

# Aldo Leopold and the Endeavor Marsh

by Curt Meine  
Crane Action Plan Coordinator

In July of 1934, Aldo Leopold and his brother Carl stopped at Endeavor Marsh while returning from a fishing trip. The famed American conservationist had received word that the marsh held a remnant band of breeding Sandhill Cranes. If so, they would be among the last in the state of Wisconsin, and perhaps in the entire upper midwestern United States.

Leopold had more than a layman's interest in the cranes. A year before, he had been appointed Professor of Wildlife Management (the nation's first) at the University of Wisconsin, and had published *Game Management*, the first textbook in the field. The profession that he was instrumental in creating was beginning to apply its principles not just to game animals, but to all forms of wildlife—and especially to those threatened by the mounting pressures of 20th century economic and technological change.

Acting on a tip that cranes could be found near "the old Mitchell place," Leopold dropped in on W. J. Somerton [sic], a farmer who had lived near the marsh since 1874. Somerton told Leopold that 3-4 pairs had nested on his farm before the turn of the century, and that during migration his meadows were "black with cranes"—as many as a thousand at a time. By the early 1930s, however, migrant cranes were few, and just one breeding pair persisted. The pair, Somerton said, usually stayed near an oak opening at the edge of the marsh. He pointed to it, and invited his visitors to have a look.

Leopold had seen wild cranes in other parts of the country, but he had never seen breeding Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin. By the 1930s, few of the state's once extensive wetlands had escaped alteration by ditching, drainage, conversion to agriculture, road-building, peat fires, sedimentation, pollution, or elimination of the adjacent prairies, savannahs, and forests. And as the marshes went, so went the cranes. But Endeavor Marsh, by virtue of its being almost level with nearby Buffalo Lake, presented an unusually difficult challenge for wetland drainers. It had escaped the drainage fervor of earlier decades, and yet held cranes for farmers to tell about, and for professors to chase after.

"We went over there," Leopold wrote in his field journal, "and were standing under the oaks, scanning the marsh with glasses, when with loud trumpeting the pair flushed from the edge of the woods not a gunshot away. It was a noble sight."

The encounter at Endeavor Marsh changed Leopold—and, through Leopold, helped to shape the course of conservation history. Be-

fore visiting the Somerton farm, Leopold had a casual interest in cranes; afterwards he became a student of cranes. Over the next few years Leopold communicated with other enthusiasts, including Owen Gromme and Lawrence Walkinshaw, in an effort to better understand the status of cranes. Leopold set his graduate students to the task, too, asking them to keep an eye open for cranes during their field work in the marshes of central Wisconsin. They surmised that there were perhaps twenty-five breeding pairs in the entire state, at only a few locations, including Endeavor Marsh.

Leopold continued to receive regular reports from interested citizens. During the spring of 1935 migration, Amanda Kimball of Briggsville, near the Endeavor Marsh, wrote to him: "My brother-in-law... asks me to report to you that there are now in the vicinity of Endeavor Marsh some (300) three hundred Sandhill Cranes."

Also in the spring of 1935, Aldo Leopold acquired an abandoned sand country farm just a few miles south of Endeavor Marsh. As he began to learn more about the local landscape, and to appreciate the role of cranes within it, he began to look upon both with new and deeper insight. Two years later, in 1937, he would pen his memorable essay "Marshland Elegy." It opens with a description of a morning flock of migrating Sandhill Cranes:

*High horns, low horns, silence, and finally a pandemonium of trumpets, rattles, croaks, and cries that almost shakes the bog with its nearness, but without yet disclosing from*

*whence it comes. At last a glint of sun reveals the approach of a great echelon of birds. On motionless wings they emerge from the lifting mists, sweep a final arc of sky, and settle in clangorous descending spirals to their feeding grounds. A new day has begun on the crane marsh.*

Leopold might well have been describing the Endeavor Marsh with these words, but in them he captured the essence of any one of a thousand Wisconsin marshes that had once hosted cranes.

