



F. EUGENE HESTER

The Golden Boys



JACK DERMID

FOR MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY, JACK DERMID AND GENE HESTER HAVE HIT THE ROAD IN SEARCH OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EXCELLENCE — AND MORE THAN A FEW GOOD TIMES.



GARLAND PARDUE

It's a tough group that has gathered at a photo blind on a chilly, gray winter morning near Lake Wendell. Despite less-than-perfect lighting, Gene Hester, Jack Dermid and Garland Pardue have spent a couple of hours in a blind taking photographs of birds. Nothing out of the ordinary — some white-throated sparrows, Eastern towhees, cardinals. Just the species you might hear and see scratching about most any North Carolina greenbrier and honeysuckle thicket.

These fellows probably have taken hundreds of photographs of all three birds, but there is always that chance for a really great photo of a common species. Hester, Dermid and Pardue have traveled tens of thousands of miles together on photography trips to shoot far more exotic species.

Wood ducks and a love of photography first brought Jack Dermid (above left) and Gene Hester together in the outdoors in 1955.

written by Jim Wilson



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JACK DERMID



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NCWRC

Dermid has a reputation for extraordinary patience in getting exactly the right shot.



JACK DERMID (4)



Now noon is approaching, the day feels a bit damp and the three men — all retired biologists — have barbeque on their minds. They toss gibes at one another as only good friends of long standing can do. Dermid is talking about changing his shoes before lunch. “Jack’s the only man I know who changes his shoes several times a day,” Hester says. “He’s like a woman about his shoes.”

Dermid, oblivious to the teasing, says, “I just like to be comfortable. You’re out in the field all day, your feet get cold and damp.”

“Yeah, but you want to change ‘em for lunch,” Hester says.

Dermid, who is as wry as Hester is jocular, shakes his head and smiles. “I just want to be comfortable.”

Minutes later, back across the highway beside the Lake Wendell boat houses, Pardue is talking about his days as an undergraduate and graduate student at N.C. State under Hester’s tutelage. “Gene taught me everything I know,” Pardue says, playing the straight man for Hester.

“You know, he’s right,” Hester says. “I did teach him everything he knows.” Hester, a master raconteur, pauses for the punch line. “I just didn’t teach him everything I know.”

BUDDING CAREERS

Fifty-one years ago, Hester, then a 24-year-old with a master’s degree from N.C. State in wildlife management (the program was then called wildlife conservation), made his first appearance in the pages of *Wildlife in North Carolina*. In a photo feature entitled, “Home of the Geese,” he briefly recounted his time spent in the Canadian muskeg region of James Bay banding Canada geese.

The scenery in his photographs is flat, forbidding, bleak. Sporting a full beard and looking a bit weary, Hester, nevertheless, is smiling slightly. It has been a difficult three months. Home has been a couple of tents with a log windbreak. The nearest railroad is 35 miles distant; the nearest road fit for automobiles is 200 miles away.

“We actually had to get an explorer’s permit from the Canadian government,” Hester recalled. “They sent one of their employees, who was a full-blooded Cree Indian, with us. I guess they figured it was cheaper to have someone baby-sit us than to send somebody to find us.”

Five years earlier, another young N.C. State graduate with a wildlife management degree had debuted in *WINC*. Jack Dermid’s first byline story involved a fledgling blue jay that he had found on the ground beneath its nest. After returning the bird to its nest several times, only to find it lying on the ground again, Dermid decided to keep the

bird. His story recounts the short life of “Saucy” the blue jay, who eventually was killed by a cat. Dermid’s message was simple: It’s always best to leave wild animals in their own environment.

A couple of years later, Dermid came to work for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, where he eventually became *WINC*’s managing editor and also served as staff photographer without the title. Dermid’s history with the commission might be the lengthiest on record. While he was a student at N.C. State, Dermid submitted pieces for publication in *North Carolina Wildlife Conservation*, the forerunner of *WINC* that published from 1937–1945.

“I had worked for the Wildlife Commission for several summers,” Dermid recalled. “Then I went to Oregon State to work on a master’s degree in wildlife management. I completed the course work, then came back to the commission and finished my thesis while I was working. I was just interested in photography; I wasn’t trained in it. I learned as I went along.”

“I was hired as an education representative. That encompassed whatever they wanted you to do. Clyde Patton [then the commission’s executive director] might call at 4 in the afternoon and say, ‘I’m supposed to give a talk to a wildlife club in Rocky Mount tonight, but I can’t make it. I need you to take my place.’ And off I’d go. I was a jack of all trades.”

