

Karen ✓  
Don

# GUSTAV A. SWANSON: A LIFE WELL LIVED



COURTESY GUSTAV A. SWANSON

Gustav Swanson, one of *BWD*'s contributing editors, has had a long and distinguished career in wildlife management and education. A former director of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, a former chief of the division of wildlife research for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a professor emeritus in wildlife biology at Colorado State University, he is still, in retirement, writing about and observing wild creatures, especially birds, and he retains membership in many conservation and professional organizations, includ-

Gustav A. Swanson receiving the University of Minnesota's "Outstanding Achievement Award" in October 1990.

ing the American Ornithologists' Union.

Now 82, Gus Swanson has devoted his life—on a one-to-one basis as well as through formal programs—to encouraging people to learn about wildlife and to act upon what they have learned. But he modestly insists, "I always considered myself lucky to have come along at just the right time, just as

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conservation was taking hold. I just seemed to have been in all the right places at all the right times."

He certainly was for me.

Back in 1981, Gus invited me to lunch. We took our seats in a restaurant in Colorado State University's student center. I couldn't tell you what we ate (though I am fairly certain I ate something), for the following hour was among the most fascinating I have ever spent with another person. Gus spoke not at all of himself yet revealed much about who he is. I had been acquainted with him for a year, but I hadn't really met him until then.

I was no kid when Gus and I met. I'd been around a little. Compared to Gus, however, I had just been around the block, while he'd been around the world. And he had

changed it everywhere he went.

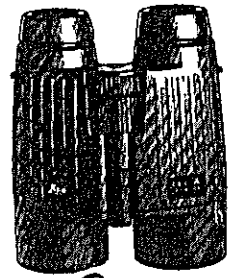
We sat there, Gus tendering unsolicited advice about a project I had been exploring, and I wondering why this person I barely knew was trying so hard to be helpful without interfering.

The answer came slowly.

Through repeated meetings, consultations, and conversations, I began to realize that here was a man who really cares. Gus Swanson's mission is to convince people that wildlife is worth caring about and caring for. More personally, he believes in people who care about wildlife. He bought me lunch that day so he could convince me to succeed.

Since that meeting, I have written several articles about what Gus has done; but until now, I have

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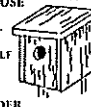
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never written about him.

He was born February 13, 1910, in Kandiyohi County, Minnesota, near Willmar. At age two he moved to Minneapolis with his parents. In 1915 he started kindergarten, where his first task was to learn English. All four grandparents were Swedish immigrants, and Swedish had been the only language spoken at home. His third grade teacher enrolled the entire class in the Junior Audubon Club, an event that may not have determined Gus' future but certainly contributed to it.

In 1930 Gus completed a B.S. in education, in 1932 an M.S. in zoology, and in 1934 a Ph.D. in zoology, all at the University of Minnesota. Then followed a diverse career that included state biologist for the Minnesota Department of Conservation and several different stints with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the last as division chief for wildlife research.

Teaching took Gus to the University of Maine, University of Minnesota, Cornell University, and Colorado State University. At each university he helped develop wildlife management curricula, but at Cornell and CSU he served as the first chairman of newly established departments.

During his teaching years, he was awarded two Fulbright Professorships. He used one to help the University of Aarhus in Denmark develop a wildlife curriculum. He used the other to help the University of New England in New South Wales create a School of Natural Resources, the first in Australia.

Taking mandatory retirement in 1975, Gus traveled widely. He

served as visiting professor at New Mexico State University, Texas A&M, and the University of Alaska, Juneau. Other travels took him to the Galapagos Islands, Patagonia, Europe, and Siberia.

Gus loves to talk. He quickly turns a plain conversation into an event. The richness of his experiences fills his stories. He seldom expresses a mere fact without setting the historical perspective that imbues the fact with greater significance than it could carry alone.

When you talk with Gus for any length, he invariably recalls certain special people, events, and places: Aldo Leopold, the Pittman-Robertson Act, and North Star Farm.

Gus became acquainted with Leopold while at the University of Minnesota. "Leopold would arrange for wildlife specialists to come speak to his classes," explains Gus. "He would invite me, so I'd load up a car full of students, and we'd drive all the way to Madison." The association with Leopold obviously influenced Gus. Though always a lover of birds first, Gus perceived the crucial need to turn society toward wildlife conservation and management.

After six decades of participating in and observing wildlife management, he sees no more important event than passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act. "This act was the most important wildlife legislation ever because it distributed additional funds to states for wildlife management they couldn't afford otherwise; but in addition, it raised the standards of the profession."

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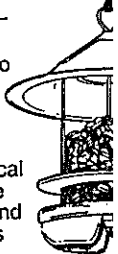
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on small arms and ammunition. The federal government uses the revenue to match with three dollars every dollar a state spends on approved wildlife projects. To qualify, however, states had to legislate that fees collected from hunting licenses would be spent only on wildlife conservation programs.

Gus spent a year of his USF&WS time with the P-R program. He inspected various projects for compliance with program requirements. "It was a real privilege for me to be so closely involved at the very beginning of this landmark development in American wildlife conservation," Gus says.

Whatever else Gus may have achieved, nothing kindles fond memories more than his years on North Star Farm. "We had just barely settled into Ithaca [at Cornell] when it became apparent that transporting our handicapped son to school was going to be a challenge. The dean of the college suggested we move outside the city. That way, the school bus would pick him up right at our door. A small, inactive farm became available, so we bought it. This was a chance to practice what I was preaching," Gus says with quiet emphasis.

For 18 years Gus and his family nurtured 88 acres they called "North Star Farm" as a wildlife paradise. It was, for Gus, a time to transfer conservation principles from lecture papers to the land. One way or another, all that Gus achieved afterwards loops back to the years on North Star Farm. He

learned his own lessons there and acquired that crucial inner sense that living life as a conservationist is the right thing to do.

An illness in 1984 put Gus in a wheelchair. He and his wife, Evadene, subsequently moved back to Minnesota. "No other city I've ever been in is so well equipped to accommodate the handicapped as is Minneapolis," he states frankly.

Paralysis changed his lifestyle, but it did not stop him. Though unable to work long hours, he still monitors the wildlife profession, he still watches birds every chance he gets, and he continues to write. His articles about birds and conservation appear in *BWD* and other publications.

In 1988 the City of Fort Collins, Colorado, dedicated an 11-acre tract adjoining the Cache la Poudre River as the "Gustav Swanson Nature Study Area." Completely accessible to the handicapped, the downtown park harbors black-crowned night-herons, great horned owls, warblers, vireos, and orioles. Belted kingfishers rattle their ways up and downstream as they hunt fathead minnows.

Gus, Evadene, and I toured the area the day before it was dedicated. "Oh, Gus, look!" Evadene exclaimed. "A mourning cloak! Isn't that the first butterfly you ever taught me?" Obviously, the big picture of wildlife conservation has not jaded his or his family's appreciation for even the smallest wildlife species. □

Kevin J. Cook writes a regular newspaper column about birds. He is based in Colorado.

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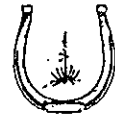
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