

OBITUARY

Herbert Axel Johnson
August 16, 1910 – March 8, 1979

MAXWELL C. WHEAT, JR.

Herbert Axel Johnson died of cancer on March 8, 1979, at his home in Rocky Point, Long Island.

Herb Johnson was the superintendent of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge from its inception in 1953 as part of the New York City Parks Dept., until 1972 when it became part of the Gateway National Recreational Area of the National Park Service.

In winter there are splendid arrays of waterfowl. In spring, and fall, the mudflats shimmer with the restlessness of shorebirds. Fall also brings the excitement of the falcon flights.

But this was not the case before Herb's tenure. Besides if there was an interesting bird, it was an unpleasant place to be because it was part of what people called "Garbage Park." They were referring to Jamaica Bay which was overwhelmed by sewage, transient dumping and unchecked hunting. Herb's wife Nettie remembers that the Refuge "looked like the Sahara Desert," when they first arrived. However, it was this "desert" that precipitated Herb Johnson's appointment by then NYC Parks Commissioner Robert Moses.

The "desert" was there at Mr. Moses' request. It consisted of large piles of sand dredged up from the bay bottom by the Transit Authority which had used it to build a viaduct for the subway's surface extension. It happened that the route ran along the edge of land that Mr. Moses had acquired for park purposes in 1938 to stop the Sanitation Commissioner from imposing a dump on that land. Since the Transit Authority wanted to use part of the land, Mr. Moses arranged that the sand piles be used for impoundments to attract birds. These are the ponds known to birders today as West Pond and East Pond.

The sandy impoundments needed planting so they would not erode. Indeed, the Refuge needed a Superintendent. This was one of the recommendations of Dr. Clarence Cottam, Assistant Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who surveyed the area at Mr. Moses' request. Mr. Moses knew the right man for the job.

The Park Commissioner first met Herb at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Mr. Moses was directing it. Herb was a foreman in the NYC Parks Department. Herb knew horticulture from the time he could walk.

Herb's father, also Herbert Axel Johnson, was a gardener on the estate of John D. Rockefeller in Tarrytown, N.Y., where Herb was born on August 16, 1910. His mother was Hanna Johnson. Later the father moved his family to Long Island where he worked as a gardener on estates. It was only natural for Herb to join the NYC Parks Department as a gardener.

During World War II he served with the Airborne Engineers in the U.S. Air Force. After the war he studied horticulture at the Long Island Agricultural and Technological Institute in Farmingdale, N.Y. Following graduation from the two-year program, he rejoined the NYC Parks Department where much of his work was on golf courses. He performed soil tests and did plantings. In fact, he was sent to the Pelham Bay Park to start a laboratory to grow grasses for putting greens.

Looking back it almost seems as if everything Herb had been learning had been leading up to his appointment. Herb was the man even though a wildlife sanctuary certainly differs from a putting green. As it turned out, this was to be an extraordinary match of a human being and a wild area.

Despite freezing winds, Herb started working immediately when he arrived in February of 1953. He and a six man crew dug up beach grass and brought the plants by outboard to the marshy islands that together with the surrounding waters comprise the 12,000 acres of Refuge. They trimmed, divided and pushed thousands of plants into the sand with a machine that Herb converted from a cabbage planter.

Herb brought healing to this wounded land. The land responded. The first summer Black Ducks nested there. The next year there were nesting Ruddy Ducks and Blue-winged Teal. Two pairs of Northern Shovelers raised young on the West Pond in 1956. Two years later there were two pairs of Common Gallinules. People wondered if Gadwalls would nest and a few years later they did.

In the spring of 1954, Herb took his men and headed farther out on Long Island to the Great South Bay. Working from boats and using post hole diggers, they dug up quantities of eelgrass. By nightfall, the shallow waters of the Refuge had been planted with eelgrass in the hope that it would attract Brant. Whether this was the actual cause, the numbers of Brant at the Refuge did increase. Whatever the case, it showed the efforts Herb would undertake to bring in the birds.

The Japanese black pines, Russian olive bushes, willows, and other plants growing so abundantly on the Refuge came from seed that Herb gathered at places like Jacob Riis Park in New York City and Jones Beach State Park farther out on Long Island. He planted the seeds in a garden by the house where he, Nettie and their daughter, Christine, lived on the Refuge. Then he transplanted them.

The Refuge flourished under Herb's touch and Herb's interest in birds matured and grew at the same time. You could tell this from the pair of binoculars he always carried in the cab of the pickup truck he used to make rounds. He became one of the leading birders of the New York area, but he was not a birder when he took on the job, even though a major part of his responsibility involved plantings for birds. He therefore made an intensive effort to learn about birds and their needs. He read books. He went to the American Museum of Natural History to talk with Dean Amadon, and other leading ornithologists. Herb joined ornithological organizations—the Queens County Bird Club, the Linnaean Society of New York, the National Audubon Society and the American Ornithologists' Union. He often attended meetings of all these groups. In 1972 he and Nettie flew to the International Ornithological Congress at The Hague in the Netherlands.

He became a favorite of people who love and work to save wild areas. He was presented awards for his accomplishments at the Refuge by the New York City Parks Council in 1968 and the National Audubon Society in 1970.

Herb became a favorite of local birders. This was shown at his retirement when on January 11, 1973, in Whitestone, N.Y., the Queens County Bird Club honored him at the first testimonial dinner in their 45 year history. A total of 141 persons attended, many being representatives of at least eight other nature groups.

Among the gifts he received was a weather vane for the roof of his new home at Rocky Point. Designed by wildlife artist John Cameron Yrizarry, it was in the shape of a Glossy Ibis. It was in the summer of 1961 that Herb, Peter Post and Paul Buckley found three Glossy Ibis nests with eggs in them at the Refuge. This was the first known nesting of this species for New York State. Herb took particular personal satisfaction in this. He had a right to feel this way considering that the 315 species recorded at the Refuge as of August, 1978 include many that returned, nested again, or showed up for the first time (as far as birders knew) after he began his restoration.

What George Barr wrote in the Queens County Bird Club newsletter, *News and Notes*, following the testimonial can be repeated again at this time, "We shall all miss big, good-natured Herb, with his boyish grin, standing at the Refuge entrance, patiently answering our inevitable opening query, 'Anything good around today, Herb?'"

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