

*By Tim Eisele
for DCCL Newsletter*

Paul Olson was a pal. (That's the way his teachers taught their students to spell principal; the principal is your 'pal.')

I attended Midvale School in the 1950s and knew Paul Olson to be a very friendly principal. He was someone that young students could freely talk with, and I can distinctly remember talking with him about one of the hottest items going back then: whether or not the Milwaukee Braves would get into the World Series. He was a good school administrator.

Paul Olson was also a pal to conservation interests. He spearheaded the formation of the Prairie Chicken Foundation by the Dane County Conservation League. The foundation purchased land, including the Buena Vista Wildlife Area near Plainfield in central Wisconsin, to ensure that the prairie chicken's spring booming ritual would never disappear from what remains of Wisconsin's prairies.

In the 1980s I had the opportunity to interview Paul in his home and I'll never forget his satisfaction with, and the smile on his face as he retold, his description of how "several league members drove up to Plainfield in 1954 and found the prairie chicken's spring booming performance remarkable. We talked with then-DNR researchers Fred and Fran Hammerstrom about preserving the chickens, and learned the necessity of buying land to manage the habitat."

The DCCL donated \$200 to start and Olson published newsletters to raise the needed \$800 to purchase the first 40 acres. Subsequently he wheeled and dealt, catching the attention of Racine businessman Bill Pugh, who remembered earlier days of hunting prairie chickens in Wisconsin. Pugh wanted to help the chickens and donated substantial sums of money to purchase more land.

The result was that the DCCL bought more than 4,000 acres devoted to prairie chicken management. The land was leased to the DNR for management, and U.W.-Stevens Point conducted research on the prairie chicken population.

Why preserve prairie chickens?, you might ask.

Paul Olson knew. He recalled: "The show the birds perform each spring is spectacular. When I first went up to watch, I was swept off my feet while watching their spring drumming. It's an experience you'll never forget."

Paul Olson, originally from Mt. Horeb and who lived all his adult life on Mineral Point Road on Madison's west side, went on to other conservation achievements. He started the summer conservation programs in Madison's schools, allowing students to spend the summer working on conservation projects for which they received school credit. In 1958, he was instrumental in developing the Madison School Forest, a 287 acre forest near Verona that has served as an outdoor laboratory for school children and the public.

In 1958 he was appointed to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, predecessor to today's Natural Resources Board, by then Governor Gaylord Nelson. In 1965 he became the first president of the Wisconsin Nature Conservancy.

He received many awards, including Conservationist of the Year, in 1967 by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, and enshrinement into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. But, I suspect one of the most pleasing honors for him was the renaming, in his honor, the Paul J. Olson Wildlife Area near Wisconsin Rapids by the Department of Natural Resources.

Paul Olson died on July 5, 1993 at the age of 83. Besides being a long time active member of the DCCL, he was a pal to Wisconsin's wildlife. Many species will be around to see the dawn of future Wisconsin decades thanks to the effort's of Paul Olson.