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## Aldo Leopold's Wisconsin October 13-19, 2013 Trip Report

Ed and Sil Pembleton, guides, with 5 participants: Owen and Ruth, Ed, Jane and Lynn.

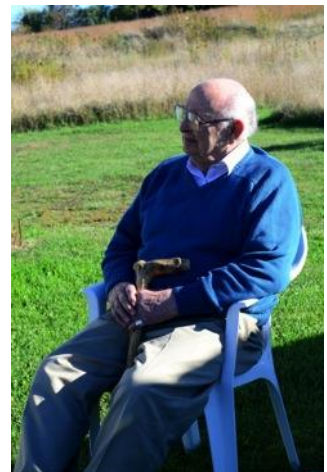
### Sunday, October 13 Arrivals/ Faville Grove Prairie/ Welcome Dinner with Dr. Stanley Temple

Everyone arrives by 1 pm and we eat lunch at the surprisingly good, if a bit slow on service, airport restaurant and depart for our first experience at Madison Audubon's Faville Grove Sanctuary near Lake Mills.

It was here, at the invitation of the homesteading Faville and Tillotson families, that Aldo Leopold and his students pioneered cooperative wildlife research and habitat restoration with local farmers and landowners in the 1930s. That initial planting of the land ethic has remained viable, growing and spreading as local cooperators work with Madison Audubon to restore prairies and savannahs.



We are greeted by resident manager, David Musolf, one of the leaders who devote untold hours to fostering and carrying out the restoration efforts in the area. With him is Dave Tillotson, a member of one of the area's homesteading families who recalls farmers meeting with Aldo Leopold in his family's living room.





David gives us an update on the progression of land protection and restoration around the initial 60 acres of native prairie that Leopold got the University to protect in the 1940s. Audubon’s Faville Grove Sanctuary has now grown to over 600 acres with more than 300 acres of restored prairie and wetlands and 40 acres of oak savanna woodlands. David explains that prairie restorations are carried out with locally collected seed using up to 150 species and then takes us out into one of the restored areas to see the diversity created by their hard work. Our hike takes us to a patch of oak savanna woodlands based on the most eastern outcrop of 1.5 Billion year old Baraboo quartzite, some of the oldest rock in Wisconsin.



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All too soon, we head east to our hotel in Madison and freshen up for our dinner appointment. Dr. Stanley Temple, who is now a Senior Fellow at the Aldo Leopold Foundation, joins us for our welcome dinner at a traditional Wisconsin supper club. Dr. Temple explains that he retired early from his professorship and head of the Department of Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin (a position created and held by Aldo Leopold) to engage people to take an active role with Leopold’s land ethic. Dr. Temple’s engaging manner of explaining Leopold’s philosophy makes it clear why he is enjoying this new pursuit with such great success. The meal is wonderful and we are so engaged with Dr. Temple that we are surprised to learn that it is past closing time.

**Monday, October 14      Univ. of Wisconsin Arboretum/ Lunch with Leopold biographer Curt Meine/ Aldo Leopold Center & Shack.**

After yesterday’s travels, a late evening and a frosty morning, we have a leisurely breakfast at our hotel before heading to the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, a unique facility founded by Aldo Leopold and a committee of visionary professors in the 1930s.



Our bird list takes some scratches and a big jump when a posse of Wild Turkeys patrolling the grounds greets us! Chipping Sparrows feed on the edge of the mowed lawn and Goldfinches are stripping the last seed from cup plants, their favorite native sunflower. Eastern Blue Birds sing as our guide and naturalist extraordinaire, Kathy Miner arrives. Kathy, who also leads the Arboretum’s annual celebration of Aldo Leopold’s philosophy with a reading of **A Sand County Almanac**, soon joins us.

Kathy showers us with a mix of historical background and natural history as we venture into the first ever prairie restoration—one of the groundbreaking ideas that originated here in the 1930s. Aldo Leopold and the founders had a vision of Arboretum beyond the typical tree collection. They wanted it to be a living laboratory







that included many of Wisconsin's ecosystems and addressed questions in habitat restoration. A migrating flock of more than 300 Double-crested Cormorants draws our attention skyward. We meet Big Bluestem and other tall prairie grasses, and in a patch of some of the original prairie Kathy finds a native thistle, the preferred soft lining in Goldfinch nests.



