

<https://www.adventure-journal.com/2023/07/how-rosalie-edge-the-hawk-of-mercy-became-the-conscience-of-american-conservation/?srslid=AfmBOopobsdfLaXJUbK6grJYuGT-AXPD1SJLuaF4TAuelSukwqci85qM>

HISTORICAL BADASS

## HOW ROSALIE EDGE, THE “HAWK OF MERCY,” BECAME THE CONSCIENCE OF AMERICAN CONSERVATION



Rosalie Barrow Edge was 52 years old and summering in Paris when she opened the pamphlet that ignited her second act as a conservationist firebrand. The 1929 booklet, titled “A Crisis in Conservation,” described the alarming decline of dozens of species of North American birds, and railed against the National Association of Audubon Societies (NAAS, now the National Audubon Society) for its backroom dealing with organizations representing sportsmen who were gunning down game birds by the tens of thousands.

Edge, a veteran suffragist and wealthy New York socialite, was spurred to action. Soon after her liner arrived back in New York, she marched straight to the organization’s 25th annual meeting and took a seat in the front row. After listening to Audubon founder T. Gilbert Pearson and his board of directors scorn the pamphlet for its “palpable unfairness,” Edge stood to speak.

“Just as she used to question and tire her grade school teachers at Miss Dormus’s Finishing School, she began her interrogation,” Kathleen Sumner wrote of the 1929 meeting, in which Edge singlehandedly held the powerful men to account for the transgressions the pamphlet detailed with precision and fury: The Society’s collaboration with shooting-sports organizations, its flirtation with the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, certain financial irregularities. Edge worked her way down the list.

“What answer can a loyal member of the society make to this pamphlet?” she demanded, as the men sat speechless before her, as if in some sort of Star Chamber turned on its head. Enraged, Pearson abruptly ended the meeting, declaring that Edge had ruined it and used up all the time allotted for other activities. The board adjourned to lunch; Edge went birding in Central Park.

She’d fired the opening salvo in a war that would last 33 years and pull the American conservation movement, kicking and screaming, closer to her own uncompromising vision. Her first step was to found a group she called the Emergency Conservation Committee (ECC) and sue the Audubon Society for access to its mailing list. She won the lawsuit, but not before an attorney for the Society called her “a common scold.”

“Fancy how I trembled,” she wrote in her memoir.



Rosalie Edge and guests at Hawk Mountain.

Mabel Rosalie Barrow was born into a wealthy, socially prominent New York City family in 1877. At 32, she married Charles Edge, a British engineer who'd made his fortune in the shipping and railroad industries. The couple wed in Japan and spent three years traveling for his work, visiting China, Siberia, and Europe, where she became acquainted with the prominent British suffragist Sybil Margaret Thomas.

Rosalie and Charles Edge settled in New York City, and in 1915 Rosalie began working with the Equal Franchise Society, applying the full force of her talent and energy to the suffragist cause. She later became an officer in New York State's Woman Suffrage Party, working closely with [Carrie Chapman Catt](#), playing a significant role in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, giving American women the right to vote for the first time. The work gave her a taste for activism and an appreciation for the power of a well-crafted appeal delivered to the right ears—what political consultants today would call messaging.

The following year Charles Edge fell in love with another woman, effectively ending their marriage against Rosalie's wishes, though she never gave him a divorce. She found solace in long walks in Central Park and soon fell in with the city's avid birding community. Edge was a birder for the rest of her life, eventually logging 804 species in the park. She joined the NAAS but did not become active in the organization until that fateful meeting in 1929.

She founded the ECC later that year, and despite a late start soon became the most influential conservationist of her time. Edge would soon create the world's first sanctuary for birds of prey in collaboration with her protege Richard Pough, who would later found The Nature Conservancy. She influenced the Sierra Club's first executive director, David Brower, and led the fights to establish Olympic National Park in Washington and Kings Canyon National Park in California. Migration data collected at Edge's hawk sanctuary helped Rachel Carson establish the link between the pesticide DDT and declining bird populations in her best-selling book, *Silent Spring*, leading to a ban. In a 1948 [New Yorker](#) profile (subscription required), her friend and collaborator Willard Van Name described her as “the only honest, unselfish, indomitable hellcat in the history of conservation.”

