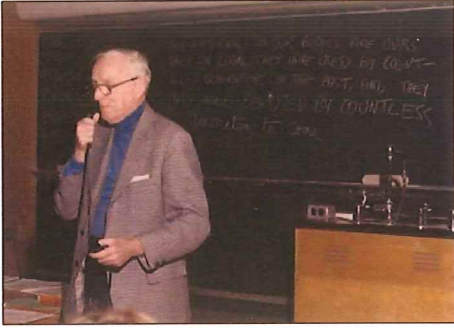
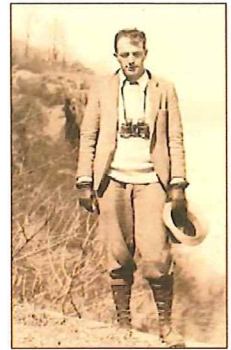


## Joe Hickey's Last Lecture



I have a photo of my dad at the last class he taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1976. Behind him on the blackboard is a lifetime favorite quote of his: "The materials of our bodies are ours only on loan. They have been used by countless generations in the past, and they will be used by countless generations to come." The class was on wildlife ecology; the quote was from Joe Hickey's heart. Since he strayed from his subject, the quote gives me the encouragement to do the same, and to try to imagine what he would say in his last lecture to all of you, who have read about the books in his ornithology collection and have decided to buy a copy or two.

**"Keep good records."** Birding can be enjoyed anywhere by anyone. But it is records of the observations that transform the experience. My dad's own life story is the best illustration of this. With his boyhood chums, all members of the Bronx County Bird Club, he discovered the excitement of Christmas Bird Counts and methodical observations and reports of all bird sightings. This passion for record-keeping lasted a lifetime. In the late 1930s, he organized a survey of peregrine falcons in eastern North America so that the data could be "consulted by those who wish to study and evaluate subsequent population changes of this interesting species." Decades later in 1964, as populations of peregrines were nose-diving, he arranged a resurvey of nesting sites. Not a single occupied eyrie was found. This observation led to an international conference that he organized on the status of peregrines and to a research project on the ecological effects of DDT on eggshell thinning in raptorial birds. Banning of DDT in Wisconsin and other states soon followed, and today, raptors like peregrines and bald eagles nest successfully in Wisconsin and elsewhere.



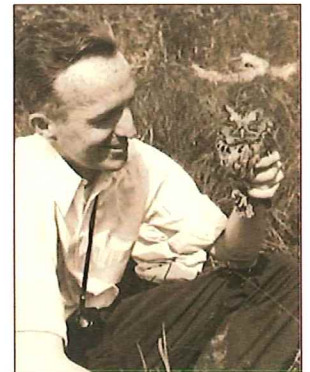
**"Be open to the unexpected and maybe the commonplace."** For a man whose love of birds was instilled by a scoutmaster and lasted for an additional 80 years, one might have thought the most unusual bird sightings would have been his most treasured. To be sure, his sighting of a swallow-tailed kite in 1928 while he and Alan Cruickshank were watching a ball game was a story he loved to tell and retell over the years. But his handwritten journals from the 1920s-30s (when he was in his early 20s) show a glimpse of how the mundane can be magical. After standing outside the Metropolitan Museum in Jan 1933, he wrote: "Here I saw one of the most impressive

sights I have ever seen in birding – hundreds and hundreds of blackbirds streaming over the buildings on Fifth Avenue, hundreds and hundreds sweeping out of the alley-like streets. Leaves being swept off roofs by autumnal gusts. It was positively thrilling. I tried to count them: 200, 200, 100, 50, 500, 200, 100, 200...." Who would have guessed that starlings would make the top of a list of lifetime birding memories.

**"Don't pass an opportunity to meet new people."** Such opportunities marked my father's life. The first occurred in 1929 on a trip to a pine plantation in Connecticut. There he encountered a lady and her high-school daughter who were also birding and who asked what he had seen. When he told them he was there to locate a saw-whet owl and band it, they said they had never seen one before and asked to come along. They walked into the plantation where my dad found the owl, sitting in a pine at eye height. He instructed the girl to approach the tree, while he came from behind and slowly reached in and hand-grabbed the owl. Thirteen years later, my dad married the high-school girl, who later became my mother.

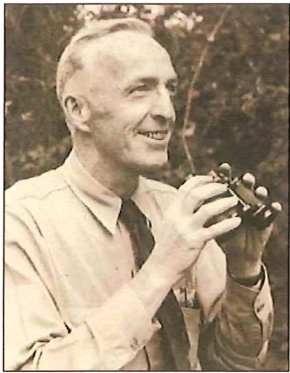


Another important "people opportunity" occurred in 1941, when at a cocktail party, dad was introduced to Aldo Leopold. This led to a subsequent invitation by Aldo to dad to come with my mother to the Midwest so dad could work on a soil erosion survey project and wait for a better opportunity to open up. "If you are interested," Aldo wrote, "I would rather have your intelligence than most people's training." My dad moved to Wisconsin, and completed the survey as a Master's project. (In the photo here, he is second from the left, and Aldo is at the right.) . . .



