

## **IN MEMORIAM: WALTER JOHN BRECKENRIDGE, 1903–2003**

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## IN MEMORIAM: WALTER JOHN BRECKENRIDGE, 1903–2003

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Walter Breckenridge, known to his friends as Breck, was born on 22 March 1903, in Brooklyn, Iowa, and died a full century later in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 22 May 2003. He joined the AOU in 1926, earlier than any other surviving member, was made Elective Member in 1935, and Fellow in 1950. He was a conservation giant in Minnesota and throughout the Midwest, spreading his message through slide shows, motion pictures, screen tours, museum exhibits, interpretive programs, lectures, and writing. He lectured in 46 states and all Canadian provinces, perhaps reaching more schoolchildren and adults than any other Minnesotan of the pre-television era.

Breck was associated with natural history museums throughout his career. He first served as an undergraduate assistant to Professor Homer Dill at the University of Iowa. After graduation, Breck was Preparator (from 1926 to 1940), Curator (from 1940 through 1946), and Director (from 1946 to his retirement in 1970) at the James Ford Bell Museum of Natural History at the University of Minnesota, then known as the Minnesota Museum of Natural History, under the direction of Dr. Thomas S. Roberts.

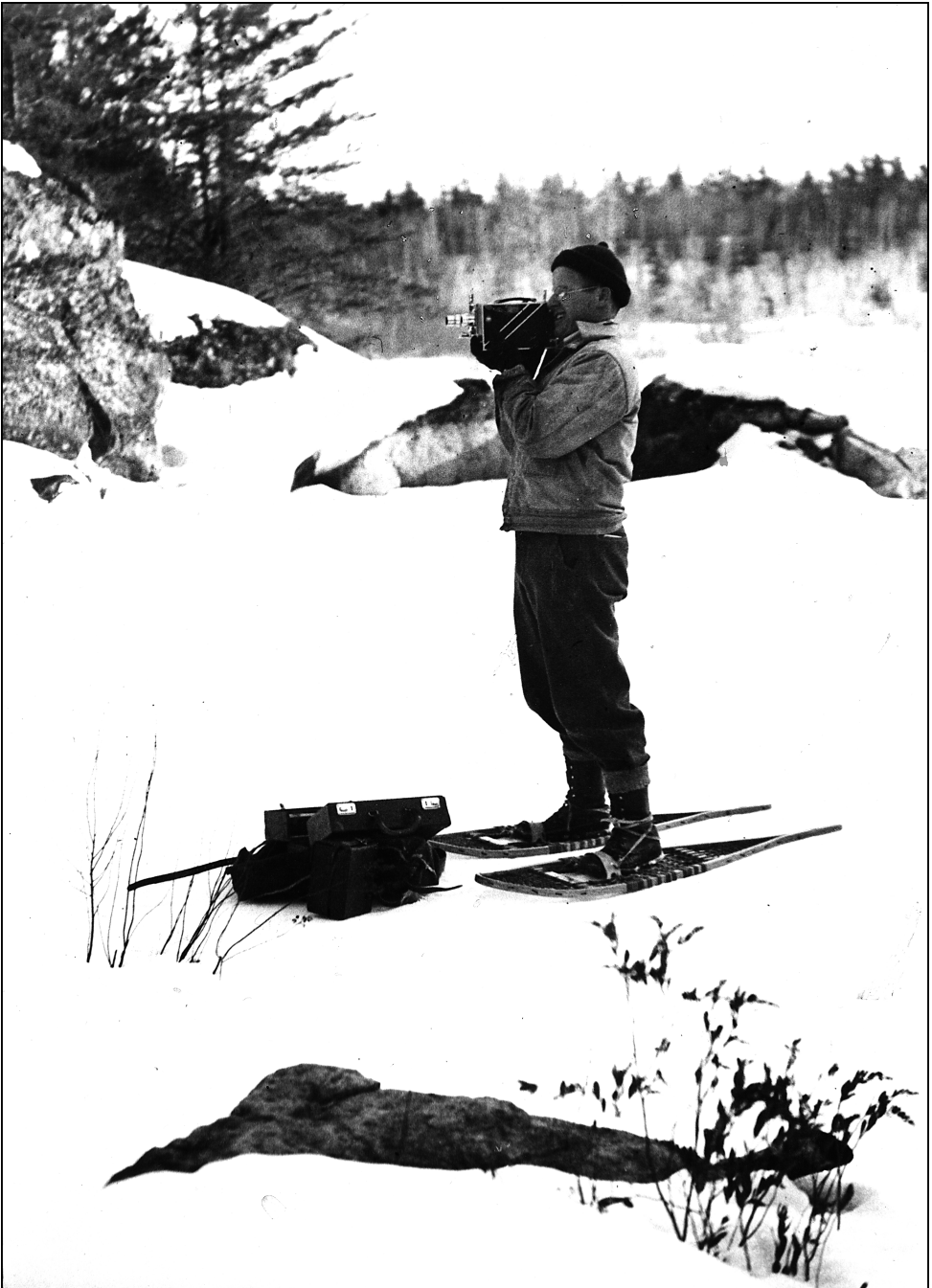
Breck left a detailed autobiography describing daily life in the small town of Brooklyn in east-central Iowa. Outdoor privies, school lessons written on slates and erased with a damp cloth, autos noted for their rarity and their effect on horses, unlimited access to open countryside and native prairie, trips by horse and surrey—these were features of his boyhood. Curious about local birds, Breck identified the local Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Dickcissels using Chester Reed's pocket-sized field guide, a gift from his parents. Abundant butterflies in a large clover field near his home motivated him to make a substantial collection, properly mounted and preserved, but long since lost. One rare butterfly so impressed him that he made a watercolor painting, an early step in his long career as a wildlife artist. A fine male Greater Prairie-Chicken that died by striking

