North American Bird Bander

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Inland Regional News

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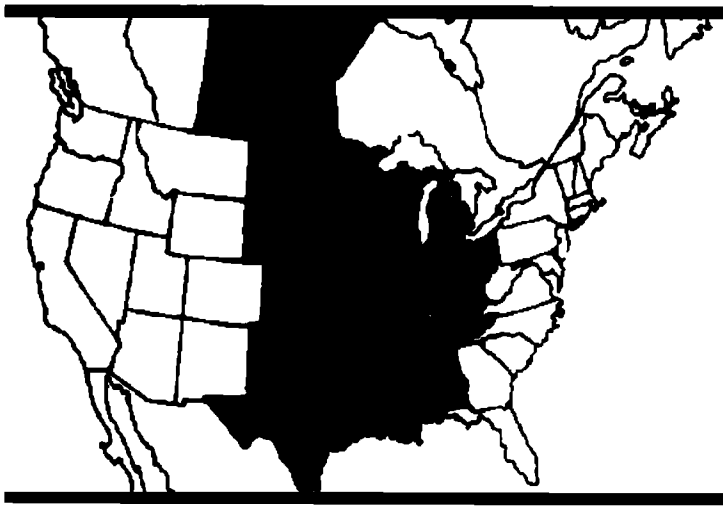


Inland Regional News

Inland Bird Banding Association

Frances Hamerstrom Dies at Age 91

As the season change this year, we find the cycle has taken one of the greats of wildlife research. Frances Hamerstrom, field biologist,researcher and author, died of cancer, 29 August 1998, near her home in Plainfield, WI.

In her ninety-one years she, along with her husband Frederick, accomplished much. She was the only female graduate student of world-renown ecologist Aldo Leopold. The Hamerstoms pioneered research on Northern Harriers in the 1950s and were some of the first scientists to indicate that DDT was negatively affecting bird reproduction. The pair is credited with having formulated a plan that saved the Greater Prairie-Chicken from extirpation in the state of Wisconsin. It was "Fran" that put into popular print the idea that harriers were dependent on the meadow vole population. Her book "Harrier, Hawk of the Marshes: The Hawk That Was Ruled by a Mouse," was printed in 1986.

In wildlife rehabilitation circles Fran will always be remembered for her first book, "An Eagle to the Sky," published in1970. In it she described how she nursed an injured Golden Eagle back to health and released her to the wild.

Fran Hamerstrom was an exceptional individual. To say she was a nonconformist is an understatement. She was born to an heiress and a criminologist. Her early life was filled with the luxuries that such a birthright dictates. She was a debutante and a beauty queen. While her father maintained the only thing she was suited for was being a governess, Fran had other ideas.

"When I was a small child I longed one day to be so famous that I did not have to hide how odd I was—how unlike other people,"she wrote in her autobiography, My Double Life. "Few people really held my attention. It was the birds and mammals, reptiles and insects that filled my dreams and eternally whetted my curiosity." And so it followed that she would meet Frederick, her perfect mate. Together, they lived their unusual life in an unfinished farm house built during the Civil War. The house still has no indoor plumbing. Her lifestyle was part and parcel of her enigmatic personality.

Each year "gaboons," as she called them, signed on to help with the research and bandinq projects. Many of those gaboons went on to be great ornithologists. This aspect of the

Hamerstroms alone was an incredible contribution to the science of the natural world.

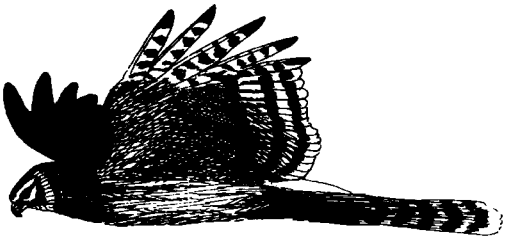
Frederick died in 1990 and, instead of becoming the recluse that many feared, Fran took a different tack. She explained to me one day that she had always had a fascination with the methods of primitive hunting and off she went to live with the pygmies in Zaire. An unusual move for a widow in her 80's, but nonetheless...She further explained that Frederick always disliked the heat and they avoided traveling to hot climates for that reason. Now she felt a need to satiate her thirst for the knowledge. Satisfy she did and each year in late September when the field season was finished, she packed her bags and was off. For the past six years, Fran traveled to South America, canoed the Amazon, and lived with the native people as she relished their culture. She would return to Wisconsin in April. She called me, anxious, even impatient for the immediate return of her trapping owl (he wintered with me) so the field season could begin.

If it was Fran's desire to be famous, she succeeded. If it was her desire to be different, she succeeded. If it was her desire to contribute to the knowledge of wildlife, she succeeded. I know it was her desire to be intriguing and outrageous, both which she did in spades. She was one of a kind. A complex mix of beauty and grace and sturdy tenacity in the same package.

The world will miss Dr. Frances Hamerstrom. I was privileged to have known her and been able to marvel from close range this unique individual.

Both Fran and Frederick were adjunct professors at UW-Stevens Point. They were honored by the National Wildlife Federation and inducted into the Wisconsin Hall of Fame.

Marge Gibson
Raptor Education Group Inc.
Antigo, WI 54409
JWRC President
dgib@newnorth. net



Spring Migration and El Nino at Last Mountain Bird Observatory

The ninth season of spring banding at Last Mountain Bird Observatory was completed on 31 May. More birds (489) were captured than in the previous two springs, but fewer than the long-term average of 629 birds.

The few bright spots mostly involved the summer resident species. More Warbling Vireos (27) were captured than ever before. With 38 captures, Chipping Sparrows recovered from a low over the past three years when only a total of 18 birds were caught. For the second spring in a row it appears that we were graced with three territorial male Orchard Orioles.

In contrast, the numbers of migrants using the area was much lower than normal. For example, we caught only one Hermit Thrush, one Ovenbird and no American Redstarts. We usually catch at least a few of these species most years. It appears as if the warm and storm-free weather produced by El Nino caused migrants to overfly the prairies and head directly to their breeding grounds.

An analysis of arrival dates at LMBO shows that 25 species arrived an average of three days earlier than normal, four species arrived on the average arrival date, and seven species arrived an average of three days late. Although day length is probably the most important factor in determining migration chronology, the preponderance of early arrival dates this spring is strong evidence that arrival dates were influenced by the fine weather.

Rarities noted at the Lake included LMBO's first **Field Sparrow** seen on 21 May by Rob Wapple. On the same day, Phil Taylor saw an **Eastern Bluebird** at the Wildlife Area Headquarters. Two days later our first **Northern Mockingbird** was spotted at the observatory by Stephan Bonneyville and seen the following day at Lasher House by Brenda Dale and Al Smith. This period was characterized by strong southeast winds which may also have been associated with the El Nino phenomenon.

Other spring rarities from the north end of the lake included a **Cattle Egret** and **Mew Gull** reported by Jim McKay, **Buff-breasted Sandpipers** seen by McKay and Wapple, and **Grasshopper Sparrows** heard by Dale and Smith.

Alan R. Smith
115 Perimeter Road
Saskatoon, SK57N 0X4
alan.smith@ec.gc.ca
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