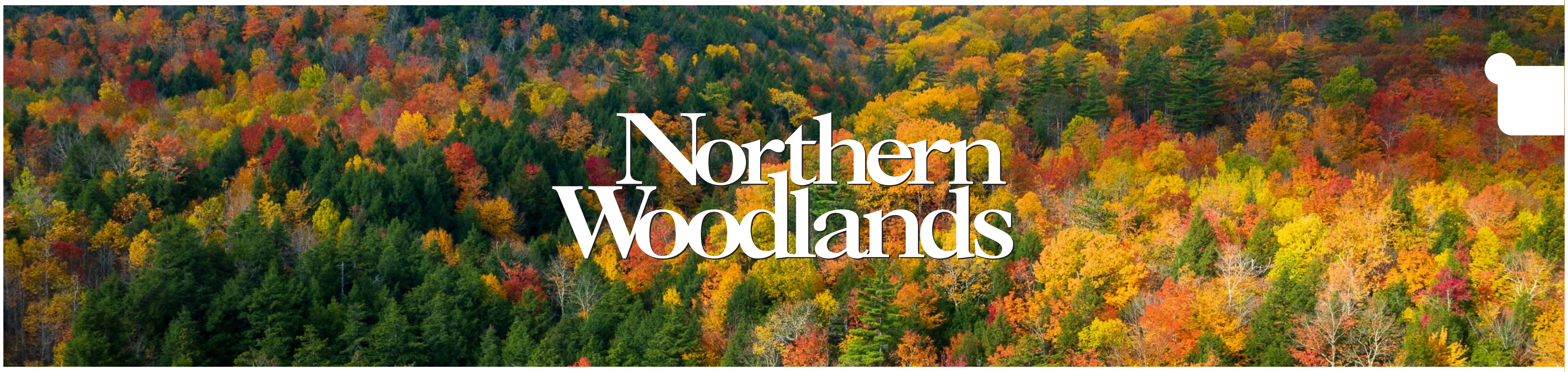


September 1st, 2021 ***by Jack Beaudoin*** ***Autumn 2021***

Old Mother West Wind, Laughing Brook, and the Stories that Inspired Generations

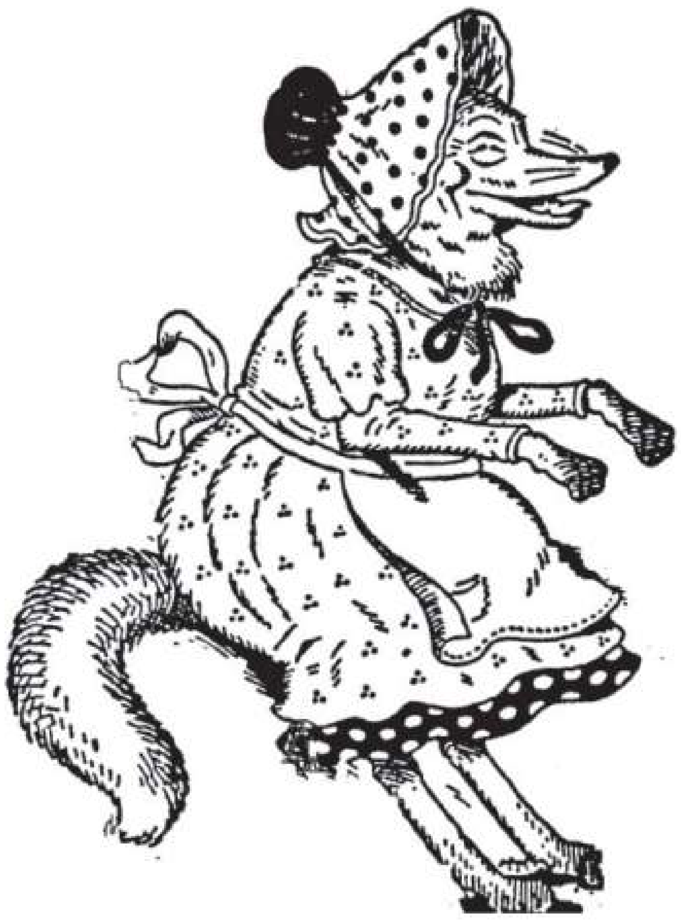


Illustration of Granny Fox by Harrison Cady.

