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The Forgotten Woman Behind Yellowstone's Predator Revolution

Rosalie Edge transformed public perceptions of predator policies in the Yellowstone ecosystem—so why isn't she more famous?

by [John Clayton](#)

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In a 1948 profile, *The New Yorker* called Rosalie Edge “the only honest, unselfish, indomitable hellcat in the history of conservation.” Here, Edge poses with guests at the Pennsylvania's Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, which she founded in 1934. Photo courtesy Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

by **John Clayton**

In September 1932, a small environmental advocacy organization called the Emergency Conservation Committee published a pamphlet, “The Slaughter of the Yellowstone Park Pelicans,” which demanded that the National Park Service stop killing birds for the sin of eating fish. It was a remarkable document for several reasons: First, few people then knew that Yellowstone even harbored American white pelicans—and thus even fewer could appreciate the birds’ role in an ecological system. Second, the ECC consisted primarily of Rosalie Barrow Edge, a wealthy New York City birdwatcher who had never visited Yellowstone nor had any training in the sciences. Third, park leaders denied ever killing pelicans. Edge had amassed proof they were lying.

Among East Coast birders, Edge is a cult hero. She founded Pennsylvania’s Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the world’s first refuge for birds of prey. Today, you can visit Hawk Mountain for close-up views of raptors in their natural environment. You can also learn the inspirational story of Edge’s 1930s battles with professional conservationists—especially at what before 1940 was called the National Association of Audubon Societies—to give predators and ecology due respect.

Rosalie Edge was arguing for a radical new standard for national parks: that they protect animals for their beauty and rarity, not their usefulness or tastiness.

Edge was in the room in the fall of 1933 when an activist pointed out that Hawk Mountain, where men liked to gather and shoot hundreds of birds per day, was available for purchase for back taxes. It could be transformed into a sanctuary. She heard Audubon leaders commit to making the purchase. So, when they didn’t follow through, she bought the land herself. Her loyalty was to birds, not an institution like Audubon. Its leaders later offered to buy the sanctuary from her, and she told them to take a hike.

What makes this story particularly interesting today is that she brought this same confrontational attitude to her 1930s crusade on behalf of Yellowstone’s pelicans. As we consider the legacy of Rosalie Edge, we can ponder difficult questions: What is the appropriate relationship between activists and institutions? Between populism and expertise, outsiders and insiders, innovation and funding, or rabble-rousing and results?

AN IMPLACABLE WOMAN

Edge described herself as a plain-featured woman with a sharp nose and receding chin. She was tall and stooped and always dressed formally. She was born in 1877 to wealth, raised in a 15-room home on New York’s Upper East Side. In 1909 she married British civil engineer Charles Noel Edge, and after three years of work in Asia, he became a New York investor and they raised two children.

“She cut her teeth as an activist in the suffragist movement,” says author Michelle Nijhuis, who wrote about Edge in her delightful 2021 book *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*. “For Edge, as for many women of means, this hard-charging, vital movement was a first step into the public sphere. And she found that she had a taste for it.”

The 1910s suffrage movement challenged a set of institutions and moneyed old white men bent on excluding Edge and others like her. In the 1920s, when she fell in love with birds amid the painful end of her marriage, she brought to the conservation movement her finely honed activist skills and willingness to be confrontational.

Edge focused first on Audubon, writing letters of complaint and attending meetings to ask difficult questions. “She was expressive and well-spoken,” Nijhuis tells *Mountain Journal*. At the time, most conservation funding came from gunmakers, and most conservationists were hunters, so most attention focused on species they liked to hunt.



Hard-charging Rosalie Edge. Photo by Carsten Lien, courtesy University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW 42001

“She had a prescient grasp of ecology, which was then a very young science,” Nijhuis says. Edge had no formal training but was highly intelligent and well-connected among ecologically minded scientists.

