



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY
<http://www.wilderness.org>

MARGARET (MARDY) MURIE

Grandmother of the Conservation Movement

“We owe much to the life's work of Mardy Murie, a pioneer of the environmental movement, who, with her husband, Olaus, helped set the course of American conservation more than 70 years ago.” So said President Clinton when he presented Mardy with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Margaret (Mardy) Murie devoted her life to protecting the lands she loved.

Mardy Murie was born on August 18, 1902 in Seattle, but she and her family moved to the frontier town of Fairbanks, Alaska when she was very young. In 1924, Mardy was the first woman to graduate the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. That same year, she met and married Olaus Murie—who was working in Alaska as a naturalist for the Biological Survey (later the Fish and Wildlife Service). For their honeymoon, Mardy joined Olaus on a 500-mile caribou research expedition in Alaska's Brooks Range, which would later become part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.



Three years later, Olaus and Mardy moved to Jackson Hole, Wyoming to study the elk population in the Teton mountain range. They built a small log cabin at the foot of the mountains, which Olaus and Mardy made their permanent home and where they raised their children. Mardy wrote about her adventures in Alaska and Wyoming in her book *Two in the Far North*. She describes how the book came about, “I just told our stories. My sense of wilderness is personal. It's the experience of being in wilderness that matters, the feeling of place.”

Her adventures included all members of her family, even her tiny son Martin, who was less than a year old when he first went into the Alaskan wilderness. Mardy and Olaus traveled by river. To keep Martin from falling overboard, they built a little box for him, where “he sat, or jumped up and down, or slept, clad in khaki coveralls.” For his safety, “he also wore a baby harness, and whenever he was aboard, the leather leash attached to it was hooked to a stout screw eye in the bottom corner of his box. The boat was open, and the rushing relentless water was right there beside us.” Olaus had missed out on the birth of Martin, since he was stranded on a sandbar at the time. Thereafter, Mardy and Olaus took their children along on their travels.

In 1946, Olaus became the director of The Wilderness Society. Mardy spent countless hours working with him to protect our nation's wild lands—by writing letters, giving lectures, promoting legislation, and even leading a group on a trip through the Brooks Range in 1956. These efforts paid off. The Arctic Wildlife Range was designated as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in 1960. Mardy describes this moment as one of the few times she ever saw her husband cry during their 39-year marriage.

After Olaus died in 1963, Mardy continued his wilderness preservation work. She delivered passionate testimony before the U.S. Congress, asking representatives to “please allow Alaska to be different, to be herself, to nourish her souls.” President Carter personally thanked Mardy Murie in 1980, when he signed the Alaska Lands Act, adding 54 million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

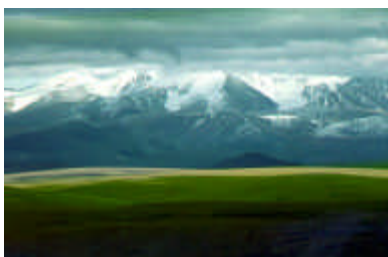


Photo Courtesy: Art Wolfe

President Clinton presented Mardy Murie with the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the nation's highest civilian honor in 1998. Her work protecting wilderness areas continues on today, as she hopes she will never see a time when “the United States of America is not so rich that she can afford to let these wildernesses pass by, or not so poor she cannot afford to protect them.”