Murph and I had ducked into the woods in Phippsburg around 9:30 a.m., hoping to escape the July heat. No spring chickens, we ambled more than we hiked and only covered a few miles before taking an early lunch break on a mossy slab of granite overlooking a still, shallow pond. Suddenly a handsome blue jay flashed past, screeching madly about our trespass.

“Thief!” I said, trying to imitate the jay. “Thief! Thief!”

Murph looked at me quizzically. I just shrugged – it was a nostalgic reference to some children’s books I had read 50 years ago – books that had introduced me to the mystery and magic of New England’s woodlands, encouraging me to get out of the house and into the pines surrounding it. Books, in truth, that instilled an ardent desire to become a writer myself.

“Never mind,” I said, waving it off.

After lunch, we retraced our steps back toward the car, mostly in silence, as is our habit. But Murph seemed preoccupied, as if trying to remember something he hadn’t thought about in a long time. As we rock-hopped across a narrow brook, he ventured a question.

“Since you’re in the business,” he said, “do you know anything about juvenile literature?”

“Juvenile literature,” I repeated, instantly disliking the term. “Only what I’ve read. What about it?”

“Well,” he said. “I’m planning to part with some books my mother collected for me when I was a boy. She had read them when she was a girl and passed them down to me. Mostly first editions from about a hundred years ago. The first series is by a fellow named Thornton—”

“W. Burgess,” I interrupted, finishing the sentence for him. “Murph, I’ll buy every single one of them from you.”

The Voice of Conservation

It was Thornton Waldo Burgess who taught me and generations of young Americans throughout the twentieth century to hear Sammy Jay scream “Thief!” In short novels and story collections such as *The Adventures of Reddy Fox, Blacky the Crow*, and *The Crooked Little Path*, he introduced children to the natural world, inspiring many to careers in conservation and natural resource management.

Born in Sandwich, Massachusetts, in 1874, Burgess penned more than 170 books and 15,000 newspaper columns about New England’s woodland creatures and their habitats – places such as the Green Meadows, the Smiling Pool, the Dear Old Briar Patch, and Laughing Brook. By his death in 1965, his books had sold more than 10 million copies in English, according to the best estimates of his biographer, and millions more in translation. So many families ended their days with a Burgess story that a 1940 *New Yorker* article dubbed him “The Bedtime Man.”

Burgess was not merely a popular children's author. He was a self-taught naturalist with a keen eye and grasp of detail who frequently accompanied the day's preeminent scientists – biologist Alfred Otto Gross, zoologist William Temple Hornaday, and Smithsonian curator Austin Clark – on expeditions and at conferences. He was a pioneer science communicator, embracing the new medium of radio to spread the values of conservation, wildlife protection, and habitat preservation to eager children throughout the Northeast. And Burgess was a savvy marketer who understood how syndication and merchandising could not only supplement his writing income but also multiply the power of his message.

“He came to the field of conservation with all of these media communication skills,” said Peter Oehlkers, associate professor of media and communications at Salem State University. “He had written advertising copy, he wrote newspaper columns, he edited magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. He knew how to connect with audiences, and he knew how to construct stories that would sell. So he was well positioned to be a success – not only as a person who spread the word about conservation, but who came at it from a very sort of American commercial, storytelling, and business-oriented approach.”

Thornton W. Burgess with an eastern cottontail at his home in Hampden, Massachusetts. Photo courtesy of the Thornton W. Burgess Society.

At the height of his popularity, Burgess was widely acknowledged as the voice of American conservation. While there were more talented writers working in the genre, and more knowledgeable scientists in the field, no one understood how to communicate these ideas better than the author of *Old Mother West Wind*, which has been continuously in print since 1910.