Dad then joined the then Department of Game Management with Aldo, taking over his teaching duties in the Department after Aldo's death and helping to organize the posthumous publication of the Leopold essays as "A Sand County Almanac."

**"Read bird books."** In his book "A Guide to Bird Watching," dad wrote, "Reading bird books is a good deal of fun. Through them, the amateur naturalist can pursue his hobby on many occasions when field work is impossible – in the evenings, on railroad trains, and during periods of convalescence." His ornithology collection, now offered by Buteo Books, includes the birding books he collected over the years.



Some people have asked me why I did not donate/sell this collection to the University Department where dad used to work. There are 2 answers: First, dad used to be the librarian of that Departmental library, so he had already assured that the books he thought the library should contain were acquired. Secondly, many of his books, especially those inscribed by authors and/or artists, might be considered by some as rare and needing to be kept in locked case. I did not want this to happen to *any* of my dad's books. They belong in personal libraries where they can be seen, handled, and enjoyed, just like they were during their years spent in the Hickey household. If you are reading this, you have just acquired one or more of these books. Like the blackboard quote – about our own bodies – at his last University lecture, these special books are now recycled, and they pass from his generation to yours. May you treasure and enjoy them, too.

**"Have fun!"** Chapter headings in "A Guide to Bird Watching" outline my father's recipe for how to watch birds: "how to begin bird study, the lure of migration watching, adventures in bird counting, explorations in bird distribution, the romance of bird banding," and "the art of bird watching." While some of his readers were advanced students, he spoke mainly to beginners in bird study. The mysteries of bird life and the pleasure we can gain from observing and studying that life await us all.

On the subject of fun, anyone who knew my father would remember his sense of humor and keen interest in getting people to laugh or smile. At "solemn" occasions – for example, at the end of acceptance speeches for prestigious national awards,\* he used to love to recite one of his own poems, written when was in his early 30s. He did so in 1978 to a group of colleagues and birding friends who gathered at the Leopold Shack for a picnic to wish him well in his retirement from academia. At the end of his thanks to all who came (see photo below), he closed by reciting the following two poems from his youth. They were the end of that speech, and so they belong at the end of this one, . . . my dad's last lecture.

#### Nature in Washington Square

Walking one day in a downtown park  
My eye was caught by a fluttering spark  
Of disembodied feathers in a tree.  
And stopping to learn what this could be,  
I found it was a male house sparrow  
Alive right down to his very marrow.  
Apparently caught in a linden tree  
Hung by the tail as I could see.

His cries of terror smote my ears  
And walking o'er to allay his fears,  
I found to my immense surprise  
This sparrow held as in a vise  
By a female bird who gripped his tail  
And would not listen to his wail.  
There he dangled caught so tight,  
Though he fought with all his might.

Here was a problem for some sage,  
To brighten the bird lore of our age.  
Had she caught him in promiscuity  
With some younger sparrow cutie?  
I wish that I could tell you so,  
But all I know is . . . she let him go.



#### Spring in Flushing

There's a redwing in my yard  
Puffing up and singing hard.  
In the starling's din, his lilting sound  
Carries me off to some swampy ground  
Where, no doubt, he'll meet his bride  
And puff some more to show his pride.  
Since he may take a wife or two  
Redwings sure know how to woo.  
The female birds will do the work  
And incubation never shirk.  
They'll raise two broods apparently  
For that is how it is meant to be.  
And the male will puff and loudly sing  
Through all the carefree days of spring.

While here am I – a bachelor still  
With not half of the redwing's will.  
Halfway through the span of life,  
And I haven't even got one wife!  
Should I take from him some pages,  
And forget about my wages?

If I were born a boat-tailed grackle,  
Boy, you'd really hear me cackle!  
For boat-tails have about 6 wives  
And evidently lead full lives.  
But, they steal eggs (which isn't nice),  
And doubtless must be full of lice.

This is the way I rationalize  
As you can readily realize . . .  
Oh, I'm fairly content with the state I'm in,  
But I'm not the bird I might have been.

Written for Buteo Books in Aug 2009 by Susi Hickey Nehls, W4171 Wirth Lane, Monticello, WI 53570.

\* These include the Aldo Leopold Medal (Wildlife Society), 1972; Arthur A. Allen Medal (Cornell University Lab of Ornithology), 1976; Special Conservation Award (National Wildlife Federation), 1982; Distinguished Service Medal (National Audubon Society), 1984; and President's Award (Raptor Research Foundation), 1985. In addition to these national honors, a local award of which dad was especially proud was the Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Teaching (University of Wisconsin-Madison), 1976.