a telephone wire prompted enrollment in a correspondence course with the Northwestern School of Taxidermy. By the time he graduated from high school, Breck had a collection of about 60 mounted birds and small mammals that he donated to the school. The speaker at Breck's high school graduation was Iowa Professor Homer Dill, whose description of museum work was exactly what Breck hoped to do for a career.

At the University of Iowa, Breck had an ideal opportunity to learn natural history and the art and science of museum work with Dill. He also sampled a range of college life. As a freshman, Breck tried out for the track squad and lettered in the broad jump and 100-yard dash. After attending a gymnastics meet as a sophomore, he began work with the gym squad. By his senior year, he was captain of the gymnastics team and one of the best gymnasts in the Big Ten, specializing in tumbling (the floor exercise) and high bar.

In 1926, Dill recommended Breck to Dr. Thomas Roberts, for a position as museum preparator in the University of Minnesota Museum of Natural History. Breck joined with Roberts in pioneering the use of motion pictures in nature photography. They employed a heavy 35-mm Erneman camera. Exposure depended on the speed of hand-cranking the slow black-and-white film.

Along with full-time employment in the Minnesota museum, Breck did graduate work a course or two at a time. From 1930 through 1933, he studied the natural history of the Northern Harrier, earning his Master's degree in 1934, with Dr. Samuel Eddy as his advisor. For his doctoral work, Breck studied the reptiles and amphibians of Minnesota, with a special focus on the black-banded skink; he earned his Ph.D. in 1941. A popular version of his doctoral thesis was published in 1944 by the University of Minnesota Press. Breck continued research in herpetology, studying the natural history of Manitoba toads and spiny soft-shelled turtles.



WALTER JOHN BRECKENRIDGE, 1903–2003

(Making movies of winter wildlife in northern Minnesota, 3 March 1938. Photograph by “Bud” Elkins.)

He studied and photographed Wood Ducks for many years, producing a film "Wood Duck Ways," and founding the Wood Duck Society. He published about 250 articles on conservation and natural history, including at least 40 in scientific journals, and more than 60 groups of paintings. He was especially devoted to the construction of a series of superb habitat groups, believing that the museum's function was to present research results to the public in displays and programs.

In 1933, Breck married Dorothy Shogren. They honeymooned on an expedition to the Arctic, studying diseases of snowshoe hares, and would revisit the Arctic on four subsequent occasions. Breck and Dorothy also visited Europe five times, tropical America nine times, and Pacific destinations five times. Dorothy worked closely with Breck throughout his career. She died in March 2004. They are survived by a daughter and a son. A second daughter died in 1995.

Breck's foremost interests were natural history and conservation. He saw and agonized over destruction of the tall-grass prairie and its fauna. He dealt with problems by personal action. He was one of the first to film courtship behavior of Sandhill Cranes, Spruce Grouse, and Greater-Prairie Chickens. His wildlife art

was exhibited across the nation. He lectured for the National Audubon Society for 35 years. Breck helped Richard Barthelmy develop a pioneering "touch and see" room in the Bell Museum, where children (and adults) could handle natural-history specimens. In 1946, Breck initiated the now-thriving interpretive and resident naturalist programs in the excellent Minnesota state park system by sending naturalists from the Bell Museum to the parks to lead hikes, develop nature trails, and give presentations. In his last decades, he saw human overpopulation as the most important problem facing the world.

Breck served as President of the Wilson Ornithological Society, 1952–1954, and of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, 1945–1946. He received at least 16 special awards, including for "Outstanding Conservationist of the Year," "Sportsman of the Year," "Meritorious Service," as well as for specific contributions to wildlife management, ornithology, and herpetology. Special among those is the Cornell University Arthur A. Allen Award in 1975. In 1995, the University of Minnesota established a Breckenridge Chair of Ornithology in permanent tribute to this versatile naturalist and outstanding museum educator.