In a 1964 letter to Burgess, H. Bradford Washburn – the explorer, mountaineer, and mapmaker who founded the Boston Museum of Science and served as its first director – made the point perfectly:

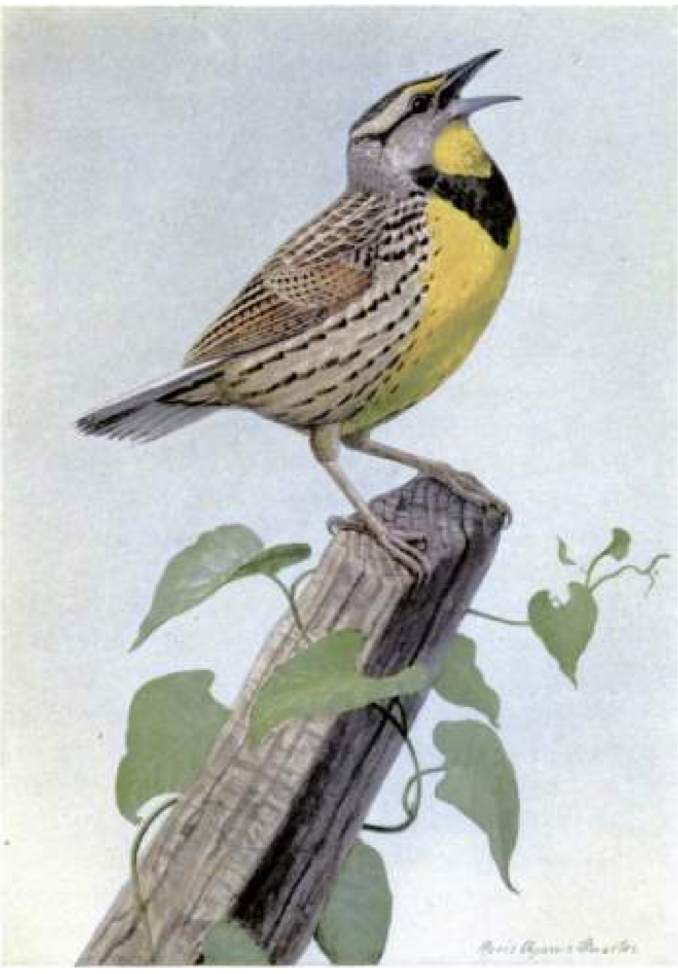
“Your wonderful books had a tremendous effect on my love of nature as a youngster. My mother and father read them to me from the time I could understand anything until the time I could read – and I read them avidly myself as virtually the first English prose I ever tackled. There is also not the slightest doubt in any of the minds here at the Museum that these same books had the same effect on literally millions of Americans throughout two full generations.”

An Inspiration

Nearly 60 years later, it would be more accurate to say Burgess has influenced another three generations on top of the two Washburn cited. Like my hiking friend Murph, families still have complete sets of Burgess's series: *Old Mother West Wind* stories, *The Bedtime Story Books*, the *Green Forest Series*, and *The Burgess Books for Children*. And many professionals within northeast's conservation and environmental organizations today credit Burgess with inspiring them to go into the field.

“My oldest memories are of snuggling against my grandfather in his wool shirt, listening to him read from Burgess's stories,” recalled David Mears, now the executive director of Audubon Vermont and vice president of the National Audubon Society. “Sometimes he read, and sometimes he would just make up his own stories, but they were always the same characters. My favorite was Jimmy Skunk, and he was always a centerpiece of the stories. At some point, I started reading the books myself, and I still have the whole bunch of dog-eared versions that I read to my kids as they got older.”

Like Mears, Marion Larson, chief of information and education at MassWildlife, recalls Burgess as a bridge between generations, present and past.



This painting of an eastern meadowlark by Louis Agassiz Fuertes graces the cover of *The Burgess Bird Book for Children*, first published by Little, Brown and Company in 1919.

“I grew up in a house with several Burgess books,” Larson said. The daughter of a University of Massachusetts wildlife biologist and a horticulturist, she spent her childhood in two environments: one an outdoors life filled with family hikes, nature walks, and exploration and the other “lying around at our summer camp reading. Burgess brought those two worlds together.”

Those books – including *The Adventures of Paddy the Beaver, Lightfoot the Deer,* and *The Adventures of Chatterer the Red Squirrel* – made a deep impression on her. After graduating from the University of Vermont, Larson became the first female Massachusetts Environmental Officer – a position better known today as a game warden. She's been with MassWildlife for the entirety of a career spanning nearly four decades.

