

James Hall Zimmerman

James Hall Zimmerman was known as “Jim Zim” to legions of friends and admirers across the state of Wisconsin.

Zimmerman died in September 1992 while tending to prairie grass plots that he and his wife, Libby, maintained at Red Cedar Lake Environmental Station near Fort Atkinson. His obituary in the Wisconsin State Journal described him as a writer, educator, consultant and environmental activist.

Based on the many tributes from colleagues, he was all that and more.

Zimmerman’s scientific skills were many, evidenced by the wide range of credible publications cited in this biography. His people skills were equal, and that gift helped him to make nature’s complexities simple and understandable for his students and the general public.

Zimmerman was cut from the old cloth when it came to research: He did much of it in the field. He wasn’t afraid to get his boots dirty.

As noted in this biography, Zimmerman’s publications range from complex scientific surveys to simple newspaper articles. Colleagues took note of his ability to communicate his knowledge across a broad spectrum of audiences.

“Certainly he was a botanical genius, knew birds and their songs extremely well and had unusually in-depth knowledge of each surrounding natural environment in which we found ourselves,” wrote respected naturalist Roy Lukes of Egg Harbor, Wis., after Zimmerman’s death. “We now only learned about sedges or aquatic plants, for example, while in the field with Jim.

“We also learned about related plant and animal species, the general ecology of these areas as well as the importance to people of these environments and the proper care of them.”

The latter skill, perhaps, was Zimmerman’s most important contribution to conservation in Wisconsin. “Jim Zimmerman was a master at inspiring people, in leading his students to be better stewards of their land. Wisconsin today is a much better state because of all the things Jim did during his lifetime,” Lukes said.

Lukes makes reference to Zimmerman's teaching skills. These were employed as a naturalist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum from 1966 until his death in 1992. He was also a member of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Landscape Architecture and taught numerous courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1977 until the time of his death. He also taught at the Madison Vocational School and Madison School Forest. At the time of his death, he was establishing an elementary school education program.

He also wrote a weekly newspaper column on environmental topics in the Wisconsin State Journal.

Lukes recalled that as far back as 1955, Zimmerman was leading field trips for the Audubon Society and Madison Vocational School. Zimmerman would have been about 30 years old at the time. In 1956, Zimmerman began to offer a week-long class to Madison area teachers called "Reading the Landscape." He went on to teach that course to thousands of people, Lukes wrote. Lukes and others noted that Zimmerman invited students to read the landscape in order to better understand the historical influences on it.

Zimmerman's early education was unconventional. Growing up in the Madison area, he was taken out of the public school around the sixth grade and taught by his mother. Even at an early age, he was invited often to join many of the field classes of famous UW-Madison botany professor Norman Fassett, who was also curator of the UW Herbarium.

In 1966, eight years after earning his Ph.D in botany at UW-Madison, Zimmerman co-authored the book "Wildflower Families and How to Know Them." In a passage on plant communities, his understanding of interrelationships among life forms emerged: "A prairie is not JUST grass, nor a forest only trees. They are complexes of hundreds of competing, dependent, or cooperating organisms – herbs, grasses, shrubs, trees, fungi – all struggling and working for survival."

Lukes took note of that broad understanding. "Jim became well known for his extensive knowledge of plants of all kinds and how they grew together in specific habitats," Lukes wrote.

Zimmerman was also considered one of the top experts on sedges. This group of grasslike plants is considered by botanists to be an extremely difficult and demanding plant group to master.

In 1976, Zimmerman and Courtenay again collaborated on a book, this time a field guide titled "Wildflowers and Weeds," a colorful and informative guide that was in print two decades after it was first published.

The guide is intended to help interested people learn more about and identify wildflowers in the upper Midwest. Noteworthy is the fact that it uses Zimmerman's own invention, the Family-Group System, to help users identify species.

Zimmerman used his broad knowledge to educate others and to advocate for wise land use. His efforts in the latter area placed him in the hurly-burly world of human interaction, where various interests often collided and preserving the environment wasn't always the first consideration.

He worked to preserve sensitive areas in his own Dane County, in Door County, where he often visited to vacation or to lead field trips, and elsewhere in the Midwest.

He was well-suited for activism, wrote Lukes: "Even though he was a pusher, a strong preservationist, a person who liked action, he also was kind, extremely hard working and generous, soft-spoken, peaceable and gentle in his ways."

Jerome Viste, executive director and longtime member of the Door County Environmental Council, which has worked to preserve the sensitive ecology of the Door Peninsula, said this about Zimmerman's efforts:

"Dr. Zimmerman's involvement in Door County ranged from protection of Europe Lake north ponds to the Southern Door Sandhill Pineries, from Whitefish spawning grounds in Lake Michigan harbors to preserving the protected dwarf lake iris, with special emphasis on wildlife corridors, wetland preservation and Niagara escarpment protection."

Viste credited Zimmerman with bringing the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences Arts and Letters annual conference to Sturgeon Bay in 1989. The Niagara escarpment, a prominent geological feature of the county, was a primary emphasis of the conference that year.