Van Name was one of the authors of the pamphlet that ignited Edge's activism. When she founded the ECC, Van Name was working as a marine biologist at the American Museum of Natural History. Some of the museum's directors also sat on the Audubon Society's board, and they directed Van Name to write no more pamphlets critical of the Audubon Society. That's the sort of entrenched power Edge was up against. But she, too, enjoyed the prerogatives of wealth and position and wasn't afraid to flex them.

She'd learned the value of such pamphlets in the trenches of the suffrage movement, and recognized the power of Van Name's scorching pen. She enlisted him to ghostwrite pamphlets, which she signed and sent to the 11,000 names on the Audubon Society mailing list the court had ordered turned over to her. Over the next 30 years the ECC, consisting of Edge, Van Name and a handful of influential supporters, distributed more than one million pamphlets on about 100 conservation subjects, from unsportsmanlike duck hunting practices to the plight of threatened species. In a 1998 [interview](#), her son Peter Edge remembered huge boxes of pamphlets being addressed and mailed from a servants' sitting room in her New York brownstone.

The mailings, like all of Edge's advocacy, emphasized the need to protect complete ecosystems, rather than specific species. This was a dramatic shift from the orthodox conservation principles of the day, which tended to favor species with economic value or those that held the particular interest of powerful men. Birds of prey were particularly vulnerable to this way of thinking. At the urging of salmon fishermen, Alaskan territorial authorities in 1917 had offered a bounty of \$1 or \$2 for every bald eagle killed. Over the next 15 years, hunters shot 70,000 raptors out of the sky.

In the early 1930s, the Pennsylvania Game Commission was paying a \$5 bounty for goshawks, deeming them a nuisance. David Pough heard about a wooded ridge in southwestern Pennsylvania known locally as Hawk Mountain and visited the place, where he found gunners shooting hundreds of passing hawks for sport. He laid out the carcasses in neat rows and made a photograph, which later inspired Edge to buy the 1,400-acre property, banish the hunters, and declare it the [Hawk Mountain Sanctuary](#). It was the first reserve for birds of prey anywhere in the world, and it's still thriving today.



Rosalie Edge dressed for the field with binoculars and hat.

Edge wasn't an outdoorsperson in the traditional sense. Her adventures were largely confined to the countryside around her summer place in Rye, New York, and the 843-acre green oasis between Fifth Avenue and Central Park West. But she wielded her considerable influence in service of conservation.

She waged a national campaign leading to the creation of Olympic National Park in 1938, protecting nearly one million acres of mountains and temperate rainforest west of Seattle. According to her son, Edge was responsible "for lobbying Congress and sending out pamphlets all over the country saying that there ought to be a park." She repeated the script to create Kings Canyon National Park, and lobbied Congress to purchase about 8,000 acres of old-growth sugar pines on the perimeter of Yosemite National Park that were slated for logging.

She'd become a conservation force to be reckoned with, and the politicians in Washington knew it. When she visited the future Olympic National Park in 1935, the superintendent in waiting, Preston Macy, served as her personal guide. Years later, Edge's son learned Macy had been under orders to watch her every move—and report everything to his superiors in Washington.

Edge focused the brunt of her considerable influence on the Audubon Society, but also brought pressure to bear on The Wilderness Society, National Conservancy, the Environmental Defense Fund and other conservation organizations. For 33 years, from the day she stood up to scold the Audubon board and demand they do better, until her death in November 1962, Rosalie Edge was the dominating force in American conservation, politically, strategically and morally.

Weeks before she died, Rosalie Edge attended the National Audubon Society's annual meeting in Texas. Her guerrilla campaign to expose corruption in the organization's leadership had opened a deep and lasting rift. The Society's membership and revenues had suffered and some of its leaders, including Pearson, had been shown the door. But others had answered Edge's challenge. They had done better. And when Edge was introduced to the membership as one of the most prominent figures in American conservation, they answered with enthusiastic applause.