Within a few feet we discover just such a nest that was only recently abandoned. A few steps further and we find Closed Gentian, one of the last prairie plants to bloom in the fall.

We circle the visitor center and find Downy Woodpeckers and Golden-crowned Kinglets feeding in trees around the site of the former CCC camp. Some of the CCC buildings are still in use.

All too soon, we depart for lunch with Leopold biographer, author and conservationist, Curt Meine at the Blue Spoon Café in Sauk Prairie du Sac. We find Curt and learn that the café that is very popular (good food does that) and a bit crowded when we arrive. We enjoy delicious meals and settle into an interesting conversation with Curt about his efforts to bring a land ethic and good policies to the management of public and private lands. It is quickly obvious that it takes a great deal of organizing, strategy and maneuvering to bring about the political will, or the will in politicians, to carry out a land ethic.

We head on to the Aldo Leopold Center and meet Anna Hawley, Education Assistant, who is our tour coordinator and guide at the Aldo Leopold Foundation. Anna gives us insight into the design thinking and practical trade offs required of a sustainable building devoted to Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Described in shorthand as "putting a roof over the land ethic," the planning team did such an admirable job. The facility received Platinum LEED® Certification from U. S. Green Building Council. In fact, the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program awarded the highest score of any building in the United States!



Carson Main joins us and we head down to the Leopold Shack, which has gained iconic status in conservation circles and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2009. To the Leopolds, it was "The Shack," the family's place to recreate and re-create native habitats on weekends and holidays. It was an old chicken coop on a worn out farm along the Wisconsin River that served as a refuge. Over the decades it remained a shack, but was transformed into an intellectual incubator. Carson shows us historical photographs for comparison to today's land health conditions as he walks us down the path and answers our questions regarding the Leopold



family and their experiences here. We end our tour with a walk down to the site where a tree once stood and was made famous by Leopold's essay the "Good Oak."

We depart just as rain promises to arrive and head to nearby River's Edge Resort for dinner and our lodging for the remainder of the tour.



**Tuesday, October 15      Necedah National Wildlife Refuge/ International Crane Foundation (ICF)**

The cold front that arrived last night continues to deliver rain this morning so we contact the International Crane Foundation and arrange to switch our tour to the afternoon and head to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge.

Aldo Leopold's students studied and worked in this area even before it was designated as a refuge. Two of his students, Fran and Fredrick Hammerstrom, carried out pioneering wildlife research here developing methods of studying Prairie Chickens (a bird not likely to be found in this region today). Currently, the refuge is restoring habitats and is one of the centers leading efforts to reintroduce and restore populations of Whooping Cranes—birds we do hope to see if we can gain access to the refuge. Access to the refuge is in question because the Federal Government is in the midst of a shut down. Even the phones and website are closed—so we have to take our chances and see what areas are accessible.

We know the visitor center is closed and find that the best areas to see Whooping Cranes are gated with no entry, but fortunately, the refuge is bordered and crossed by a few essential roads that cannot be closed. A light cold rain persists, but does not deter our birding interests.



We arrive at a restored oak/pine savannah and are rewarded immediately with our first sighting of a Red-headed Woodpecker. That bird is soon followed by sightings of Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatches and the call of a Pileated Woodpecker. Rain lessens and we walk through the savannah to stretch our legs. Very quickly we find several more Red-headed Woodpeckers, apparently they are part of a familial colony. We have hit the woodpecker jackpot!

Light rain is falling again, so a picnic at a pavilion back near town seems like a good idea. We start to leave the refuge, but are stopped short by an immature Bald Eagle that flies up and perches in a dead tree alongside the road. The pavilion proves to be a great place for a wonderful lunch, including homegrown tomatoes.





We head back to the International Crane Foundation, arriving just as the clouds part and the sun breaks through. Cully Shelton, ICF Interpretive Programs Manager greets us. As part of our orientation, we view ICF's new film that celebrates their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and focuses on their worldwide efforts to protect and restore crane populations. We head out to meet representatives of all 15 species of cranes on the planet. These graceful and elegant creatures are the perfect ambassadors for birds and people, who are quickly captivated by their beauty.