WOOD DUCK CONNECTION

It was photography — and wood ducks — that first brought Hester and Dermid together. Hester had become fascinated by wood ducks while taking an N.C. State ornithology class under Tom Quay. “When I learned that wood ducks nested in trees, that just set me on fire,” Hester said. Soon Hester was making wood duck nesting boxes from whatever materials were handy — an old nail keg, trees blown down by Hurricane Hazel — and installing them at his father’s pond near Wendell.

The timing of Hester’s burgeoning interest in woodies was fortuitous. For more than a quarter of a century now, the wood duck has been one of the most popular species in North Carolina hunters’ bags, usually ranking first or second each season. It is difficult for many hunters today to realize that early in the 20th century, biologists feared that wood ducks might become extinct. The season on them was closed from 1918, with the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, until 1941.

“One of the reasons wood ducks suffered so bad was there were no seasons,” Hester said, switching from the role of storyteller to that of teacher, one at which he excels. “Most ducks migrated out of here by the first of March. Wood ducks were still around. They start nesting about the first of February. People were shooting wood ducks basically right off the nest. All ducks were suffering, but wood ducks suffered the most.”

By the mid-1950s, wood ducks were well on their way back, but their population was nowhere near what biologists thought it

Hester travels widely each year in search of waterfowl and deer.

could be. Dermid, who wrote his master’s thesis on biological photography, learned of Hester’s project and wanted to document it in photographs. The result was “Wood Duck Payoff” in the January 1956 issue of *WINC*.

“Jack was my mentor and helped me along the way, teaching me a lot of things about photography — biology, too,” Hester said. “I was able to help him by telling where and when the birds would be nesting.”

Hester, in fact, was one of the pioneers of wood duck research in the Southeast. That early work eventually led to the publication of a well-received book by Hester and Dermid in 1973, “The World of the Wood Duck.”

“We’ve kept plugging away at it for half a century,” Hester said of his outings with Dermid. Plugging away, however, does not fully describe the photographic journeys that Hester and Dermid undertake each year, along with Pardue. Usually it’s three or four forays annually, with a few short outings on the side. Either as a threesome or as a pair, the men have photographed wildlife from Florida to New Mexico to Texas, Louisiana, South Dakota, Maryland and points in between. They have made more road trips — and delivered more one-liners, jokes and good-natured ribs — than Bing Crosby and Bob Hope ever considered in their “Road” movies.

“Jack will give us the photo tip of the day when we’re on one of our trips,” Pardue says.



F. EUGENE HESTER (2)

F. EUGENE HESTER



GARLAND PARDUE





GARLAND PARDUE

As a professor, Hester dressed the part, whether in his office or the field.

"I'm probably more in the management thing. I want to build a pond or put up wood duck boxes or chop down some trees, plant something."

Dermid's patience in getting just the right photo and his sometimes offbeat subject matter is the stuff of legend among the trio. "One trip, Jack became fascinated with

taking photographs of foam on the Sewanee [River]. He was getting what he calls peripherals," Pardue says.

"You finally photographed foam on the Sewanee, too," Dermid says. "You have to admit it had some really interesting designs."

On the drive back from Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge one year, all three men succumbed to the lure of photographing a sign in Walterboro, S.C., that proclaimed: "We sell chicken feet."

"It was several years before any of us knew why anyone would want to buy chicken feet," Pardue said.

Dermid's attention to detail and his ability to create something extraordinary from an everyday scene were on display from 1950 to 1962 in *WINC*. He became interested in photography at a relatively early age. "I started taking wildlife pictures when I was in high school," he said. "The first camera I had was a folding Kodak, one that had a cocking lever for the shutter. It made it possible for me to cock the shutter, and tie a string to the release to get photographs.

"Some of my first wildlife pictures I remember taking were made with that camera by mounting it on a branch by a robin's nest and then moving maybe 50 feet away. When the robin would come to the nest, I'd pull the string and trip the shutter. The early cameras weren't automatic winding. If you had a nest 25 feet in the tree, you had to climb 25 feet every time you took a picture."

Dermid reprised those early efforts at photographing a robin on her nest in a free-lance photo in *WINC* in 1949.

Dermid often finds interesting subjects in ordinary places.

The publication of the photos caused enough of a stir among readers that several months later Dermid was prompted to write a story, "Simplified Bird Photography," detailing exactly how he had obtained the shots.

ROAD TO WASHINGTON

After obtaining his master's at N.C. State, Hester, believing he needed to beef up his understanding of fisheries management, headed to Auburn University for a doctorate in fisheries. "In my naiveté, I thought I would become a fisheries and wildlife biologist," he said. "You just don't do that — you are one or the other."

