

Wisconsin Outdoor News Conservationist of the Year: Christine Thomas

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Christine Thomas, Ph.D., retired June 30 from her role as dean of the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point. Thomas was selected as Wisconsin Outdoor News Conservationist of the Year. (Photo by Dean Bortz)

When she was a young girl growing up in a small town 30 miles northwest of Detroit, Mich., Christine Thomas mostly wanted to just fish, shoot firearms, and go boating on Cass Lake.

Little did she know then she would go on to play key roles in the Wisconsin and national conservation scene as a professor at UW-Stevens Point. Thomas may have retired from UW-Stevens Point as dean of the College of Natural Resources on June 30, but she is far from done with conservation work.

Before she continues on that path, though, she'll have to find room on her cabin wall to hang a plaque recognizing Thomas as the *Wisconsin Outdoor News* Conservationist of the Year.

Where it started

Her folks had a small home on a channel on Cass Lake, one of the biggest lakes in Oakland County near the town of West Bloomfield.

"That's where I got my start in fishing. I started on smallmouth bass and bluegills, and the occasional walleye. After dark it was all bullheads, which was the only fish my dad would unhook for me. For everything else I was on my own. I fished with my younger sister, Darleen, but she really didn't like to bait her own hook. Dad might have created two anglers had he been a little more tolerant of baiting hooks for us," said Thomas, of her dad, Kenneth Zube.

"Besides fishing, in my earliest days, my parents did a lot of shotgunning. Dad pheasant hunted. He had spring spaniels. I was exposed to hunting, too. When I was 6, Dad went mule deer hunting in Wyoming. He took some wonderful photos – lots of photos – slides. That was the first time I ever saw slides. I was the only one who liked the meat. He stopped hunting before I was old enough to hunt. Then our bird dog died.

"But he kept on shooting. I learned to shoot handguns. I didn't shoot long guns until I got married. I married a farmer (her husband, Stan Thomas) and we moved to a farm. The first

major gift I got from my husband was a shotgun. I picked it out because it was pretty. But, it was a Model 600 Ithaca over/under 20-gauge. It was cut down to fit me. It's the only shotgun I ever use to this day. I hunt turkeys, upland game, and waterfowl with it.

"I'm not really that good with it, but I can put supper on the table. I won't win a contest, but I will come home with something to eat.

"Women in my generation, we came to hunting and fishing one of two ways. You were the only son your father ever had or you married someone who hunted and fished. I got both of those."

Thomas also had a very influential biology teacher at West Bloomfield High School, Dorothy Childers. Childers helped further spark Thomas' natural interest in biology. After high school, Thomas attended Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant, Mich., where the biology program is very conservation focused.

"It was a lot like Stevens Point, a similar community in the middle north in the state. I went there thinking I would be teaching. I never did get that teaching job. I graduated in December. It was the biggest group of would-be teachers flooding the job market. I moved to small town in southwest Michigan and taught biology in a community college, I worked as a micro biologist and product development specialist (in private manufacturing), and also ran a wastewater treatment plant in Paw Paw, Mich. That's where I met Stan's uncle, who knew L.L. Bean."

Not long after that, Christine and Stan packed up and moved to Adams County in central Wisconsin for Stan's new job, managing a large farm. At that point, Christine started a masters program in water resources at UW-Stevens Point. A chain of circumstances and situations sort of took over her future from there, eventually leading to her role in the College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point and a stint on the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board.

The hunting ...

When they married, they moved to Stan's family farm in the Lower Peninsula.

"Stan's dad, his uncles, those people were what I would call quintessential red-shirt conservation guys. They were dyed-in-the-wool deer hunters. One uncle had a cabin in the Upper Peninsula, another had a cabin in the northern Lower. My dad hunted, but he wasn't a hunter. I'm a hunter.

"For those guys, Stan's family, hunting was a defining thing in their life. They told stories year round. Uncle Harry, when bed-ridden later in life, sent his wife to the sporting goods store to buy a license for whatever season was open. She would then hang his gear by the bed so he could read stories about whatever hunting was going on at that time.

"We moved to Adams County in 1977 to a 3,200-acre farm changing from cattle to vegetables. About 500 acres of it was woods. I had a horse, a dog, and a shotgun. Stan bought me a bow and muzzleloader and I was about to become a student. It was like I just landed it, right? This was the absolute heyday of deer hunting in Adams County. We would see 100 deer a night in the fields. There were grouse. We had no kids, no mortgage, I had room to roam. All I had to do was just pass my classes and occasionally try to back a vehicle into somewhere, which is another whole story.

The career ...

Thomas entered her masters program in natural resources, with a focus on water resources. When she finished that, Dan Trainor, then dean of the College of Natural Resources, was looking for an assistant. He hired Thomas. She did some advising, worked on the college newsletter, helped organize events, taught classes, and conducted a water resources lab of her own.