Gregory D. Armstrong, director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum, called Zimmerman a “thoughtful and persistent advocate for wetlands and other natural areas in many parts of Wisconsin.”

Armstrong wrote: “He was an important figure in defending the Kickapoo Valley from a hydroelectric project that would have destroyed one of Wisconsin’s great areas of natural beauty, and his defense of wetlands in Dane County and Door County are but a few examples of natural areas that received his influential support.”

His concern for wetlands led Zimmerman to be a founding member of the Wisconsin Wetlands Association. He was “the spirit behind the creation” of the group, Armstrong said.

He was also an inspired educator, Armstrong noted.

This was supported by Evelyn A. Howell, chairperson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Landscape Architecture. Zimmerman was a member of that department from 1977 to the time of his death. “He was one of the best field instructors it has been my pleasure to know,” Howell wrote.

She added, “Important as his formal courses were, Jim’s contributions were even more significant as an advisor to undergraduates and graduate students who were pursuing independent ecological investigations.” Howell described Zimmerman as a “Pied Piper, inspiring many to pursue careers in conservation.”

Calvin B. DeWitt, a professor at the UW-Madison Institute for Environmental Studies, called Zimmerman “the finest wetland conservationist and naturalist of the state of Wisconsin.” He added: “Of everyone I know in this state that has a deep love for wetlands and their care and keeping, nearly every one has had the uplifting experience of having Jim bring them much of their love for wetlands and much of the stimulus for making wetlands conservation a top priority in their lives.”

Chuck Pils, director of the Department of Natural Resources’ Bureau of Endangered Species, wrote in 1992: “Many of our bureau personnel have taken courses and field trips with Jim and have been greatly influenced by him. Some bureau personnel considered Jim the best naturalist in the state.”

Zimmerman assisted the DNR's Natural Heritage Inventory Section in identifying plants and provided the inventory section with location information of native communities and rare species, Pils said.

Zimmerman and his wife, Libby, along with Barbara Bedford, prepared a comprehensive study of Dane County wetlands for the DNR and Dane County Regional Planning Commission in 1974. The 581-page document was credited with facilitating preservation of Cherokee Marsh and other high quality sites in the area.

While the study was highly scientific, occasional snips of rich prose and environmental advocacy are found, as in the following passage: "Wilderness is defined as a place where man is only a visitor. However, it is more than that; it is a place where man can renew his ancient bonds with nature, seek his place in the scheme of things, and find inner peace."

If all of that wasn't enough, Lukes noted that Zimmerman was also a "masterful field ornithologist." As proof, he cites Zimmerman's 55-page contribution to Samuel D. Robbins Jr.'s "Wisconsin Birdlife: Population and Distribution, Past and Present," published in 1991. Zimmerman's contribution, "The Landscape and the Bird," was both highly scientific and entertaining, Lukes said.

With obvious high respect, Lukes wrote after Zimmerman's death:

"Dr. Zimmerman was an unsung hero whose teachings, writings, leadership and the examples he set for others to follow will be seen and felt for years to come."

JAMES H. ZIMMERMAN
1924-1992

BIRTH: 1924, Chicago, Ill.

DEATH: Sept. 28, 1992.

EDUCATION: Ph.D. in Botany, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1958

BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

Naturalist at University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum, 1966-92.

Teacher: Member University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Landscape Architecture faculty, 1977-92, taught numerous courses and advised students. Taught for Madison Vocational School. Taught at Madison School Forest.

Ecologist, Door County Environmental Council, 1987-92.

Technical Advisor, Wisconsin Scientific and Natural Areas Program.

Author of "Flora of Devil's Lake," 1947. A botanical survey of the plant life in the Devil's Lake, Wis. area.

Co-Author, "Wildflower Families and How to Know Them," 1966 (with Booth Courtenay).

Editor, "Proceedings of the Second Midwest Prairie Conference," 1972.

Author of "Wildflowers and Weeds, A Field Guide in Full Color," 1978 (with Booth Courtenay).

Co-author of "Wetlands of Dane County, Wisconsin," 1974. (Barbara L. Bedford and Elizabeth H. Zimmerman co-authored this 581-page work.)

Contributor to fourth edition of "Spring Flora of Wisconsin," by Norman Fassett, 1976. (Zimmerman wrote 40-page section on sedges.)

Contributor to "Wisconsin Birdlife: Population and Distribution, Past and Present," by Samuel D. Robbins Jr., 1991. (Zimmerman wrote a 55-page section, "The Landscape and the Bird.")

Offered ecological assessment services and recommendations to Municipal, County and State Governments, Organizations and Corporations. These included Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources and Transportation, Dane County, Door County, Scott Paper Co., Wisconsin Power and Light and Weyerhaeuser.

Author of numerous articles for ornithological publications.

Author of weekly environmental column in "Wisconsin State Journal" newspaper, titled "The Nature of Our World."

Founder, "Wisconsin Wetlands Association."