

North Woods call

2 good men

Nels Johnson

If a writer were trying to create a storybook wildlife manager he'd concoct a character with immense scientific knowledge of the natural world. He'd make him a deep thinking, quiet, private man. A man with intense feelings for nature. A man with firm convictions and the grit to stick with them. A man whom others naturally follow and respect, and who respects and trusts others.

When our mythical writer got done putting together his mythical composite he'd have created a Nels Johnson.

Nels Johnson, the northern Lower Peninsula regional wildlife chief for the Dept. of Natural Resources and new DNR wildlife chief, is that outstanding. We put it down for the record, without reservation. No man could be better qualified to lead what may be the nation's finest wildlife management agency. He, as one presidential hopeful puts it, understands the power of ideas. He's a man who when it comes time for compromise the bottom line will always be the resource and sportsmanship.

We, also, applaud DNR director Howard Tanner for his insight and foresight in settling on Johnson to take over the wildlife division.

There was no one carrying banners for Nels Johnson. Others were campaigning hard for this most prestigious and coveted wildlife management job. Johnson was seldom mentioned, except privately by those within the department. No one considered him a serious candidate, including Johnson. He had applied more out of a sense of responsibility; not really wanting to leave his farm and north woods duties in Roscommon.

"He was picked 100 percent for his professional and personal qualities...not because he was ambitious and pushing for it," a senior field biologist points out.

Though virtually unknown to the public, Johnson, in his quiet but persistent manner, has greatly impacted on Michigan's wildlife management program. It was Johnson who lead northern Lower Peninsula wildlife biologists to their hard-fought (but little recognized) victory over Lansing staff personnel in scaling down antlerless deer hunting.

The high priority placed on turkey management—and dazzling success it has brought—bears Johnson's stamp. As a member of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program Kir-

land's Warbler Recovery Team, Johnson has been highly influential in diverting land and effort to saving Michigan's Jackpine Warbler.

Again, rarely noticed, Johnson has lead a quiet in-house campaign that has maintained clout for wildlife considerations in management of the northern Lower's state forests. Though this has been a bitter controversy at times, Johnson managed to keep it from erupting publicly while not compromising away wildlife habitat to pine plantations.

A man with a deep affinity for wild places and wild things, Johnson went to the mat for Michigan's elk herd and the Pigeon River Country, testifying in court that oil field development would doom them. The Supreme Court was so impressed with his professionalism that it ruled against oil drilling.

Many said at the time that Johnson's defiance of his bosses in the Pigeon River oil suit would deprive him of any chances for promotion. It was typical of Johnson that he gave no consideration. He was doing what he knew was right. He's so much his own man that he accepted it on face value that by doing so things would turn out as they should, however that might be. A man of true grit.

Hunters have rarely had a champion as stout as Johnson. He is a hunter, not a killer. He recognizes the difference and knows that if hunting is to survive all who go afield must go as sportsmen. As wildlife chief we can count on him to lead the most effective crusade we have ever seen to clean up the hunter's public image.

Perhaps the bottom line with Johnson is his leadership qualities. He brings out the best in those who work for him. No one is a threat to him, allowing him to give others their head, knowing that their trust in him will keep them on the right track.

In taking over the wildlife division Johnson is fortunate to be leading what many inside and outside observers say may be the finest group of professional wildlife scientists ever assembled in one organization. From the lowest level man in the field to the top level executives who expected to get the chief's job, the division has been the envy of others for at least two decades for its team work, dedication and competence.

With Johnson at the helm, the finest has been elevated to a notch above that.

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