

# Giants of the past: Maurice Broun

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I didn't get to know Maurice Broun until I began to write *The View from Hawk Mountain* in the early 1970's, after he and his wife Irma had moved to a farm one ridge west of Hawk Mountain and he had retired as curator of the sanctuary. He was a bit leery of me at first. That was partly because he was jealous of his privacy—not so much the day-to-day kind of privacy, but root privacy, privacy about what made him tick. And he was also leery, I think, because my book would succeed his classic about the early years of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, *Hawks Aloft*, which the sanctuary had allowed to go temporarily out of print, a development he did not, shall I say, admire. But he was cordial and in the end irrepressible. He loved to talk about conservation, and he loved practicing the art of personal narrative.

My book was published, and I gathered that the material about him made him feel exposed and vulnerable. It was, he wrote me once, more publicity than he cared for. But in 1978, *Defenders* magazine asked me to write a profile of him. He hemmed and hawed again for a while but finally gave his consent, and for the second time he and Irma and I talked for hours with a tape-recorder running beside us. The piece was published in the October 1979 issue of *Defenders*.

Maurice died that month. The remembrance of Maurice that follows is hung on a framework constructed of parts of the book, fleshed out of what I learned through our correspondence and occasional personal encounters after the book was published, including the interview we did for the *Defenders* article.

When he entered the Hawk Mountain narrative in *The View From...*, he was 29 years old and just about to become the “warden” at the newly established sanctuary.

“He was already something of a Horatio Alger figure in ornithology. In later life, he didn't much like to talk about his beginnings, but his wife would a little: 'I'll have you know that this man raised himself. His mother left when he was two weeks old. His father died when he was two years old. They were people from Rumania and they came over here, and they died of TB. He was put in a New York City orphanage where he didn't see grass or a tree until he was taken out by a Catholic family—he was younger than seven then. The mother became ill, and the foster father bought Maurice back to the terrible orphanage; the man who ran it was sadistic and used to beat the kids up once a week—Saturday night, they were automatically beaten with a strap. When he was ten, a Jewish family came in and took him to Boston. He ran away from his foster home when he was fifteen and he has earned his own bread and butter since that time.”

I hope that passage conveys a little of what still vibrates in my memory—Irma Broun's passionate telling of the story. Maurice always made a lot of Irma's seafaring antecedents on Cape Cod. Probably to him she represented gentility and an identifiable family with a history. But she struck me as a loner, too, something of an orphan in her own right, at least in spirit. I

thought she and Maurice were a uniquely matched pair, double orphans facing the world.

Neither of the Brouns would talk about why he ran away, but it may well be that birds had something to do with it.

“One spring day, in his fourteenth year, he was on his way across Boston Public Garden when he came upon a group of adults standing around under a freshly-leafed tree and staring up into it through binoculars. He stopped and tried to make out what they were looking at. One of the grownups noticed him and offered him her binoculars. With the aid of the binoculars he found a Magnolia Warbler and was instantly bird-struck. The dramatically marked warbler... was, he later wrote, ‘truly the most... beautiful thing my eyes had ever beheld.’“

So Maurice became a birdwatcher. Simple as that.

Among his acquaintances in those early days was Richard Pough, whose own career as a conservationist was to be linked with Maurice’s in a very important if coincidental way. In the early 1930s, some fifteen years after they met, Pough was a central figure in the discovery and revelation of the shocking amount of hawk killing that went on at Hawk Mountain every fall. At the time he ran a photography store in Philadelphia, which was perhaps an unlikely springboard for a conservationist. Nevertheless, as encourager and counselor he played an indispensable part in the effort to have Hawk Mountain bought for a sanctuary by the Emergency Conservation Committee of New York, headed by Rosalie Edge. Pough was to go on to perform again and again such a function in conservation action—which he still does, so far as I know, well into his eighties. And the first warden of the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, of course, turned out to be Maurice Broun, his young friend from Massachusetts.

Pough met him “... ‘when Maurice was a high school student and I was at M.I.T., and he used to lead bird walks in the Boston Public Garden. I remember his going with the Brookline Bird Club on a trip to Ipswich (on the shore north of Boston) on I think it was, New Year’s Day. A bitter cold day, and Broun came along with, actually, his bare toes showing out of his shoes. We were all worried about him freezing his feet, because we walked all the way from the station out to the marsh, which was four or five miles. And the story was that his father was a Russian Jewish tailor, and they just thought this boy of theirs was nuts, and they did everything they could to discourage him, but nothing would.’“

Maurice objected energetically to something about those last three sentences when he saw them in manuscript, but he offered no amendment to improve or replace whatever it was he didn’t like. His childhood was not something he wanted to uncover in public, so far as I could tell, under any circumstances. Anyway, while still in Boston English High School he rented a room and found menial jobs to support himself and his birding passion, and he published a booklet on the birds of the Boston Public Gardens. A remarkable young man. How many teenagers have you met in your life who displayed such nerve and independence while remaining on the right side of the law?

