

Walter Hastings:

A life dedicated to Michigan's wildlife

By Alan Campbell
Special to the Enterprise

Folks in Leelanau County should get to know Walter E. Hastings because, well, he's worth knowing.

Here's a spoiler alert. I've got a side hustle going, as I'm hoping that one of our older readers can fill in some gaps in what I've been able to learn about Mr. Hastings' remarkable life in conservation.

Hastings was a complex figure, especially in the 1920s and

30s during the height of his popularity. He was a worldly ornithologist who enjoyed shooting grouse, a fly fisherman who applauded a Lake Leelanau smallmouth that tossed a hook, and a deer hunter whose most famous photograph created intense backlash against the hunting public.

I learned of Mr. Hastings years ago while perusing copies of the *Enterprise* dating back to the 1930s and 40s. It was a fascinating time when hunting and fishing transitioned from

required pursuits for table fare to hobbies that fulfilled a human instinct to bask in and at times outfox Mother Nature.

Readers relied on newspapers to learn about their world. They didn't belong to Facebook or TikTok groups connected by lifestyle.

People held the news of the day in their hands. Hastings brought the outdoors to them.

In particular, I recall seeing in an *Enterprise* a photo of a dead doe with her wounded fawn cuddled in her lap. The

byline went to Hastings, who during a later interview said it was the most impactful photo he had ever taken. He used the photo to take his own shots — verbally — at so-called sportsmen who fired away willy-nilly at wild game.

That he was hired in 1927 as photographer and de facto spokesperson for the fledgling Michigan Department of Conservation seems somewhat of a political miracle. Within the many folders of his archives is a two-page, incredulous

response from the head of the Conservation Department to a Hastings' letter published in the *Pontiac Press* protesting a crow shooting contest sponsored by a sportsman's group. Hastings went for the figurative throat, writing, "If the Oakland County Sportsmen's Association wants to do something really worthwhile, it will check up on the rank stupidity of the Department of Conservation for the state of Michigan."

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