

Harriet Taylor Marsi 1912-2008

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Harriet Marsi died in Vestal, NY at the age of 95 on 10 June 2008. She was raised in Port Washington, NY by her parents, Thomas and Matilda Taylor, who supported her early fascination with the world of nature. She earned a Bachelor's degree from Wellesley College in 1933 and a Master's degree in Zoology from University of North Carolina in 1936. While working in a Manhattan law office where she was employed as a secretary she met Frederick Marsi, an attorney, and they were married in 1938. They moved to Binghamton in 1946, raised two children, Gail and Rick, and remained in that area for the rest of their lives.

Harriet quickly found like-minded people in Binghamton, and in 1950 she and a few others founded the Naturalists' Club of Broome County. She was the first President and served several terms thereafter in that office. She led field trips, "weed walks", bird song classes, banding demonstrations and wetland surveys and gave many nature programs for the club over many years. She became an expert on foraging and preparing wild foods, testing them out on her family, and then serving some she thought to be more successful on field outings and at club meetings.

Over the years Harriet spent hundreds of hours giving nature programs in local school classrooms, conveying infectious enthusiasm, no matter what the topic. A local newspaper article about her said that "she could keep a classroom full of children spellbound as a just-emerged monarch butterfly perched on her finger while she explained how the creatures migrated, what they ate and where to find them. She would tag the butterfly as she did this, then go to the window and send the butterfly on its way" (Frank Roessner, Binghamton Press & Sun-Bulletin 13 Jun 2008).

Perhaps her most widely publicized conservation success involved a confrontation with the NYS Department of Transportation as they planned an upgrade to Rt 17 in the mid-1960s. When she learned that the highway was slated to go through the Apalachin Marsh about 15 miles west of Binghamton, she and fellow Naturalists' Club member Florence Linaberry went to the site and challenged the NYSDOT engineers to divert the traffic lanes around the marsh. Their initial laughter at the two ladies ultimately changed to respect as the campaign persisted, the route was changed, and the marsh between the east and westbound lanes was preserved. Now that Rt 17 will become Interstate 86, federal officials say that the unique 50-acre nature preserve (called "Harriet's Marsh" by the locals) will continue to be protected. A *New York Times* article on

18 May 1999 gave Harriet Marsi much of the credit for saving the marsh from the bulldozers.

Harriet's lifetime concern for conservation led to leadership in several local and statewide organizations and recognition through many awards. As a conservationist and environmental activist, she was a long-term member and Chairperson of the Broome County Environmental Management Council. In 1976 she was given the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency "Special Award of Merit" recognizing her "significant contributions to a better environment." She served as President of the Central New York State Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, and earned the Oakleaf Award in recognition of her conservation work, and the Susquehanna Group of the Sierra Club recognized her with the 2005 Spickard Environmental Award as a longtime advocate for the local environment. She persuaded Binghamton University to relocate a new dormitory in order to preserve a stand of mature forest, and her last campaign involved New York State's role in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Her letter-writing continued until the state joined a multi-state consortium to oversee the issue.

Harriet served in major roles in the (then) Federation of New York State Bird Clubs over many years. She served as Corresponding Secretary (1964-1967 and 1978), Recording Secretary (1979-1980 and 1982), Vice-President (1983-1984) and President (1985-1986). She also served as *Kingbird* Regional Editor for Region 4 for 15 issues between 1982 and 1985, plus several terms as Conservation Chair. She treasured the friendships with other FNYBCL leaders during her era and always looked forward to the social aspects of Annual Meetings and Board Meetings. Her outstanding service to the organization was recognized with the Gordon M. Meade Distinguished Service Award, the highest award of the organization, in 1993.

Bird-banding was an interest that spread over many decades of her life. She apprenticed under Les Bemont in the early 1960s and as she became more experienced, taught other people, including at least two who continue to use banding to study birds to this day (her daughter Gail Kirch and this writer). She established a banding station on her property where she was able to document the replacement of Golden-winged Warblers by Blue-winged Warblers between 1961 and 1976 in an article in *North American Bird Bander*. She also participated in a study of fall migration of passerines from about 1970 to 1985 in a series of reports in the same journal.

As her physical health curtailed banding and birding activities, Harriet turned to other studies. Always willing to try something new, she founded three 4th of July Butterfly Counts in the mid-1990s, compiling and reporting the annual results for the North American Butterfly Association. During her last few counts she remained in the car, helping with identification of tricky skippers brought to her and then gently released. Her last butterfly count was in 2007 at age 94, and she was thrilled that a 4-year old on the same count found a Hairstreak that had been missed by the others.

In her latter years, Harriet took many courses through Lyceum, a life-long learning program for seniors affiliated with the University at Binghamton, and enthusiastically enrolled for as many as three classes a week. As in every other

project, she became deeply engrossed in whatever her class was studying, whether it was geology, water conservation, the Chesapeake Bay, or American and Russian literature.

She left a wonderful legacy to those who knew her—a joy for life, great appreciation for everything outdoors, a love of learning, and fascination with the little things, whether child, bird, bug or bud. She had great enthusiasm for passing on her passion for nature as well as a keen sense of responsibility for working to conserve the things she loved. Both bore fruit and will continue to do so for years to come.