Edge and some scientist friends formed the ECC to take ecological issues straight to the public. They used pamphlets, a format that had been swaying public opinion since at least the American Revolution. Pamphleteering took advantage of Edge’s skills in writing and design; it also allowed the activists to avoid gatekeepers. At first, Edge tried to take a back seat—the pamphlets’ masthead simply listed her as the organization’s secretary. But as the ECC gained an increasing public profile, it needed a public face. Although she never took a salary, “Mrs. C. N. Edge” and the ECC became one and the same.

"ARE THE YELLOWSTONE PARK PELICANS 'VERMIN'?"

In June 1931, the ECC published a four-page pamphlet titled "The Last of the White Pelican." It argued that these large, awkwardly beautiful birds were in danger of extinction around the nation, in part because people perceived nearly all predators as vermin. The pamphlet provided some basic science on pelicans' migratory and breeding habits. It excoriated the U.S. Biological Survey (predecessor to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and several Western states for failing to protect them. A subheading then asked, "Are the Yellowstone Park pelicans 'vermin'?"

The pamphlet cited "disagreeable rumors" surrounding pelican populations in the park. It suggested that amid declining numbers of trout, anglers and park managers had blamed pelicans, though surely other factors must be at work. "But even supposing the birds did affect the number of fish in the lakes, to what better use can a few of the Yellowstone trout be put than to enable these splendid birds to live and raise their young and escape extinction?"



American white pelicans snack on the Yellowstone River. Edge worked to protect the pelican from extinction. Photo courtesy Openverse

The pamphlet "caused a lot of trouble," writes James A. Pritchard in the 1999 book *Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions: Science and the Perception of Nature*. Edge was arguing for a radical new standard for national parks: that they protect animals for their beauty and rarity, not their usefulness or tastiness. Although she didn't use the word *ecology*, and stopped short of saying that predation was *valuable*, she was challenging conventional views.

"It was a time of change," Alicia Murphy, Yellowstone's official historian, tells *Mountain Journal*. "The Park Service as an organization was less than two decades old and had a young understanding of both its mission and the resource values of the park. National parks needed

public support to get appropriations from Congress. So, the Park Service saw visitation as crucial—and fishing was an even bigger driver of visitation then than it is now.”

At the time, most people divided animals into “good” and “bad” species. The bad species—such as wolves, coyotes and hawks—typically killed the good species, and thus deserved extermination. Pelicans do eat voraciously: up to 40 percent of their body mass per day in prey. In some nationwide locations, that up-to-3.3 pounds of daily fish intake comes from less coveted species. But according to the 2023 book, *Yellowstone’s Birds: Diversity and Abundance in the World’s First National Park*, “The primary source for fish-eating birds on Yellowstone Lake has historically been the Yellowstone cutthroat trout.”

Regardless of their diets, Edge refused to see beautiful creatures like hawks and pelicans as *bad*. “She saw an egregious betrayal of Yellowstone’s values,” Murphy says.

Edge was far from alone. Scientists inside and outside the Park Service were simultaneously defending the pelican, sometimes even trying to compare the relative benefits to humans of birdwatching versus recreational fishing. In the spring of 1932, Yellowstone Superintendent Roger Toll collected lots of information and opinions, including those of his predecessor Horace Albright, now the Park Service director. But the ECC pamphlet, Pritchard writes, played a big role. Toll came to agree with Edge: pelicans should not be killed.

“Here was this woman in New York City who was *doing* things in conservation—very militant, very strident, very abrasive, but she was *doing* things. Getting things done.” – Maurice Brown, future Hawk Mountain employee, as quoted by Stephen Fox, author, *John Muir and his Legacy*

On May 21, 1932, “Toll decided to protect the pelican, [and] he essentially redefined Yellowstone’s purpose in concrete terms,” Pritchard writes. “Yellowstone Park would protect the native wild animals not only when convenient for visiting fishermen but in every instance. Nature, in other words, took precedence over human uses.”