When he graduated, college was financially out of the question. He claimed in his mature years that he hadn’t been much of a student, anyway. “Except I loved to read, “he told me once.... “When I should be listening to algebra and so forth I’d be reading Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, something like that.“ He bellhopped at the Women’s City Club of Boston for a couple of years until the lady who had loaned him her binoculars that spring day in the Public Gardens found him another job—an avenue into an ornithological education and a life

in conservation. He went to work as an assistant to Edward Howe Forbush and John Birchard May, who were then preparing the third and last volume of Forbush's monumental *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*.

Forbush first put Maurice to the task of researching the literature and writing basic species descriptions; the physical appearance of males, females, and young; measurements, molts, field marks, voice, breeding habitat and nest, range, distribution in New England, and season in Massachusetts. But Maurice was naturally literary, and Forbush eventually assigned him to write some of the chatty narrative essays, called "Haunts and Habits," that supplemented the sort of small-print sections on which Maurice had been working. The "Haunts and Habits" were what gave life and character to the great work—along with the superb *Fuertes* plates, of course. Maurice wrote the pieces on the Common Yellowthroat, Hermit Thrush, Black-capped Chickadee—his favorite species—and two hybrids about which little was known, Lawrence's and Brewster's warblers. "...He acquitted himself well. 'But did I read', Maurice said, 'I never rested a second. I worked day and night, because I had to do my regular work, and then I'd go to my little cubbyhole of a room (on) Claremont Street... and I'd have all these books with me, and reports, and so on under my arm, and I'd have to wade through them, pick out the meat, and make notes, and then when I thought I had all the data I needed, then I sat right down and wrote. I can still see myself as a young man, slaving away. I didn't take time to eat anything—I ate candy.'"

After three years of that and with Volume III nearly finished, Forbush and May pointed Maurice toward conservation work. Not only pointed him but gave him entrance velocity by convincing the garden-clubbers who were creating the Pleasant Valley Bird Sanctuary in western Massachusetts that 23-year-old Maurice Broun was just the man they needed to start up and run the place.

In the next three years he cut six miles of trails and built a nature museum for Pleasant Valley. After that he moved to the Austin Ornithological Research Station on Cape Cod, where he worked as a research associate. Then, having married the pretty and sparky Irma Penniman, he was hired by the Treadway Inns to be staff naturalist and to make nature trails and a nature center as part of Treadway layouts.

By then he had met and greatly impressed Rosalie Edge of the Emergency Conservation Committee, and when she leased Hawk Mountain in 1934 she offered him the job as warden for the fall—if he didn't charge her too much. He had the Treadway job to go back to at the end of the hawk migration season, and he was as passionate a conservationist as Rosalie Edge. So he and Irma agreed to go to Hawk Mountain for room, board, and expenses.

In the next few years Maurice made important discoveries about the size and timing and weather requirements of the fall hawk migration at the mountain. Meanwhile, he and Irma (who, while he was counting the migrating hawks, often stood guard at the entrance to the trail that lead to the old hawk-shooting stands) had their difficulties with the local hunters.

"... They patrolled the road to keep the hunters out, and faced down angry gunners who approached the gate, their guns casually cradled in their arms so that the muzzles pointed at Maurice's or Irma's stomach. Maurice, walking the grounds during the deer season, would hear a shotgun blast and then the whistle of a slug over his head. A Red-tailed Hawk was shot and its corpse hung as a warning from the girders of (a) bridge..."

“The Brouns reacted with their own gestures. Maurice, for example, photographed the dead hawk hanging from the bridge and used it to publicize the work of the sanctuary. ‘Broun was the most hated man,’ said the (local) antique dealer Charley Thomas, ‘if ever there was a man hated. He’s lucky he’s living. I pushed a gun down one day that was pointed right at his head.’”

Still, the Brouns kept the hunters out and lived to tell many tales. And that wasn’t the only crucial development at the mountain in those early years.

“People—particularly young people—arrived at Hawk Mountain and were immediately attracted to the energetic and devoted Brouns. Above all, Maurice was ‘a tremendous field naturalist,’ in the words of Roland Clement, (whose) first job in conservation was working for Maurice at the Austin Research Station on the Cape. ‘He is a wonderful naturalist, a wonderful ornithologist, a wonderful botanist... although his lack of formal education for years kept him from the full recognition he deserved.’ Maurice assumed that any hawkwatcher would be as excited about the sanctuary as he was, and his enthusiasm was catching. He was also a natural teacher.... Tom Hanson, one of his early Hawk Mountain protégés, who (eventually) quit a successful career in business to teach science, remembers what his exposure to Maurice meant: ‘Here was a person who had probably more innate knowledge concerning ornithology and botany and the other natural sciences than any other 10 or 12 people. And at that age—in my teens—I just soaked it up, just like a sponge.’

“The Brouns invited visitors in for a cup of coffee or tea and a piece of pie; put them up on rainy weekends (in the former little roadside ‘hotel’ down the mountain a bit from the lookout, which became both headquarters and residence for the Brouns); gathered them around for impromptu lectures or birding talk; and in general treated them as partners in the enterprise. A family was forming, and the members of that family would find themselves on rainy or foggy days when the hawks weren’t in the air, helping Maurice string wire around the boundaries—miles of wire—or burning brush or chopping firewood or building camping shelters...