Illustrator Harrison Cady at work with Thornton W. Burgess. Photo courtesy of Christie Lowrance / Thornton W. Burgess Society.

Carol Foss, senior advisor for science and policy with New Hampshire Audubon, tells a similar story. An avid reader of Burgess's reference books (and Audubon newsletters) as a young girl in Penacook, New Hampshire, Foss said the writer "enriched all my experiences in the outdoors."

"I wasn't a scientist when I was being read these stories," she explained. "The value, the particular value of these three books – *The Burgess Bird Book for Children, The Burgess Animal Book for Children*, and *The Burgess Flower Book for Children* – made all these things familiar at a young kid's level. It made me want to see them myself."

Burgess's work remained with her as she pursued her doctorate. "It wasn't until I was in my 20s that I saw my first Hepatica," Foss recalled. "And I was so excited because I first read about it in one of those Burgess books."

"Nature Faker?"

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Burgess enjoyed universal admiration. In his day, Burgess was often smeared with the "Nature Faker" epithet. Critics raised several objections: that his animals spoke and dressed like humans; that Burgess attributed human morality to foxes, rabbits, and beavers; and that in his world, the predator never seemed to catch the prey.

"Burgess didn't mind the critics because those were the qualities that made his books popular," Peter Oehlkers contended. "He felt that to tell relatable stories, you had to retain some aspects of the life children were familiar with while still conveying factual information. So for example, even though they're wearing clothes, his characters are wearing clothes that match the markings of the species."

Although Oehlkers said Burgess's later stories sometimes turned "grim" and reflected the realities of nature, he stayed true to his instincts. He believed children could learn more about the natural world and build a personal conservation ethos if they saw animals as living, breathing creatures with goals and hopes. They would value habitat preservation by reading about Peter Rabbit's dependence on the Dear Old Briar Patch for his safety or how Paddy the Beaver needed clean water to thrive.

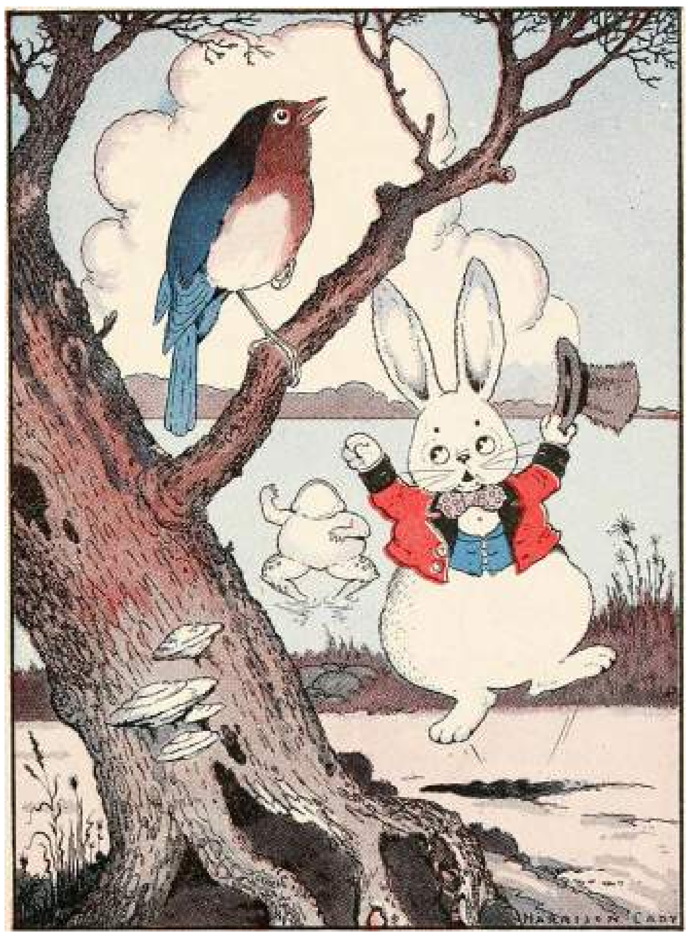


Illustration by Harrison Cady from "When Mr. Bluebird Won His Beautiful Coat," the first chapter in Mother West Wind "When" Stories by Thornton W. Burgess.