In "Marshland Elegy," Leopold described the geological, ecological, and human history of the Wisconsin marshes. Set against that background, the crane took on a special significance in Leopold's science, writing, and thinking. "Our appreciation of the crane," he wrote, "grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history.... When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millenia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men."

But as the marshes shrank under the pressures of modern development, the Sandhill Crane—along with the diversity and wildness it symbolized—retreated. In unusually tart language, Leopold wrote that, for the cranes, "the song of the power shovel came near being an elegy. The high priests of progress knew nothing of cranes, and cared less. What is a species more or less among engineers? What good is an undrained marsh anyhow?"

*Continued on page 8*



The lure of big profits spurred muck farmers to gamble on converting wetlands to fields. This photo shows a lettuce harvest at the Chickering-Jacobson farm on Endeavor Marsh, July, 1955. The workers, mostly children, were divided into five teams: cutters & trimmers, box assemblers, packers, box closers, and loaders. The work started before 5 a.m. and ended by noon, to avoid heat that could spoil the crop. Standing in center: Sylvester Chickering, II (left), and K. Jacobson. Photo by The Portage Daily Register.

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These words revealed the ongoing shift in Leopold's conservation philosophy. No longer concerned with just game species, he as a wildlife ecologist and manager began to consider the entire gamut of native plant and animal life, and the ecological communities within which they exist — what we now term "biodiversity." In particular, he began to argue that greater attention needed to be paid to the needs of rare and threatened species. And in his prose, he began to portray the natural beauty of a place or organism as a function not merely of its outward appearance or human utility, but of its evolutionary history and destiny. For the upcoming generation of conservationists, this was a new and profoundly challenging message.

*And so they live and have their being—these cranes—not in the constricted present, but in the wider reaches of evolutionary time. Their annual return is the ticking of the geologic clock. Upon the place of their return they confer a peculiar distinction. Amid the endless mediocrity of the commonplace, a crane marsh holds a paleontological patent of nobility, won in the march of aeons, and revocable only by shotgun. The sadness discernible in some marshes arises, perhaps, from their once having harbored cranes. Now they stand humbled, adrift in history.*

Endeavor Marsh is now a different place, with some of the sadness that Leopold perceived in marshes that had lost their cranes. But cranes are now found in abundance in the vicinity. The marsh still lies at the core of the state's recovered population of Greater Sandhill Cranes, now numbering about 20,000. Descendants of the remnant band have dispersed from that core and now breed, after an absence of a century or more, in portions of Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. And just a few miles from both Endeavor Marsh and the Leopold farm, ICF bears witness to "the good" to be found in an undrained marsh. ■



This painting by Victor Bakhtin, entitled "Last Hope," appears in a 1996 calendar available from ICF. It shows nesting Siberian Cranes at Kunovat in western Siberia. In 1987, this breeding area contained 10 nests, but during the summer of 1995, Russian colleagues could find only one nest.

## 1996 Wildlife Art Calendar Available

The beautiful scene shown above is one of 13 large paintings and several small ones on a 1996 calendar, illustrated by ICF's Artist in Residence, Victor Bakhtin. The 14 page calendar measures 23.5 X 16 inches. To order, send a check for \$8 in US funds (payable to ICF—\$11 for overseas and Canadian orders) to Terry Brooks at ICF. The cost includes shipping—please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

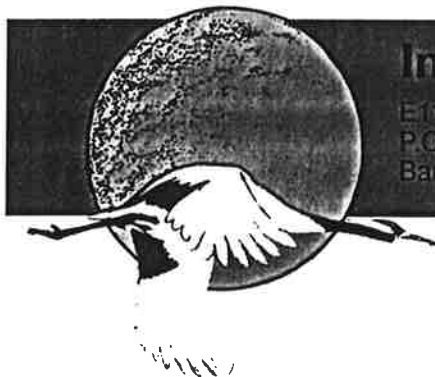
This is the first time that Victor's wildlife art has been published in his native Russia. The calendar is being printed by a manufacturer of refrigerators and other consumer items in the city of Krasnoyarsk. Formerly a secret defense plant, the company has converted to making consumer goods, and wants to improve their image by producing a calendar.