“‘We actually, physically, built the place,’ Tom (Hanson) said. ‘In that sense, it became mine. I built it. I know all the boards there. I know the trails, because I cut them.’

“‘Do you remember the time,’ put in Maurice excitedly, leaning forward in his chair, with an intensity that always gives one the feeling there’s a spring compressed inside him, ‘we got together a lot of material and boards and built a latrine, all for under \$25? And weren’t we proud of it? First we had to dig a tremendous hole...’ “In the rocks.’ “And then we built a magnificent latrine, for less than \$25.’

“The Brouns’ boys’ would write to Mrs. Edge from overseas (during World War II): ‘There is one thing that I hope to find unchanged when this war is over, and that is Hawk Mountain. Even if the world is tearing itself apart, the hawks will continue to fly over the Sanctuary, and the days and nights will be just as peaceful and beautiful.’ ‘Three things are synonymous with Hawk Mountain,’ said another, ‘peace and quiet, good fellowship, and Irma Broun’s apple pie.’”

The Brouns’ Hawk Mountain family of friends and volunteers grew into an institution that continues today to be one of the sanctuary’s distinctive characteristics. And until that family grew so large that its personal demands began to overwhelm him, it was one of the satisfying

aspects of life at Hawk Mountain—though not as satisfying, I think, as the absolute privacy that settled on the place in mid-winter after snow closed the road over the mountain and he and Irma could be snowbound in their little house.

A far from satisfying part of the life at Hawk Mountain was the fact that as long as Maurice was curator, and despite all his own efforts and the efforts he inspired in others, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania resisted passing a law to protect all the hawks. What the conservationists got in 1937 was a law protecting all but the accipiters, which was meaningless, because the gunners at shooting stands off Hawk Mountain—there were at least six stands just within 30 miles of the sanctuary—could plead errors of eyesight if they were caught shooting, say, an osprey or a bald eagle. The enforcement was not particularly rigorous. In 1957 the Pennsylvania legislature finally protected all hawks in the northeast corner of the state—Hawk Mountain territory—in the months of September and October; it did not pass a comprehensive protection bill until 1969, three years after Maurice retired.

“On good hawking days at the sanctuary, many of the birds of prey that sailed past were missing flight feathers or carried blood stains on their plumage, and people who loved hawks cringed at the thought of the carnage that must be going on that day farther east along the ridge. So Maurice took to leaving Hawk Mountain for a while on good hawking weekends and going to one of the shooting stands he knew about. ‘You’d get a good hawking weekend shaping up,’ Maurice said ‘and everybody would be calling in and saying, “How’s the hawking, Maurice?” and I’d say, “It looks great. You’re going to have some real good hawking over the weekend.” Bust those nights I never slept, because I knew what was happening up the ridge. It just killed me. I had no pleasure out of the hawking. You could go up to Bake Oven Knob and stand by the side of the road, facing the east, in the direction of the oncoming hawks, and there’d be half a dozen guys lined up next to you with guns, shooting these birds as fast as they came. You’d see these hawks drop in the road, you’d see them drop in the woods; there was nothing you could do about it, because they’d always make sure to shoot sharpshins when I was there.’”

One thing I admired in Maurice was his intolerance for pseudo-conservationists. He raged about people who wouldn’t put themselves on the line and join him at the hawk-shooting stand to help protect as many of the passing hawks as possible. “A lot of these so-called bird-lovers, so-called conservationists, really aren’t,” he said in 1978.

During that interview I asked him if he felt the battle to protect the environment was being lost. His answer, like so much he said, took me by surprise. “Ah, what a question! I’m pessimistic. I do think the environmental movement is just great, but it’s come too late. I think (the future is) going to be grim. I’m not a doomsayer, but I look at it a little differently. Look, each generation has to adapt to the conditions they find. When I was a boy, you saw bluebirds everywhere. They were common birds. It’s very difficult to find bluebirds now in the East—but we manage to live without them. Lots of young people, they’ve heard about the bluebird, they’d like to see a bluebird, but they’re not pining about it. Take the passenger pigeon. Who’s moaning about the passenger pigeon? They once filled the whole sky in clouds, in Audubon’s and Wilson’s time. Nobody’s moaning about the passenger pigeon. It’s gone. We’ve learned to live without it. All right. If I had children and grandchildren, I know damned well what (they would) face—an increasingly sterile world. But it doesn’t mean the end of the world. Upcoming citizens are going to have to cope. They’ll cope somehow.”

Maurice could not be pigeon-holed. He wasn't good at pulling his punches, either.

He left the sanctuary he had helped build because he couldn't any longer take the crowds that became bigger each year; he couldn't take the increasing managerial demands on his time that stole from his time as a naturalist. But he wasn't at all sorry at the end that he had lived that life. With "all its headaches," he said, "with all the sleepless nights from the hawk killing, it nevertheless was a tremendous thing for a young couple to experience. So we have no regrets."