As for predation, Burgess was adamant that his books were for children and often read at bedtime. "Children will learn the hardships of life soon enough," his biographer, Christie Palmer Lowrance, quoted him as saying. More practically, he recognized if the predators enjoyed too much success, he'd run out of characters to feature.

Contemporary naturalists side with Burgess. Marion Larson has frequently encountered other former Burgess readers during her 30 years as an environmental interpreter, educator, and communicator. While a handful of her colleagues continue to criticize Burgess's work for its unapologetic anthropomorphism, Larson said most believe – as she does – that Burgess presented scientifically accurate information to children in a language stirring their imaginations. Mears agrees.

"The fact that Jimmy Skunk had a name and a really interesting personality – he was by far the most clever, interesting, and cynical of all the different creatures Burgess portrayed – allows kids to think differently and more curiously about the natural world," he said. "And science is beginning to move in Burgess's direction, with the debates right now about animal intelligence and feelings, and whether animals can sense beauty."

In her book *Nature's Ambassador: The Legacy of Thornton W. Burgess*, Lowrance argues most of the nature-faker charges were leveled by his literary critics and not trained naturalists.

Hornaday, for instance, credited Burgess with the successful passage of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and a year later, the writer received the Distinguished Service Medal of the Permanent Wildlife Protection Fund. Shortly before his death, Burgess was one of the first recipients of a special gold medal from Boston's Museum of Science for his work advancing conservation.

"Burgess was a skilled observer," Lowrance argued, his talents recognized by the many scientists with whom he collaborated and corresponded. "He had a personal, close, and mutually admiring relationship with the top scientist in the country, Smithsonian curator Austin Hobart Clark. He did field research around the world with Alfred Gross. These people were Thornton Burgess's people. It wasn't the literary types having tea and coffee in the parlor; it was the naturalists who were out in the field collecting information."

The Burgess Legacy

After Burgess's death at 91, he remained a popular and influential figure. Schools in his adopted home of Hampden, Massachusetts, were named after him and his books, and the Massachusetts Audubon Society acquired his property. Named Laughing Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, it was, according to Lowrance, the epicenter of conservation in New England.

"I attended Green Meadows Elementary School and Thornton W. Burgess Middle School," one local Burgess reader recalled, remembering how she and her classmates made frequent field trips to the former Burgess property. "Among my many happy memories of Laughing Brook Wildlife Sanctuary is sitting in a circle with a group of kids listening to Old Mother West Wind read from Thornton Burgess's books, looking at snakes and turtles in the natural history museum that was created from part of his home, and visiting Old Man Coyote and other animals along the trails throughout the property. This was such a big part of my childhood, and that of my siblings and neighbors and friends around town."

Meanwhile, in Sandwich, his first home was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Thornton W. Burgess Society opened a museum in his name.