Hester taught at Auburn for a year after finishing his doctorate, and then returned to N.C. State as an assistant zoology professor. Four years later, in 1963, he became the first head of the university's Cooperative Fishery Unit, which was administered at the time by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1971, Hester headed to Washington, D.C., where he eventually became the deputy director of Fish and Wildlife and served a lengthy spell as acting director. He ended his career as deputy director of the National Biological Survey.

But Hester and Dermid, who left the commission in 1962 to teach biology at UNC-Wilmington, remained friends. Hester also kept his hand in at *WINC*, providing photographs and later stories about fishing and hunting. Although Hester basically ran a federal agency of more than 6,000 employees and adapted readily to dealing with high-powered political appointees, in many ways — the best ways — he remains the fellow from Wendell who loved to hunt and fish as a child. He's still the guy who was overjoyed to find that he could earn his college degree by studying wildlife.



GARLAND PARDUE

Garland Pardue (middle) is now part of Dermid's and Hester's travels.

"When I saw that I could actually major in wildlife conservation and management, I thought I had died and gone to heaven," Hester said. "Better yet, I thought I was still living and had gone to heaven."

At age 75, Hester has a young person's excitement about learning and the natural world. He is a man fascinated by numerous things, and that shows in his photographs, many of which have not only graced this magazine, but many others, too. These days, it's a rare issue of *WINC* that does not include the photo credit "F. Eugene Hester."

His enthusiasm is infectious, whether with friends or students or someone he's just met. And Hester possesses the rare ability to become genuinely interested in what you are doing, what you're thinking.

"He was a very hands-on teacher," said Pardue, who studied under Hester both as an undergraduate and graduate student. "His students thought a lot of him. He was the same then as he is now with young people. That's his life. He's never lost that interaction with people."

Like Hester, Pardue received his undergraduate and master's degrees from N.C. State, followed by a doctorate in fisheries from Auburn. Since retiring as supervisor of Fish and Wildlife's Ecological Services Field Office in Raleigh, Pardue has often hit the road with Hester and Dermid.

"Jack's sole focus is pretty much on photography. That's what he does with almost all of his free time," Pardue said. "Gene pretty much divides his time between photography and fishing. He's either going to be doing one or the other, or sometimes both, all day. I love doing both, and I love doing it with them. If they stopped doing either or both, I'd probably stop, too."

LUCKY DAY

One of the annual trips the trio makes is to Cades Cove to photograph deer. "One year, Gene and I would get up early and go to the park," Pardue said. "We'd be at the gate waiting for them to open up so we could get some shots of the deer before they moved off into the woods. Jack, as he's gotten older [he's now 83], is less interested in getting up at the



MELISSA MCGAW

"There's an old saying that in a great partnership, each guy thinks he got the better part of the deal," Hester says. "I know I got the better part of the deal with Jack."

crack of dawn. He'd come in about 9 o'clock. Gene and I had been there since 6.

"Gene and I would be walking through wet grass trying to photograph a deer. We were really trying to photograph deer jumping over fences, jumping logs or deer fighting — something more unusual than a deer standing out in the woods. We were not having much luck this one day, and we hooked up with Jack at lunchtime. He was sitting on the tailgate of the truck. We told him a little about what we had been photographing, but that we hadn't gotten exactly what we wanted. We asked Jack how he'd done.

"Well, I didn't get much. I got three or four pictures of deer fighting, a deer jumping a log."

"In a couple of hours, Jack had gotten the things we'd been trying to photograph all morning."

"Jack reminds me of the fellow who's playing poker and says, 'All I've got is two pair of aces,'" Hester said.

Dermid's assessment is simple: "That was a lucky day."

A partnership that began in the 1950s has aged gracefully, as have the partners. Dermid

has had some health problems that have slowed him a bit. "Gene and I went out to Lake Wendell this morning, and he had to help me get in the boat," Dermid said recently. "Normally I'd hop right in like a grasshopper. I'm not as steady as I used to be."

The important thing is that Dermid is still out there, still adding beautiful photographs to an illustrious body of work. And there are trips yet to be made, places both old and new to see. Cades Cove is an annual December adventure, and Hester is set to return to South Dakota in late winter to catch the earliest waterfowl heading north to their breeding grounds. He has yet to convince Dermid to make that trip, but he's still working on his partner, trying, in a gentle, ribbing way, "to see if he's man enough to go stand on the ice."

Whether he goes or not, Dermid's decision will become part of the arsenal of stories that bind them. "There's an old saying that in a great partnership, each guy thinks he got the better part of the deal," Hester says. "I know I got the better part of the deal with Jack." ♦

Jim Wilson is associate editor of *Wildlife* in North Carolina magazine.