She started with the university full-time in January of 1980, then started with Trainer in September of 1980.

"In 1986 he took me to Madison – actually took me to Madison – and got me enrolled there. I took an 18-month leave of absence, except for a 15% posting. After two summers came back to work here. He (Trainer) moved me into full-time teaching. I came in one evening to move my stuff – I had been sharing a space with faculty member. It was probably 1988. My daughter, Shannon, was 5 years old. She was with me. I was crying while I was packing up. I was getting the best opportunity I could ever have asked for, but I was leaving the guy who helped me get there.

"Shannon said, 'Mom is Dean Trainer kicking you out?'

"I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you right now if it weren't for Dan Trainer. He helped in every way, encouraging me to be better and do more. That was a big self confidence booster."

She taught while working on her dissertation, which was on the role of the Natural Resources Board in Wisconsin.

"When I finished that they switched me into a faculty role and I was off and running."

She graduated in May of 1989 from the UW-Madison Institute of Environmental Studies.

"I didn't want to be a lab person. I knew I wanted to be a people person, so I switched to policy and land, again probably because of Dan. When he asked what I wanted my focus to be I said something hunting related. He said, 'Good luck with that.'

"At that time, Dan was on the NRB, he was doing acid rain stuff, he was always doing deer stuff. He always talked about topics and meetings. So I went that direction. One of the most lucky things is that when I graduated I knew everyone who was anyone in the natural resource field – I interviewed them for my dissertation. It was not some smart move on my part; it was just really lucky," she said.

Becoming an Outdoors-Woman gets rolling ...

In 1989 Thomas was working at UW-Stevens Point as an assistant professor, doing a lot of work in teaching while trying to find her niche.

"I knew what I was teaching, but hadn't figured out who I wanted to be. Then professors Ray Anderson and Bob Jackson asked if I wanted to help with a conference that ended up launching Becoming an Outdoors-Woman. We had 65 people from around the country. That's where I met

Pat Durkin; he came to cover it. Fran Hamerstrom was keynote speaker. She had just written a book called, *Is She Coming Too?*

“That’s how the first Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshop started. We’re an educational place. We should be able to teach women how to do this if they want to.”

The first Becoming an Outdoors-Woman field event took place at Treehaven in 1991 east of Tomahawk.

Alan Haney followed Dan Trainor as the CNR dean.

“I had to borrow \$150 from him to print and mail brochures for the first workshop. No one registered! Then one of the people I interviewed when I did my dissertation – Jay Reed – got the press release and called. Jay did a Sunday story on it in the *Milwaukee Journal*. It took three people to handle the calls on that Monday.

“Without Jay Reed I might have been toast and BOW might not have happened. Workshop filled in one day with 150 people. That answered the question, ‘Does anyone want to do this?’ That’s the thing that probably sent me down this path.

The future ...

Thomas has taught hunter education beginning in 1995 when her daughter took hunter safety class. “That’s one of the things I’m going to do more of.”

In June she was appointed to the board of governors of the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, located in Stevens Point.

“That’s something I have always felt a responsibility to become involved in.”

She has been a professional member for the Boone & Crockett Club for a good number of years and will continue in that role. There she did a stint as chair of their conservation committee. She is a member of Izaak Walton League in Stevens Point.

“There are a lot of movers and shakers in Boone and Crockett. During the Bush II administration, Boone and Crockett convinced the president to start the Sporting Conservation Council, advisory to the Secretary of the Interior. As a result of those who know me in Boone and Crockett, I was appointed to that council. I served on that group until President Obama was elected.”

That administration created the Wildlife, Hunting, Heritage Council, and Thomas was invited to come on as vice-chair on that council. She spent the whole Obama administration on that council, which was advisory to Interior and the Department of Agriculture.

She still is involved with Ducks Unlimited and has been on the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation board. Before she puts too many irons back in the fire after retirement, though, Thomas may just take a minute to look around.

“I have no plans yet, but would really like to go on an antelope hunt. That probably goes back to being a 6-year-old girl looking at my dad’s pictures. And maybe mule deer; I haven’t done that yet. And maybe a Canadian fishing trip. I have never done that.”

She has shot elk in Wyoming and has moose hunted in Canada, but didn’t shoot one. She was, though, the only person to see a moose on that trip.

When she goes out west, she will carry only the second long gun she owns – a Browning bolt action .308 Safari Grade with a Sako action, Leupold scope and “pencil” barrel. It weighs about 6 pounds.

She gave her first rifle back to Stan. It was a Model 336 Marlin in .35 Remington.

“I shot my first deer with that rifle, but one opening day in the U.P. we got out of truck and my rifle jammed as I loaded it. Stan put that rifle away and took out a spare he had bought at a gun show in Grand Rapids, Mich. It was the Browning. We gave the 336 to my nephew; that was his first deer rifle. Stan never got the Browning back. I have shot elk in three states with that rifle. It’s my second most valuable earthly possession.”