We welcome this new face of Russia!

The calendar contains brief writings by Victor in Russian and English about the paintings. He writes about the above illustration: "In 1976, the Russian-American program "Sterkh" began. I call this painting "Last Hope," because I hope and believe in people who are doing their best to save the white cranes. As with so much of the world's endangered wildlife, the fate of the sterkh rests in the hands of those who care."

Here are some of the subjects of the paintings reproduced in the calendar: deer, red-crowned cranes, Stellar's sea eagle, badger, mountain quail, kestrel, sandhill cranes on the Platte River, golden eagle hunting a fox, reindeer, and coyote. ■

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### International Crane Foundation

E11376 Shady Lane Rd.  
P.O. Box 447  
Baraboo, Wisconsin 53913-0447

(608) 356-9462  
Fax: 356-9465  
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# The Death of Endeavor Marsh

by David Chickering, ICF Volunteer

I grew up on a 500-acre farm among Michigan lowlands, where my family grew onions and other vegetable crops.

In 1953, my father and his business partner, Kelly Jacobson, bought about 2,000 acres of pristine marshland near Endeavor, Wisconsin. There, our family turned marsh into productive muckland for an intense and very wrenching ten years.

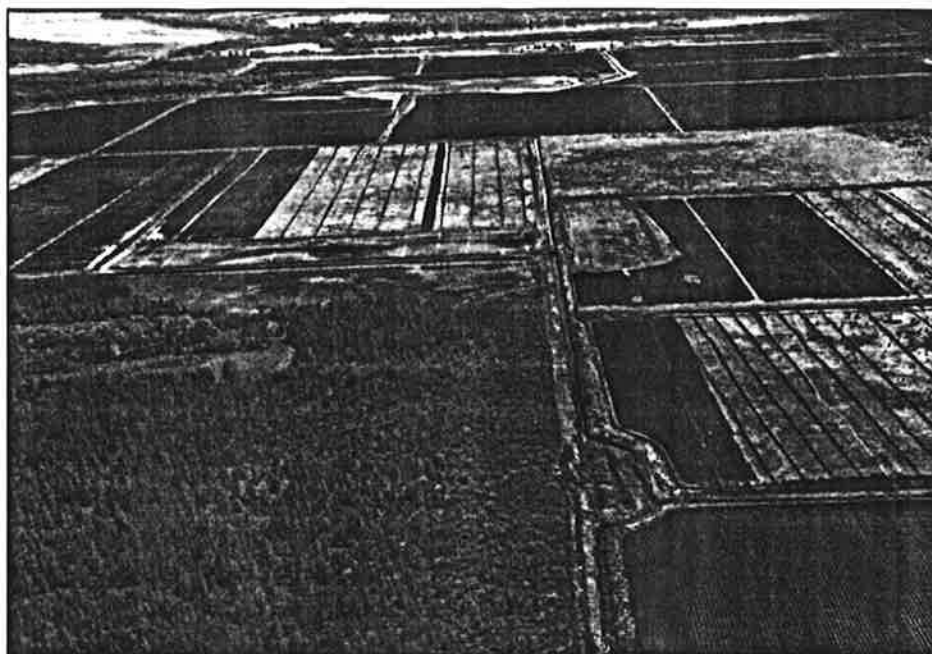
We moved from Michigan to Wisconsin when I was fifteen years old. The first time that I saw the Endeavor marsh, I was overwhelmed by the vast sweep of its untouched, primeval wildness. Ten thousand years old, the marsh was large and deep, the remains of a shallow lake left by the retreating ice sheet. Before we cleared the land, it contained areas of tamarack swamp, thick brush, clumpy grass mounds interspersed by soupy muck, and floating mats of tall grass that undulated and quaked with every step.

We tamed the land where the craggy, handsome Paddy Chapman had trapped for decades. He told of traversing the treacherous floating bogs on marsh skis, seeing mink and mallards in the wild areas, and catching immense snapping turtles. Open water deep in the marsh attracted reclusive waterfowl. Old-time residents like the Summertons told of families of Sandhill Cranes, whose plaintive cries exalted the vast marsh. We also heard of poachers who shot Sandhills for trophies or food.