In retrospect, this was a big deal. The philosophy would shape Yellowstone’s wildlife management; for example, it was an essential early step toward the 1995 reintroduction of wolves. But back in 1932, it was an obscure, unpublicized and potentially reversible change in bureaucratic policy. At least, until Rosalie Edge spoke up again.

"ALL SHE WANTS IS MATERIAL FOR PUBLICITY"

Four months after Toll’s decision, the ECC published the 12-page pamphlet “The Slaughter of the Yellowstone Park Pelicans.” It said that pelicans in the park had been “subjected to persistent secret persecution and have only narrowly escaped entire extermination.”

The pamphlet quoted a 1928 Albright letter saying that “no pelicans have been killed” except for a few scientific specimens. It then quoted at length from an anonymous whistleblower. This former ranger described how beginning in 1923, rangers stomped on pelican eggs and clubbed chicks to death, under apparent orders from Superintendent Albright. The whistleblower enclosed reports and correspondence that further demonstrated a sustained cover-up.

Edge also reprinted several pelican-friendly letters and memos that had gone into Toll’s decision-making process. But she was apparently unaware of his decision. After also criticizing the state of Montana, the Biological Survey, and especially Audubon, the pamphlet concluded with a call to action for readers to write the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to protest Yellowstone’s killing of pelicans.



Edge poses with a hawk, 1947. Photo courtesy Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

The Park Service and Audubon were tempted to ignore the pamphlet, Pritchard writes. They saw Edge as a sentimentalist and an ignorant extremist busybody. “All she wants is material for publicity,” one underling told Albright. Some Park Service employees in Washington, D.C. even drafted parodies of her pamphlets, with all-caps titles such as, “EVERYTHING IS BEING DESTROYED—THE WORLD IS COMING TO AN END.”

Pritchard found an October 1932 letter from Albright to Audubon head Gilbert Pearson. In the letter, Albright admitted that “experiments in the control of the [pelican] colony” had taken place, contrary to Pearson’s recommendations. (Although Edge constantly berated Pearson for not doing enough to defend predatory birds, he had done *something*.) Albright’s letter defended the Park Service’s actions, presented them as less drastic than they had actually been, and noted that the pelican had now received “complete protection.” Pearson accepted the non-apology. Indeed, he embraced it. With Albright’s permission, he forwarded the letter to 200 prominent conservationists—his and Albright’s own form of pamphleteering.

With Albright’s letter publicizing Toll’s decision, pelicans were not just protected, but protected *publicly*. Albright and Pearson openly celebrated the role of a predatory bird in a national park, even when it conflicted with recreational uses. This was surely due at least in part to the ECC, whose pamphlets had turned pelicans from a scientific issue into a public cause. “The controversy over the [Yellowstone] predator pelicans helped preserve the white pelican in North America, shaped wildlife management policy in Yellowstone, and... propelled Yellowstone and the National Park Service toward redefining the purposes of the parks,” Pritchard writes.

Yet at the time, Albright denied that the new policy had anything to do with the ECC. His letter to Pearson claimed that the Park Service “has in no way been influenced by the Emergency Conservation Committee.”

EDGE AS AN AMATEUR CONSERVATIONIST

In the 1981 book *John Muir and his Legacy: The American Conservation Movement*, historian Stephen Fox argues that “the role of the radical amateur was the driving force in conservation history.” Professional conservationists and government agencies were important, Fox says, but were hampered by bureaucratic inertia, political imperatives, and the need for money. “Judged by such criteria as flexibility, vision, innovation, honesty, and zeal, the amateurs played their parts more admirably: in the tradition of John Muir.”

Muir wandered the Sierra Nevada Mountains and wrote essays and books. He lived like a bum until he married into a wealthy family. He’s famous for founding the Sierra Club, but his role was more inspiration than organization. Likewise were his political crusades, which were also unpaid. He didn’t enjoy or even much understand the work, he mainly provided the vision and poetic language for those who did. Even as a writer he was an outsider: lacking in academic training or university affiliation, never on staff at a magazine, rooted more in observing natural phenomena than reading other people’s books.

