

Owen Gromme
(1896-1991)

The man who became known as the "dean of U.S. wildlife artists" was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in 1896. Owen Gromme spent his childhood in the marshes and forests of east-central Wisconsin, surrounded by abundant wildlife. He spoke of memories of his youth: the railroads and loggers, and outdoorsmen like his father who were tough and rugged and understood the lessons of the land. From this background Gromme developed his powers of observation, sense of detail, and love of the outdoors.

Gromme's first professional job was as a taxidermist at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. Later, after serving in World War I, he went to work at the Milwaukee Public Museum, where he was curator of birds and mammals. He eventually became head of the department, and stayed until his retirement in 1965. A concern with conservation issues was naturally a part of his job, but Gromme went beyond anyone's expectations.

Gromme understood how important conservation education and public support was to the environmental cause. In addition to designing fabulous exhibits and collecting specimens from all over the world, he filmed and edited movies, and created and donated a painting for the Head Foundation (now the Sand County Foundation) to fund environmental education at the Leopold Reserve. He helped train museum employees and stressed the importance of excellence in public service.

Gromme became increasingly involved with wildlife painting, and his love of the subject and attention to detail helped him earn his reputation. He spent 20 years working on his book, "Birds of Wisconsin," which was a pictorial representation of all birds known to have lived in Wisconsin. As his reputation grew, so did his capacity to contribute to conservation organizations. His painting for Ducks Unlimited, entitled "Fall Kaleidoscope," was one of the most productive fund-raising efforts ever sponsored for the organization, generating more than \$600,000. Ducks Unlimited Executive Secretary Ken McCreary once said of Gromme, "He is a phenomenal man and outstanding artist; there is no question in anyone's mind that Owen Gromme is one of the greatest wildlife painters of all time. And it's perfectly obvious to

anyone who knows him that he really cares about the outdoors."

Known for his editorials and networking, Gromme was a champion of wildlife state-wide. In 1934, Gromme attended the American Ornithologists Annual Meeting in Chicago. There, he learned through the U.S. Biological Survey that North American waterfowl were facing a serious plight. In typical Gromme fashion, he began speaking out. He pressured Wisconsin administrators to enforce a closed season on ducks, bag limits on geese, and other environmental legislation. In 1935, he also led the fight to stop the Milwaukee Gun Club's state-wide hunt of "varmits." The "varmit" hunt was on hawks, owls, and crows. When anglers began killing large numbers of Great Blue Herons because they were believed to reduce the fish population, Gromme worked with Aldo Leopold to influence legislature that would protect herons, rooks, hawks, and owls.

More than once, Gromme became embroiled in controversy as he sought to influence conservation policy and legislation. The Horicon Marsh was the focus of one such controversy. The 40,000 acre marsh, home to a plethora of wildlife, was being drained by speculators and promoters who insisted that it would make tremendous farmland. Both the Wisconsin and National chapters of the Izaak Walton League issued resolutions that the marsh should be preserved for wildlife. Gromme created a painting for the Wisconsin Citizens Natural Resources Association, Inc. (CNRA) for their Horicon Defense Fund, to stir public empathy and gain funding. The marsh was saved, but Gromme continued to monitor the management practices of the agencies involved with the marsh, and to remain in contact with legislators regarding his concerns. His efforts led to his election as president of the Wetlands for Wildlife organization.

Gromme was an effective organizer and took pride in strong public leadership. He was an integral part of the formation of the International Crane Foundation, Inc., located in Baraboo. Gromme's concern for the dwindling crane population was shared by several of his contacts. He helped make the connections between interested people, donated paintings to assist with fundraising, asked close friends to help with the fledgling organization's legal issues, and pressed everyone he met for donations. The organization officially began in 1971, and Gromme joined the Board of Directors in 1978. The impact of this successful

organization extends far beyond Wisconsin, and is felt worldwide, involving 20 countries.

Because Gromme was so involved with observing and collecting specimens for the museum, he often was ahead of his time in noting environmental concerns. He was one of the first to notice the scarcity of birds of prey and warblers, and learned that this was due to chemicals being used against Dutch Elm disease. Years before Rachael Carson wrote against DDT in "Silent Spring," Gromme was crusading against the use of chemicals.

Gromme was concerned about all natural resources and their connections, and many groups appreciated his efforts. In 1950, he was given an honorary life membership to the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology, which he helped found. Marian College in Fond du Lac gave the self-taught environmentalist an honorary doctorate degree. The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau named him its first Master Wildlife Artist in 1976, and in 1978 he was chosen to be Artist of the Year by Ducks Unlimited.

Owen Gromme's involvement with art, journalism, conservation legislation and public service in all areas of natural resources, both locally and internationally, make him an outstanding example of the quality of environmentalists in the state of Wisconsin.