



**Joseph J. Hickey**  
**1907-1993**

“Conservation means more than preserving a few species of wildlife. It means the wise use of all the natural wealth of a great continent so that other generations of Americans can benefit by its resources and enjoy the same opportunities that we do today.”

—Joseph J. Hickey

Joseph J. Hickey was a kid from the South Bronx, but he made his mark in Wisconsin, where he lived most of his life.

An interesting and rewarding life it was, too. Hickey “rose to join the elite of American ornithology and conservation,” wrote Stanley Temple and John T. Emlen, colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who wrote a memorial tribute to Hickey shortly after the emeritus professor of wildlife ecology died in 1993.

It all started with birds for Hickey. His interest in birds would continue throughout his life, and seemed to place him in the right place at the right time more than once.

A Boy Scout leader first got him interested in birds. As a teen-ager, he joined the Bronx County Bird Club. Also in the club were a couple of Hickey’s lifelong friends: Roger Tory Peterson and Allan Cruickshank.

History was his degree path as an undergraduate at New York University (NYU). He was also a champion miler as a student, and upon graduating in 1930, he coached track at NYU. He also worked as a businessman at Consolidated Edison. T

Temple and Emlen describe a key point in Hickey’s life in their tribute to Hickey, published in an April 1994 edition of “The Auk,” a quarterly journal of ornithology published by the American Ornithologists’ Union:

“During the Depression, Joe continued his avocational interest in birds and joined the Linnaean Society, which held meetings at the American Museum of Natural History. There he met Ernst Mayr, who encouraged Joe to become more scientific in his pursuit of birds.”

Hickey followed the advice, returned to night school at NYU and resumed undergraduate studies, in biology.

The authors describe another key moment in his life:

“In 1941, Joe met Aldo Leopold at a cocktail party and eagerly accepted an invitation to move to the Midwest and pursue an M.S. Degree with Leopold at the University of Wisconsin.”

As his master’s thesis, Hickey wrote “A Guide to Bird Watching.” It was published immediately by Oxford University Press and is still in print.

Not to be mistaken as field guide for identifying birds, Hickey's book is rather a guide to how to watch birds. It includes chapters that focus on netting and banding, keeping accurate and valid records, tips on how to identify birds by sound and the tracks they leave, where and when to pursue bird watching and other valuable information. It is a comprehensive how-to for the bird watching enthusiast.

He and Leopold were collaborating on other projects as early as 1943. In that year, they co-authored "The Erosion Problems of Steep Farms of Southwestern Wisconsin." That area of the state became the focus of intensive erosion control efforts.

Hickey earned a Guggenheim Fellowship to earn his doctorate at the University of Michigan. His thesis project involved analyzing what Temple and Emlen describe as "a virtually unexploited gold mine of bird-banding data accumulated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." They continue, "Joe analyzed these data using the then-new technique of life-table analysis. His dissertation, "Survival Studies of Banded Birds," was published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1952 and reprinted in 1972."

Then came another of those key moments for Hickey.

Leopold invited him to return to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to become the second professor in Leopold's Department of Wildlife Management.

Leopold died a few months later, and Hickey was appointed head of the department in 1948.

"One of his first major accomplishments was organizing the effort to publish posthumously Leopold's nearly completed masterpiece, 'A Sand County Almanac,' " his colleagues write. The book was published in 1949.

He is credited as being an acclaimed teacher, researcher and conservationist in his years at UW-Madison.

"He loved students and classroom instruction, and he was an outstanding mentor. Tape-recorded sounds of birds greeted students in his wildlife ecology class, and his lectures were charming," write Templeton and Emlen.

Hickey helped to unravel the connection between declines in bird populations and chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides such as DDT.

Amazingly, it was work that he did in 1941 that proved to be a key link more than 20 years later.

Hickey was fond of peregrine falcons, and in 1941 he assembled an atlas of all the known eyries east of the Rocky Mountains. In 1964, as peregrine populations and those of other bird species were nose-diving, Hickey arranged a resurvey of the nesting sites.

“Not a single occupied eyrie could be located,” his colleagues note. He quickly organized an international meeting on the status of peregrines, and edited an extensive book on the conference proceedings.

Hickey’s research on the ecological effects of DDT was pivotal in the eventual ban of the pesticide, first in Wisconsin, then in the United States. The authors note that there was a cost. “...he paid a price for being an outspoken critic of popular agriculture. As a professor in the country’s largest college of agriculture, Joe was severely censured by spiteful college administrators.”

The environmental community, however, treated him like a hero. He received numerous prestigious awards, as noted in the accompanying bibliography.

The bibliography also notes his extensive engagement in a variety of conservation fields. He served as a director of many organizations and as an editor for a number of publications, also noted in the bibliography.

Hickey also showed a keen interest in preserving sensitive scientific areas. Forrest Stearns, himself an internationally known ecologist from UW-Milwaukee, and Cliff Germain, a longtime conservation figure in Wisconsin, credited Hickey for his role in creation of the Scientific Areas Preservation Council in Wisconsin.