In Yellowstone, examples of amateur success include the Lacey Act of 1894, which stopped hunting inside Yellowstone and established a model for administering all national parks. It resulted from public outrage against poachers spurred almost entirely by writer Emerson Hough and publisher George Bird Grinnell. Similarly, Mission 66, a massive 1950s investment in infrastructure-building, resulted from public outcry about substandard, overcrowded conditions, spurred partly by Bernard DeVoto’s 1953 *Harper’s* article “Let’s Close the National Parks.” In both cases, amateurs produced rabble-rousing populism with lasting effects. (Although Grinnell was associated with Audubon and the Boone and Crockett Club, he never made any money at his conservation activities. Fox writes that “In over forty years of campaigning he never lost the amateur spirit.”)

“For Edge, as for many women of means, this hard-charging, vital movement was a first step into the public sphere. And she found that she had a taste for it.” – Michelle Nijhuis, author, *Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*

Fox cites Edge as one of the 20th century’s best such radical amateurs. He quotes young birder Maurice Brown, who later worked for Edge at Hawk Mountain, hearing about her in the early 1930s: “Here was this woman in New York City who was *doing* things in conservation—very militant, very strident, very abrasive, but she was *doing* things. Getting things done.” By contrast, Audubon at the time, Fox writes, “seemed frozen in memories of old battles.”

Edge’s amateur status empowered her. As the park historian Murphy says, “She could be dedicated to wildlife, not an organization. And she could—if you’ll excuse the really bad bird pun—ruffle some feathers.” However, this attitude cost Edge dearly in terms of her relationships with traditional conservationists.

For example, in addition to the scorn of Albright’s letter, consider famed ecologist Aldo Leopold. In 1932, Leopold wrote Edge to complain about an ECC pamphlet critiquing government wildlife policies, titled “It’s Alive! Kill It!” He called the pamphlet “misleading and unfair,” especially a claim about the Biological Survey’s “wholesale” poisoning of songbirds.

