

# Fred Lesser

by German Georgieff

Fred Lesser was born in Glens Falls, NY, in 1937. His father worked for the S. S. Kresge Co., which operated a chain of five and dime stores. His father's job required the family to relocate several times, eventually settling in Beachwood, NJ in 1943, after he obtained a position teaching math and science at Admiral Farragut Academy, located on the banks of the Toms River in Pine Beach.

Fred was attracted to the natural world early on and did a bit of muskrat trapping as a youth back before much of the area's salt marshes were filled and developed. He recalls never making much money at it but had plenty of fun and learned to observe the nature that surrounded him, a trait that would serve him well later in life. His first "real" job was obtained at the age of fourteen, candling eggs for the Harold Scott Egg Company several nights per week. In a short time he saved enough money to purchase a nice fishing rod and reel. He next saved enough of his earnings for his first shotgun, a Kessler bolt action. As he did more waterfowling, he decided he needed a gun that could get off additional shots more quickly, and saved for a Remington 870 pump action, which he bought from Western Auto.

Fred was able to access more water for fishing and hunting when their father bought a 12-foot Trojan plywood boat, powered by a 14 hp Evinrude. Once again, Fred desired an upgrade, saving his own money to buy an Aristocraft, which was the same size as his first boat, but much sleeker and more attractive-looking. He also powered it with a larger 30 hp Mercury outboard. His time duck hunting and observing the nature surrounding him led to a love of bird watching, which only became stronger as his life progressed.

Fred's outdoor pursuits eventually took a back seat to his education when he left for Paul Smith's College and received an associate degree in forestry. While there, he met his future wife, Barbara, with whom he had three children. He next obtained a bachelor's degree in wildlife biology at North Carolina State University. During his time there he took a summer job at



Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge, trapping wildlife. While at this job he developed connections with the University of Delaware and was offered an assistantship, allowing him to earn a master's degree in entomology while he worked on researching the relationships between mosquitoes and wildlife. He then obtained a position as a state waterfowl biologist, in Florida, for a little over a year. This was followed by an appointment to the St. Johns County Mosquito Commission as Director, also in Florida, which he held for approximately one year. The next three years were spent working for the Lee County, Florida, Mosquito Commission, where he helped develop an inspection and mapping system for identifying problem areas for mosquitoes using helicopters. He also worked with others to devise equipment to spray pesticides from the same helicopters. Up to this time, most spraying was done from fixed wing aircraft.

In 1969, at an annual meeting of mosquito control professionals, Fred met the Chairman of the Ocean County Mosquito Exterminating Commission. Fred was soon lured back home to develop a program of inspecting and treating mosquito populations using helicopters. Using the

trial and error experiences from his previous positions, he helped design improved spray rigs for the helicopters flown by the commission. Once, while taking the Chairman out in the helicopter to inspect recent improvements to the impoundments within the Manahawkin Wildlife Management Area, the pilot attempted to land on one of the larger dikes. The weight of the right skid of the helicopter caved in a muskrat run and the skid became entangled in Phragmites roots. This caused the craft to tip over onto its side, destroying most of the rotor blades and drenching the pilot. Luckily, no one was injured. On another occasion, the helicopter Fred was riding in lost power and the pilot managed to autorotate down to a sandspit on the bay, just inside Island Beach. The landing did destroy the tail rotor, and a barge had to be towed in to retrieve the copter.

Eventually, Fred left the Mosquito Commission and worked as a pest control consultant for a time. He then began working for the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation in a variety of roles, including his last 20 years until retirement as a naturalist. During this time, he not only conducted a variety of environmental education programs, but was also involved in running the contests at the Ocean County Decoy & Gunning Show. Fred's bird identification skills came into play many times, when a bird was misidentified on the contest entry form, or set in the wrong place by a novice show worker. Fred's sharp eye never missed the error. He also often played a role as a contest judge.

Fred's birding skills and knowledge of the bay became extremely valuable when he was asked by Dr. Joanna Burger, a professor at Rutgers University, to assist in conducting a colonial nesting bird census in the mid-1970s. Using Fred's boat, they surveyed the approximately 300 islands in Ocean County's waters nearly every year, noting the number of bird colonies and estimating the number of individual birds per colony. They also collected early season eggs and shell fragments, as well as feather samples, in order to test for residual pesticides and heavy metal levels. The research gathered contributed to a number of scientific publications. Fred continued to volunteer this help until only a few years ago.

During all this time, Fred enjoyed his biggest passion, bird watching. He would often drop what he was doing at a moment's notice, traveling several states away to pursue reports of rare bird sightings. He has also traveled all over the world, establishing an immense life list of bird sightings. Fred retired from the County in 2013 and relocated to Maryland to be closer to his family. He returns to New Jersey from time to time, especially to volunteer at the Decoy Show. He can usually be found under the decoy contest tent. He will be easy to pick out. He's the one with the binoculars hanging from his neck, always ready to spot the next bird.