Few people ventured into the marshland guarded by poison sumac, or struggled through the tangle of tamarack roots, clouds of insects, or treacherous mud. But I clambered through the swamp, often barefoot, leaping from tussock to tussock across widening areas of “loon-goop.” Deep in the swamp, I found dead tamaracks topped with massive nests, occupied by herons gazing eerily down at me.

My dad faced the challenge of developing the 2,000 acre marsh into a productive vegetable farm. This entailed digging miles of ditches, while constructing levees, dikes, roads and pumping stations. We plowed the land with immense plows that could bury a stand of 30-foot poplars in furrows four feet deep. Yet, we might encounter tamarack roots that had laid buried for 1,000 years, formidably tangled and able to defeat almost any plow.

Newly-developed marshes could produce prodigious amounts of onions, carrots, and head lettuce, yielding more than 1,000 jumbo cases of sweet head lettuce, or over 30 tons of carrots per acre. But unlike normal upland farming, farming muckland was a high-investment venture, because we were fighting nature. To attain the high yields, we had to add



The Endeavor Marsh in May, 1985, looking east. The Chickering-Jacobson farm was located in the far east of this view. The Nature Conservancy now manages a 428-acre sanctuary named Summerton Bog (lower left), home to the pickerel frog (once listed as threatened in Wis.) and up to nine species of orchid, including the threatened small white and showy white lady slippers. The sanctuary covers just a fraction of the former wetland area. Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy.

tons of mineral fertilizer per acre. Without fertilizer, the land remained sterile and incapable of supporting any commercial crop.

The drained land was prone to many disasters. Buffalo Lake waited to flood the croplands through rain-weakened dikes, sometimes damaged by burrowing muskrats or malevolent beavers. Once the water table was lowered, mucklands oxidized, disappearing into thin air as carbon dioxide. As the peat oxidized, the fields sank again below the water table. In response, we had to deepen ditches, and increase our already expensive pumping. The soil became sticky when wet and prone to wind erosion when dry. The blowing soil cut whole fields of tender seedlings off at the surface.

Aging muckland also faced the intrusion of troublesome weeds. We had to extensively hand-cultivate, or apply high levels of herbicides.

Occasionally, an acrid smell would guide us to a patch of smoldering peat as big as a house, caused by a discarded cigarette. We dared not walk where ashes lay white on the surface, for fear of falling through into an underground furnace. These fires could burn relentlessly for years if not stopped.

During the same decade, other farmers arrived from Michigan. By rapidly bringing large areas of central Wisconsin marshland into production, these farmers overproduced, unwittingly driving down the price of their crops far below costs. Vegetable crops couldn't be stored until prices improved. Success in clearing marshland had brought chaotic markets and economic disaster.

My family had only one good year on the muck farm. In the end, floods, late frosts and virus infestations prevailed, melting whole fields of crisp lettuce into slimy detritus. Increased use of pesticides failed to stop infestations of the insect vectors. Then we started to see the same oxidation, erosion, and fires that had driven Michigan farmers to Wisconsin.

Our land produced bountiful crops when all factors could be controlled. However, the cultivated marshland was both expensive to create and unpredictable to maintain. Economics drove the use of chemicals by the ton—these toxins still contaminate the local food chains. Those years were stressful for my family because we battled nature and lost. But farmers are always battling nature. What really killed us was the chaotic market for our crops.

Farmers converted the wetland because of the potentially huge profits, but there were also many intangible rewards. My father would go out with my mother after a long day's toil, and stand at the edge of the field, watching the sun go down over a ripening crop. Fine food for thousands of people. That was his payback for all the stress and frustrations.

Today, I see something different—an area of total desolation. In some abandoned muck farms, fields are so full of toxins that nothing can grow. My most vivid memories of the dying wetland are of plowing a large tract of mature trees into flat muckland, and of driving a ditch-digger across a 10,000-year-old spring, which seemed to gush its essential water like a living creature suddenly ripped open. ■