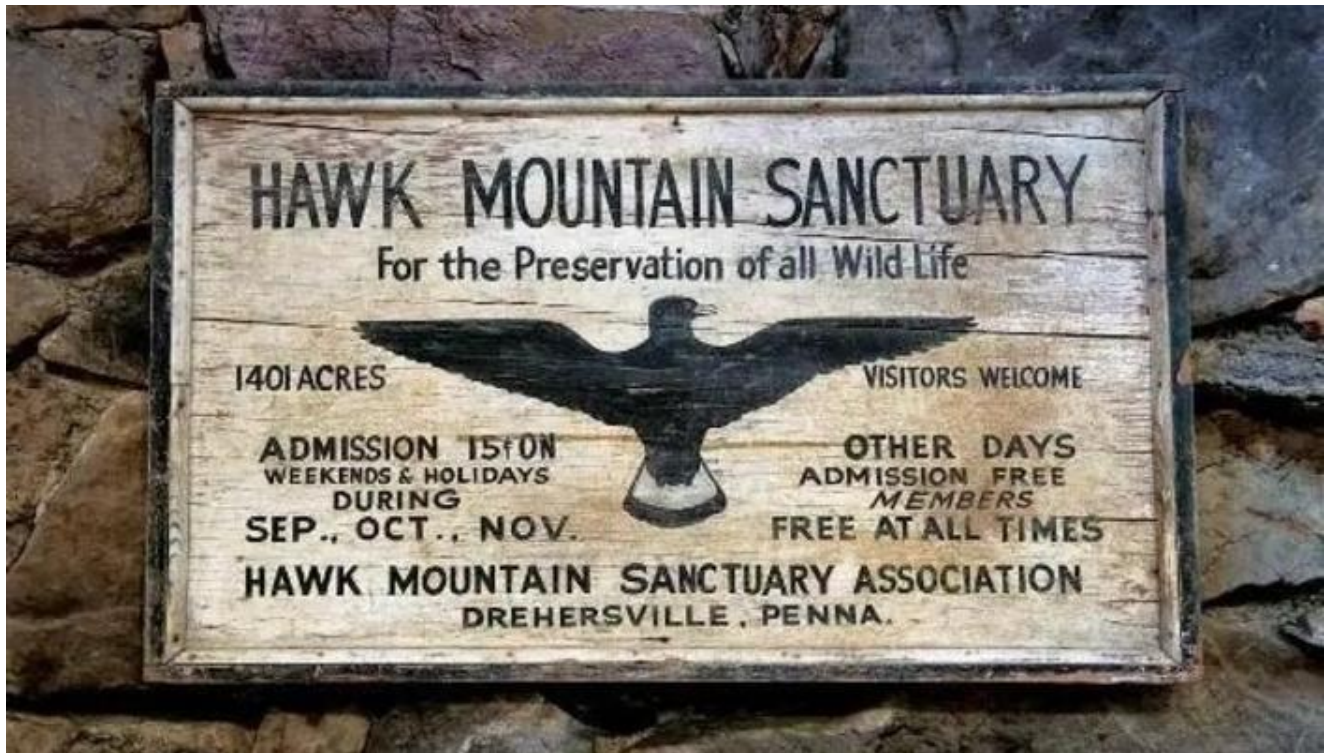


Photo courtesy Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

Edge responded: “If you do not call the destruction of 30,000 (or a number probably greatly exceeding 30,000) blackbirds ‘wholesale’ destruction, then the word *wholesale* must be entirely without meaning.” She didn’t explicitly point out that Leopold, who had just left the Forest Service and not yet joined the University of Wisconsin, was now totally dependent for his income on ammunition makers, which funded his game surveys. She simply implied that such relationships damaged one’s ability to speak out. “In our opinion,” she said, “the failure of conservation is largely due to a want of courage in telling the truth.”

IMPLICATIONS OF OUTSIDERISM

When Leopold, Bob Marshall, and other establishment figures founded The Wilderness Society in 1935, they sent out invitations to influential conservationists, pointedly excluding Edge. In a 1936 letter, she called Marshall on it. He responded that they simply hadn’t thought of her. But it seems clear they didn’t like her. In 1943, for example, Wilderness Society employee Robert Sterling Yard told a colleague, “Rosalie Edge is a rich widow who started a conservation organization ... She prints monthly circulars and carries her hatreds into them.” (Yard was mistaken: the circulars were printed irregularly, not monthly, and Edge was not yet widowed, merely estranged from her husband.) Likewise, retired U.S. Forest Service founder Gifford Pinchot wrote a friend that nobody “goes off half cock with greater regularity than Mrs. Edge.”

In other words, some saw the ECC as a fringe group. Murphy wonders if there may be a similarity to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, in the last few decades. “They were both extremist for their time and used emotionally charged language,” she says. “When I read what she wrote, and try to put myself in her time, I can see how her contemporaries might have called her hysterical.”



At the edge: Rosalie Edge at the entrance to her Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. Photo courtesy Hawk Mountain

Such a label was a sexist slur. Yet it was common in the 1930s, when *hysteria* was still an official medical diagnosis centered on the idea that women could be overtaken by emotions, unable to control themselves, while men were always clinical and logical. Today we know better; as Murphy says. “Both genders can resort to bombastic, emotional language.”

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But Edge may have felt closed off from the clinical and logical avenues toward creating change. Nijhuis, the *Beloved Beasts* author whose impressive journalistic career has included editorial stints at *The Atlantic* and *High Country News*, notes that Edge functioned as much like an investigative journalist as an advocate. “She would hear things, follow up on them, and then publish them in ways that were impossible for the establishment to ignore,” Nijhuis says.

Edge often heard these things from scientists whose organizations refused to let them speak publicly, for fear of angering funders. Because she had such lowly status—as a woman, uneducated, without a salary or fundraising network, and disliked in professional circles—she could say what professionals dared not to.