Not only did Hickey push state lawmakers to create the council, but actually wrote the enabling legislation, according to Stearns and Germain. They wrote “Natural Areas Preservation Council: A brief History and Record of Activity,” published by the Wisconsin DNR’s Bureau of Endangered Species in December 1991. Hickey drafted the legislation creating the State Board for Preservation of Scientific Areas in 1951, they wrote. That body was the forerunner of the Council.

This single act of the Legislature ended up preserving many thousands of acres of crucial scientific and natural sites in Wisconsin. In the race to protect and preserve in the face of development, it was the first good foothold secured by the conservation community.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing from the start. The Legislature created the Board but provided minimal funding, so acquiring and preserving sites was difficult. Still, the Board found funds where it could, and by 1961 the board reported that 33 scientific areas had been established, encompassing 3,200 acres. By 1971, there were 80 sites. By 1977 there were 139 scientific areas, encompassing 19,000 acres. Stearns and Germain reported in 1977 that the sites drew 250,000 annual visits, 16,000 visits for research and class instruction and produced 90 active research projects on scientific areas.

The effort to set aside sensitive lands helped to spur creation of The Wisconsin Chapter of the Nature Conservancy, in 1960.

Hickey had already helped to found The Nature Conservancy in 1950, and served as the first secretary of the Conservancy's national board. He was among the founders of the Wisconsin Chapter-The Nature Conservancy, and served on the Wisconsin Chapter board of directors.

In 1982, efforts to acquire and preserve scientific and natural areas took another step forward. The Bureau of Endangered Resources was formed in that year, with staff assigned to scientific areas management. Stearns and Germain note that by 1991, Wisconsin had 251 state natural areas, totaling more than 60,000 acres. More than 20 percent of these areas, covering 12,000 acres, are covered in perpetuity.

Hickey is credited with providing a key initial nudge, giving birth to the movement.

Married to Margaret Brooks in 1941, Hickey was widowed soon after he retired in 1976.

He was remarried to Lola Gordon, and together they traveled extensively, usually with birding on the agenda.

Almost from the moment he arrived in Wisconsin in 1947, Hickey was thrust into playing a key role in helping to shape the state's conservation agenda.

He managed in his career to have a major impact on the lives of thousands of students. His "Guide to Bird Watching" was read by many thousands of bird-watching enthusiasts. He influenced state and national policy through his research findings and worked to set aside sensitive scientific and natural areas through his involvement with conservation groups.

Authors Temple and Emlen took note of the interconnections that resulted from Hickey's passion for birding, his scientific prowess and his hard work to ensure preservation of sensitive areas.

"Peregrine falcons and other birds of prey have recovered during the post-pesticide era that he helped bring about, and millions of acres of critical bird habitats have been protected by the conservation organizations to which he was so devoted," they wrote.

**JOSEPH J. HICKEY**  
**1907-1993**

**BIRTH:** April 16, 1907, South Bronx, N.Y.

**DEATH:** Aug. 31, 1993, Madison, WI.

**EDUCATION:** Undergraduate degree in history, 1930, New York University.  
Master's degree in wildlife management, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1943  
Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1949.

**BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY**

EDUCATOR

Joined UW-Madison faculty in 1947 as assistant professor of wildlife ecology.

Became chair of the Department of Wildlife Ecology in 1948.

Continued on faculty until 1976.

Named emeritus professor of wildlife ecology.

AUTHOR

"A Guide to Bird Watching," Oxford University Press, 1943, still in print.

"The Erosion Problems of Steep Farms of Southwestern Wisconsin," co-authored with Aldo Leopold, 1943.

Ph.D. dissertation, "Survival Studies of Banded Birds," was published by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Wrote more than 100 scientific papers on subjects that included bird population dynamics, rare and endangered species, effects of chemical pollution on wildlife and effects of strip mining on birds.

## EDITOR

“Peregrine Falcon Populations; their biology and decline,” 1969, proceedings from international conference.

Organized effort to publish posthumously Aldo Leopold’s “Sand County Almanac.”

Editor, Linnaean Society, 1940-41.

Editor, “Journal of Wildlife Management,” 1956-58.

Editor, “13<sup>th</sup> International Ornithological Conference,” 1962.

Member, Conference of Biological Editors.

## AWARDS

Aldo Leopold Medal, The Wildlife Society, 1972.

Chancellors Award for Distinguished Teaching, UW-Madison, 1976.

Arthur A. Allen Medal, Cornell University Laboratory of Ornithology, 1976.

Special Conservation Award, National Wildlife Federation, 1982.

Distinguished Service Medal, National Audubon Society, 1984.

President’s Award, Raptor Research Foundation, 1985.

## ORGANIZATIONS

Founding member, The Nature Conservancy, 1950.

Secretary, Nature Conservancy, 1950.

Founding member, Wisconsin Chapter-The Nature Conservancy, 1960. Served on Wisconsin Chapter board of directors.

Member American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU), beginning in 1936.

Council Member, AOU, 1945.

Fellow, AOU, 1954.

President AOU, 1972.