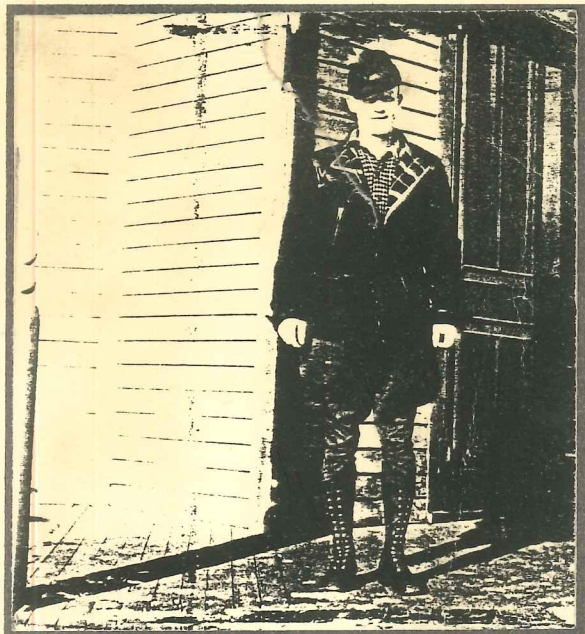
## The courage to walk alone

*"The success of conservation in the coming one hundred years will depend upon what we do in our local communities ....through self-discipline aimed at overcoming wastefulness....self-disciplin born of an intelligent understanding of the limitation of our natural resources"*

**O**n a cool morning in 1928 a young Wisconsin game warden quietly trailed three men to a secluded stretch of the Chippewa River. The warden knew that these men were not to be trifled with. Laying on the seat of their black sedan, he had spied a sub machine gun. This was the era of mobster rule in northern Wisconsin.

Srambling through the tangled brush he spotted the men fly-fishing under a posted sign that read, "Fish Refuge Area-Fishing Prohibited." Several walleyes were tied to the bank. He approached the men cautiously, but with an air of confidence and courage. He knew full well that game wardens more experienced than him had lost their lives in similar situations.

Walking quietly, a startled sparrow suddenly flew out of the bushes. The men quickly whirled around, leveling their pistols at the young warden. Even as fear clutched his heart, he bravely informed them of their violation. The mobsters dared him to draw his weapon, wanting to kill him on the spot. Undaunted, the young warden confiscated all their fishing gear and ordered them to appear in court the next morning. Two days later, he pushed his luck even further by arresting the gang's leader for poaching. This time it was the warden who leveled his gun. This daring young warden was **Ernest "Ernie" Fremont Swift**.



Swift as a young game warden in 1928.

Swift once wrote that, "a successful game warden was by nature an individualist, a man not afraid to walk alone through cold dark woods, fields, and marshes to uphold the law." He exemplified courage, foresight, and devotion throughout his life, whether as a fearless game warden or as an ardent defender of the country's natural resources.

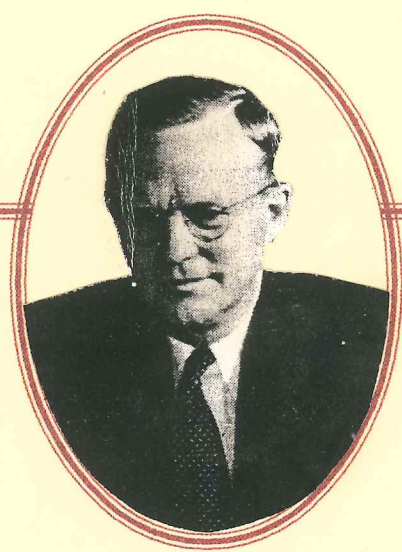


Raised on the wind swept prairies of southwestern Minnesota, Ernie was captivated by tales of a fading frontier. Roaming the prairie surrounding the family farm, he would act out buffalo hunts and fierce Indian battles. Through these imaginative adventures he was able to witness and contemplate a world of booming prairie chickens, shy pasque flowers, and endless flights of ducks and geese stretching across the somber prairie skies. From these early childhood explorations Swift developed a respectful fascination with the natural world and a deep understanding of the importance of conservation

Following his renown as a fearless game warden, Swift became deputy director of the old Wisconsin Conservation Department under the tutelage of hard driving Director Harley "Mac" MacKenzie. Rising steadily in the ranks, he was appointed Director in 1947.

In his uncompromising manner to protect the State's natural resources, he took on anyone who stood in opposition, including many of his old friends, established conservationists, and past warden associates.

During the 1930s Swift forged a lasting professional and personal relationship with a University of Wisconsin wildlife ecologist Aldo Leopold. Together they fought the deer management battles of



the early forties, seeing scientific research, not political influence, as the key to a healthy herd and ecosystem. Many of Ernie's past warden associates split with him over this issue. Predictably he forged ahead.

Though it took years with numerous setbacks, Swift's deer policy eventually set the stage for further wildlife management refinements that have led to healthier and more viable populations.

Swift became more embroiled with conservation issues and organizations in the 1950s. In 1954, Ernie was appointed Assistant Director to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington D.C. A year later he accepted the appointment as director of the National Wildlife Federation.



Assistant Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Swift received over 20 conservation awards during his life, including the Aldo Leopold Award in 1959. He also was an excellent writer, authoring many articles and several books. He published his best writing in 1967, an autobiographical book entitled *A Conservation Saga*. Ernie Swift passed away in 1968.

Ernie Swift was forever thinking about conservation, stating that, "People become conservationists in relation to their ability to become philosophers." This tough-talking and articulate spokesman for conservation never received a formal college education. As in his childhood, for Swift the adult, nature became his guide and teacher.