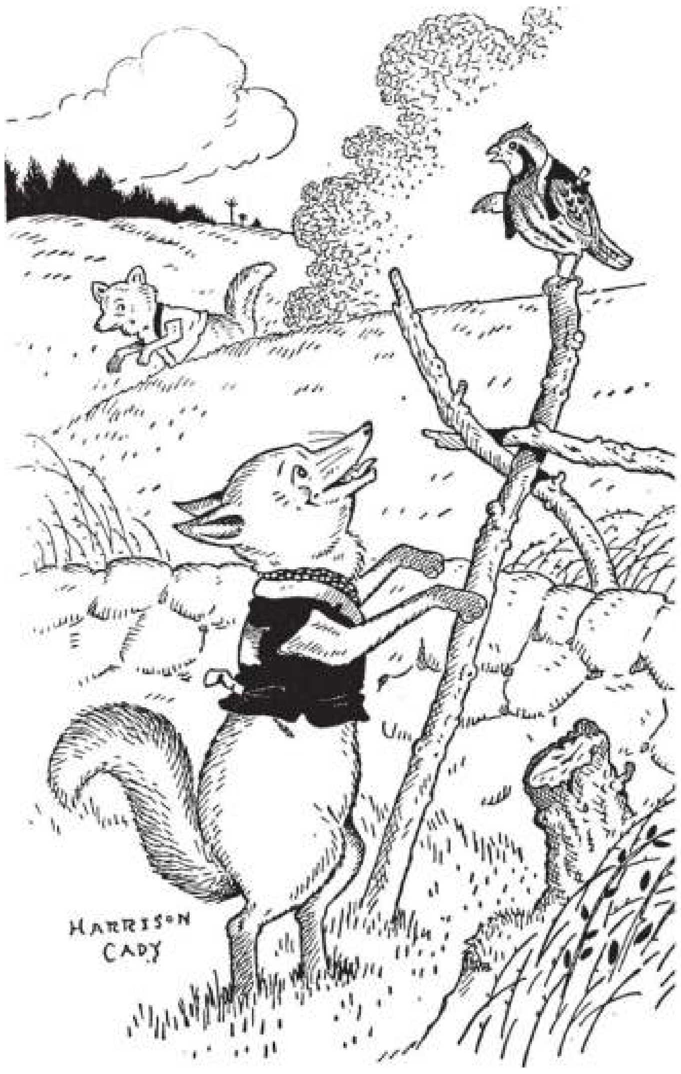


Illustration by Harrison Cady from *The Adventures of Bob White*.

But such momentum was hard, if not impossible, to maintain. The times were a-changing, and Burgess's prose did not age gracefully. A new generation of writers and critics insisted on more realistic representations of wildlife, and the more activist environmental movement of the 1970s found little in common with conservationist predecessors such as Burgess, who some felt were too conciliatory with hunters, the forest products industry, and energy interests.

Today, Laughing Brook Wildlife Sanctuary is a husk of its former self – little more than a set of hiking trails – and some Hampden residents fear for its future. The Burgess Museum in Sandwich closed in 2012 due to a lack of financial support, and its successor, The Thornton Burgess Green Briar Nature Center and Jam Kitchen, is merging with the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History.

"I'm a little bit worried about Burgess's legacy," Oehlkers admited. "If only from a historical point of view, I want to bring him back because I think he's incredibly central to the story of conservation and environmental communications in the United States. People don't know his name, and that's crazy because he was such an important figure for so long. So at least it needs to be part of the historical record."

Oehlkers and Lowrance are hard-pressed to name an heir to Burgess – a spokesperson for conservation and habitat preservation who can appeal to the hearts and minds of America's children. "These days, we'd say that Burgess had a personal brand," Oehlkers said. "He made possible science communicators like Carl Sagan and Neil Tyson de Grasse. But no one has really taken up his mantle."

Foss, Mears, and Larson believe we haven't heard the last of Burgess. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, many New England conservation and environmental organizations had to shift their educational programs online. They feel it could be an opportunity to reintroduce Burgess and his work to a new generation of children.

Foss, for instance, has contemplated an initiative at New Hampshire Audubon to read Burgess stories to children over Zoom or another online tool. She imagines interspersing the reading with photographs or slideshows to document phenological processes. It would be a significant undertaking, she admitted, but "that's a testament to my belief that these books are still relevant. They can still introduce kids to species, habitats, and behaviors."

Larson has entertained a similar idea. One of the founders of the educational Project Wild program in Massachusetts, she said the pandemic sparked new virtual learning initiatives such as virtual ice-fishing clinics and presentations about preservation efforts. "I'm imagining something like 'Zooming with Grandfather Frog,'" she said. "There are lots of people who are familiar with Burgess's books, and offerings like this would make a lot of sense."

In fact, Jennifer Schmitt, who works as the strategic audience engagement manager at Maine Audubon (and whose first student research paper was inspired by Little Joe Otter), thinks combining Burgess with social media platforms may be the perfect way to keep his message relevant.

“Generation Z is pretty media savvy, but they are also close observers and look around at everything,” she said. “We should be using social media to foster connections today that might otherwise never happen. We need to find that spark that makes people want to know more about the environment, and to share what they know.”

That’s undoubtedly Burgess in spirit.

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by Jack Beaudoin

Jack Beaudoin has been writing about the environment, politics, healthcare, and the people of Maine for nearly three decades. He continues to freelance from his home on Penobscot Bay.

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Discussion *

Oct 18, 2021

I discovered the Burgess books when my daughter was 5 or so. I can’t tell you how much both of us enjoyed them. Thanks for sharing this info; I hope it inspires others to read the books.

Gary Miller

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