We learn that a few have populations that are doing well, even thriving, but most like the Whooping Crane in the U. S., are faced with severe limits on their numbers, loss of suitable habitats and other threats.

The weather cooperates better than the Federal government. Clouds fill in again, but no rain falls for the next three hours and we head for dinner in nearby Baraboo.

**Wednesday, October 16**

**John Muir Memorial Park/ Sandhill Cranes on the Wisconsin River/ Dutch Oven Dinner-Leopold Center**

We depart for breakfast in historic Portage Wisconsin, taking Levee Road past the Leopold Shack along the south bank of the Wisconsin River. Near the east end of the road, where it borders a wildlife management area, we spot three game birds: Chuckar; Bobwhite Quail (a bird that has become scarce over much of its range in the state); and then a Ring-necked Pheasant. We learn later that all of these birds were likely recently released.

In Portage we meet for breakfast with our guide, Mark Martin, who has just returned from a trip and is anxious to get out to Muir Park. Mark, recently retired from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, can now devote even more time to his many conservation efforts and work with Madison Audubon. He knows both the history and the natural history of the area and has been one of the leaders in protecting and developing Muir Park.



Fall colors in the prairie and woodlands greet us in bright muted light when we reach the park. After a bit of background, we begin our hike through the prairie, wetlands and woods around the glacial lake that is a central feature here. Mark points out the plant communities in the wetland and prairie zones and recounts the habitat restoration efforts here. We discover several new plants and some of us learn to identify familiar ones like Poison Sumac that lacks leaves, but still holds distinctive white berries.

The fall woods here is lush and many of the older trees have impressive size. Mark takes us out to a fen on the edge of the lake where we find specialized plants growing in very wet soils. We arrive back at the picnic pavilion where we share lunch with Mark before he leaves for his next appointment.

We take a break after lunch to return to our rooms to change and get ready for this evening's crane watching adventure along the Wisconsin River. After a snack of Wisconsin cheese, smoked salmon and crackers we return to meet Anna Hawley at the Leopold Center. We set up the Dutch ovens and Sil stays to prepare our evening meal.

Anna takes us down past the Shack to a special blind the staff has erected on the bank of the Wisconsin River across from a sandbar that Sandhill Cranes use as a roosting site. Each fall prior to migrating south for the winter, Sandhill Cranes gather here in ever-larger numbers



before departing for the south ahead of winter freeze up. This is early in the season and we're pleased when half a dozen birds arrive early to establish the roost. The breeze drops and Canada Geese begin to arrive and join the cranes on the river. Within a few minutes there are over 50 Sandhill cranes and several hundred Canada Geese across from the blind and almost twice as many upstream from us. Numbers of cranes and geese continue to grow until sunset, when we return to the Leopold Center and Sil's Dutch oven dinner.

Tonight's dinner, prepared in Dutch ovens, is reminiscent of the methods if not the menus that the Leopold family used during their trips to the Shack. After a long and chilly day, warm "Shepard's pie," salad, apple cider, coffee and hot apple crisp hit the spot.



**Thursday, October 17**

**Coon Valley**

After a late evening, we have a late breakfast and depart from Rivers Edge for Coon Valley to see the first watershed based soil conservation project in the United States. Stunning fall colors are highlighted with fog in the valleys as we head southeast into Wisconsin's drift-less area that escaped the glaciers.



In the village of Coon Valley, we meet Sam Skemp, District Conservationist for the USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Jon Lee, local landowner/farmer, teacher and photographer. Jon's family farm was the site of the tree nursery for the Coon Valley project and he is a keen student of the area's history and its people.

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We drive up onto the ridge top and stop at a farm that was included in the project to get a panoramic view of the valley. Hills here are steep and composed of easily eroded soils. Newly arrived emigrants were not familiar with the weather patterns that caused erosion so severe that towns in the valley were flooded and buried in sediment. Sam gives us an introduction to this historic undertaking of introducing new erosion control techniques and Aldo Leopold's connection. Once he has us oriented, Sam has to return to his office where a backlog of work has piled up during the Federal government shutdown.