And she was smart about it. Referring to Edge's statements at Audubon annual meetings, Nijhuis says she was both fearless and strategic. "She was in the room with the people she wanted to embarrass—and the people they didn't want to be embarrassed in front of." Though they weren't literally in the same room, this was clearly the strategy Edge brought to her Yellowstone pelican fight: she embarrassed Horace Albright in front of people, such as Audubon's Gilbert Pearson, whose opinions Albright cared about.

WHY ISN'T ROSALIE EDGE KNOWN TODAY?

Edge was a minor celebrity in her day. She was profiled in *The New Yorker* in 1948. The article called her "the only honest, unselfish, indomitable hellcat in the history of conservation." But today—outside of Hawk Mountain and *Rosalie Edge, Hawk of Mercy*, a fine 2009 biography by Dyana Furmanskyy—she's forgotten in many of the diverse places where she made an impact.

Why? Nijhuis suggests some factors: "She was a woman, and older when she became a conservation activist, and she never wrote a book." Edge drafted an autobiography, but it was nowhere near publishable when she died in 1962—the year the book *Silent Spring* cemented the legacy of another female conservation outsider, Rachel Carson. But perhaps the biggest factor working against Edge was that she was such a maverick. "She wasn't part of a large organization," Nijhuis says. As age slowed Edge in the late 1950s, the ECC—which had never even developed bylaws—went extinct.

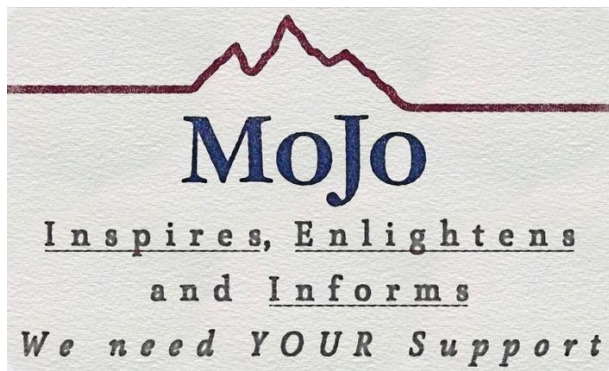
Edge had a huge impact on large organizations such as Audubon and the Park Service. But because she'd always been at odds with them, sometimes viciously, they were reluctant to acknowledge her. "They look back at those interactions with red faces," Murphy says. "Justifiably. But you can see how they might prefer to highlight softer, gentler stories of their successes."

Yellowstone might offer a particularly valuable venue in which to reinvigorate Edge's legacy. But it's tricky. "Why are some people, such as John Muir, well known to the public, while others, such as George Bird Grinnell, aren't?" Murphy wonders. Like Edge, Grinnell was an amateur outsider with massive influence on policy in the park. But Murphy says that when she talks to members of the public, they know Theodore Roosevelt better than his influencer Grinnell.

The answer to the riddle of Rosalie Edge may be that historical figures become well known when their quests become relevant. Roosevelt's Progressivism feels important amid today's challenges; Muir's nature-based spirituality was little-known before 1960s Baby Boomers pursued the same ideals.

As pelicans gained protection, ecology entered the establishment. Thus, through the 20th century, it seemed Edge's militant outsider tactics didn't need celebrating. "She increased the urgency," Murphy says. But given all the other people involved, and Albright's canny tactics, insiders were later able to claim that urgency hadn't mattered much.

Almost a century later, the issues are different. Society is different. Media platforms are different. But if and when an issue arises that might benefit from an increased sense of urgency, Edge's quest may yet gain relevance. Her legacy stands ready to help.



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About **John Clayton**

John Clayton writes the newsletter [Natural Stories](#). His books include *Wonderlandscape: Yellowstone National Park and the Evolution of an American Cultural Icon*, *The Cowboy Girl*, and *Natural Rivals: John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and the Creation of America's Public Lands*. He has lived in Greater Yellowstone since 1990.