

Bird Lore: Hawk Mountain Sanctuary founded nearly 90 years ago

- By DAN ALTERS



This is the 1930 photograph that enraged Rosalie Edge and led to her purchase of the land now known as Hawk Mountain. For more information about the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, go to www.hawkmountain.org.

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The Hawk Mountain Sanctuary near Kempton, in Berks County, is well-known to bird watchers — especially those who enjoy birds of prey, or raptors.

A new book review recently stirred my interest in learning more about the creation of the sanctuary. The popular raptor migration viewing site has existed for nearly 90 years, yet many people know little about the feisty woman who made it all possible. And not only did she enable the creation of the sanctuary, she also challenged, and eventually changed, the raptor protection policies of the Audubon Society.

When I think of an early 20th century, wealthy female Manhattanite, the picture of a dedicated conservation activist is not what comes to mind. The story of Rosalie Barrow Edge, as chronicled by science journalist Michelle Nijhuis in her book “Beloved Beasts,” is one that would inspire any conservation-minded person into action.

Rosalie Edge honed her activist skills during the women’s suffrage cause around 1920, later turning her attention to the plants and wildlife on her own property on Long Island and later in Central Park. Emboldened by the writing of Willard Gibbs Van Name, a zoologist at the American Museum of Natural History, she attended a National Association of Audubon Societies meeting in New York in 1929, and challenged the Audubon policies allowing bounties on Bald Eagles and hunting within wildlife refuges. It was common for many early conservation organizations to ignore predator and raptor eradication practices.

She founded the Emergency Conservation Committee (with Van Name secretly writing the early pamphlets), and together they wrote many pamphlets denouncing the Audubon policies and some Sierra Club policies, even winning a court battle over use of the Audubon mailing list. Soon after, the Audubon president resigned, and in 1940 the organization reformed as the National Audubon Society with policies far more protective of raptors.

Edge had no formal conservation or ornithological training but learned much during her travels from visionaries such as J. “Ding” Darling, Aldo Leopold and William Temple Hornaday. Later, in turn, she influenced the work of Roger Tory Peterson, Sierra Club leader David Browner and the Nature Conservancy co-founder Richard Pough.

In 1918, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was passed but saw little enforcement except for certain birds renowned for their plumage. A photo taken around 1930, after a weekend killing of raptors during the autumn migration, stirred Edge to lease, and later purchase in 1934, some 1,400 acres of the Kittatinny Ridge in southeastern Pennsylvania where the killings occurred.

She hired Maurice and Irma Broun (both ornithologists) as wardens to protect the property, with Maurice becoming the curator of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Maurice and Irma served as a team until they retired in 1966.

The Hawk Mountain Sanctuary formed by Rosalie Edge would grow to 2,600 acres, with over 60,000 visitors per year and more than 9,000 members that keep the sanctuary's mission alive.

Edge would live to 1962, long enough to witness significant changes in the bird protection policies of every significant conservation organization, in large part due to her unflinching commitment. She clearly earned the reputation as “the only honest, unselfish, indomitable hellcat in the history of conservation” (New Yorker magazine, April 1948).

Hawk Mountain would play a role in yet another woman's conservation activism. As a writer for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Rachel Carson visited the sanctuary in 1945 and took note of the abundance of raptors. Many years later, as she was studying pesticide impacts on wildlife, she used over 20 years of migration data collected by Maurice Broun in her groundbreaking book, “Silent Spring.”

The life of Rosalie Edge is far more interesting than can be covered here, and I encourage the reader to explore more. The National Audubon Society published 10 articles by Dyana Furmanskyy in 2010 titled “Unpacking Rosalie Edge,” available at [Audubon.org](https://www.audubon.org) and by searching there for Rosalie Edge, and also published an interview with Michelle Nijhuis titled “Capturing the Whole History of Conservation” on the same page (https://www.audubon.org/search_results?search=rosalie%20edge).

I invite everyone to one day — and especially in the fall — go to Hawk Mountain, explore the fantastic rocky trails and scenic views and look for some raptors as they sail by majestically. No experience is