Jon takes over and we wind our way through a bucolic agrarian setting where farmers still maintain small dairies and multiple crop farms employing contour terraces, strip cropping patterns and woodlands on really steep slopes. We spot Red-tailed hawks soaring over the valley. Wild turkeys forage in the harvested fields and based on their tracks and the number of deer stands, Whitetail deer populations are doing very well here. Jon tells us that stream water quality is so excellent that a substantial trout fishery attracts anglers from a broad area. Wildlife as well as farming has recovered and prospered in the Coon Valley watershed.



We return to the village of Coon Valley and the Stockyard Café, a location that was used as an "office" by Aldo Leopold and his students. In fact, there's a 1930's photo of the professor sitting at the bar in the back of the place doing paperwork. Jon's excellent photos of local landowners also adorn the walls and he shares some of the personal histories. Jon's talent for humorous story telling shines as we await our meals. In a side conversation, two local farmers express concern that gains in soil conservation will be lost as some locals are shifting their farming practices into larger single crops. It is clear that a culture of conservation and a land ethic is embedded in the community.

After lunch Jon takes us to his family farm and points out the location of the tree nursery and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) that served the Coon Valley project. From an old file he has brought Jon extracts a copy of the original, hand-colored, farm conservation plan and we can see how it was applied from this vantage point overlooking the farm. Still actively working on conservation projects, Jon describes some stream restoration work completed near his house. He



then takes us to a nearby active project and then for comparison, further upstream to an area that has not been restored.

Jon leaves us late in the day to meet his veterinarian that is coming to care for an injured cow (such is the life of a farmer) and we make a quick trip to a small Amish market that specializes in local produce before heading back to dinner in Wisconsin Dells.

**Friday, October 18**

**Devil's Lake State Park-Glacial action on Ancient Rock & A Coot in a Tree!**

After breakfast at the Log Cabin, a charming local Baraboo café, we head to Wisconsin's most popular State Park, Devil's Lake. During the summer crowds throng here to camp, hike, climb, enjoy the beauty of these ancient (1.7 Billion year old) quartzite rocks and engage in all kinds of lake-based recreation. This time of year the park is serene and cloaked in the beauty of fall colors.



We visit the north end of the lake to get oriented at the visitor center, one of several beautiful buildings erected of native stone by the depression era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).



From here we drive a curving tree enclosed road around the west side of the park to the boat launch. From this vantage point we can see how the glaciers, which did not enter the valley, dammed it at both ends with terminal moraines to form Devil's Lake.

We check for waterfowl on the lake. Apparently cold fronts the last few days have pushed waterfowl further south and sightings are limited to Mallards, Canada Geese and a few American Coots.

We start toward the south end of the lake for a hike along Grotto trail at the base of the talus slope, when suddenly, from the back of the van Lynn cries, "Coot in a tree!" We back up, get out and photograph what is a first for all of us.



We reach the south shore picnic area and hike on a path that follows level ground with giant blocks of quartzite that have tumbled down the cliff to our left. No one wants to witness the arrival of the next block. We note the large old oak and maple trees as we pass through Devil's Lake Oak Forest, one of Wisconsin's designated Natural Areas. Dominated by an overstory of red oaks that originated about the time of the Civil War and a nearly pure understory of red maple, this species



rich area also has a few larger, older, open grown white oaks that predate that time period. Our hike leads us down to the site of the old CCC camp where we find monument to the youth who served.

Our hike takes longer than expected, so we hurry back to the Aldo Leopold Center for a picnic lunch and to meet for a land ethic discussion with Anna Hawley. We are forced to delay our arrival Lynn discovers Sandhill Cranes feeding in a winter wheat field—a photographic opportunity too good to miss.



Finished with our meal we settle in with Anna to reflect on and discuss our experiences on the trip and how they relate to our lives at home. Following our discussions we use our open time to walk trails, see exhibits we missed, visit the bookstore and reflect on what we have learned this week.

The Aldo Leopold Foundation's Executive Director, Buddy Huffaker, and Director of Education, Jennifer Kobylecky join us along side the warm woodstove for a delicious catered farewell dinner here at the center.

<b>Saturday, October 19</b>	<b>Departures</b>
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We're up early and headed to the Milwaukee Airport with a brief stop for a quick breakfast. The weather holds clear and cool with no major ground or air traffic delays. With fond farewells, we all look forward to a future adventure.