



George Melendez Wright, Scientist and Visionary



George Wright with a camera in the snow. Yosemite National Park, 1929. National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center, photographer, C.P. Russell.

“Our national heritage is richer than just scenic features. The realization is coming that perhaps our greatest national heritage is nature itself, with all its complexity and its abundance of life, which, when combined with great scenic beauty as it is in the national parks, becomes of unlimited value.”

– George M. Wright

When George Melendez Wright joined the National Park Service in 1927, the fledgling, 11-year-old agency had no formal field research program. Wildlife management was often based on anecdotal evidence, erroneous concepts, or subjective opinion. In fact, park staff would routinely kill predators of all kinds, rangers would stomp eggs to reduce the number of birds to lessen competition for anglers, and even park leaders would have their pictures taken feeding bears. Yet less than a decade later, due to Wright’s influence, science was firmly established as the basis for wildlife management and conservation in our national parks.

Wright was born in San Francisco, on June 20, 1904. His mother, Mercedes Melendez Wright, who was born in El Salvador, died when Wright was only two years old. When his father, John Tennant Wright, a sea captain, died six years later, Wright was adopted by his great aunt, Cordelia Ward Wright.

Young George spent much of his time roaming the San Francisco Bay Area where he came to love plants and wildlife, especially birds. He graduated from Lowell High School as senior class president and president of the Audubon Club. Wright and Aunt Cordelia then moved to Berkeley, where he majored in forestry and minored in vertebrate zoology at the University of California.

In summer 1924, Wright took some college friends in his Model T Ford (nicknamed Peter) on a trek throughout the West. They visited many national parks and wildlife areas including Yosemite, Flathead Lake, Crater Lake, and Yellowstone. Wright documented his astute observations on both the wildlife and the many breakdowns of his car in a journal entitled, “The Perils of Ponderous Peter.” After graduation, Wright visited



In 1936 George Wright participated in a commission to formulate policies and plans for the establishment and development of international parks, forest reserves and wildlife refuges along the international boundary between Mexico and the United States.

Commission Group: (l to r) George Wright; Dr. Bell, US Biological Survey; Daniel Galicia, Mexico; Conrad L. Wirth, Assistant Director USNPS (later Director); Roger Toll, Superintendent, Yellowstone National Park; Santos Ibarra, Mexico City Forest Service; Sr. Trexenia, Forest Ranger, Chihuahua. National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center, photographer, Roger Wolcott Toll.

Mount McKinley National Park (now Denali) collecting specimens and conducting life history studies. He discovered a surfbird nest and eggs that had previously been unknown on a ridge 1,000 feet above timberline. This find established Wright as an ornithologist of note.

In 1927, Wright was hired as an assistant park naturalist at Yosemite. He traveled the Yosemite Valley, the Sierra Foothills, and the California coast studying the wildlife intently. He found that deer in Yosemite Valley were too abundant and tame and that cougars and other large predators were scarce. He became concerned about the scarcity of Tule elk, the fact that black bears were accustomed to being fed by humans, and the impacts of hunting and trapping along the park's boundaries. Wright documented his findings in natural history articles for the Yosemite Nature Notes.

At the time, the National Park Service had no program devoted to the necessary field research on which to base wildlife conservation and management. This led Wright to develop a plan for a wildlife survey program in national parks. Wright's proposal for a survey, which he himself funded, was accepted by Director Albright in 1929, and for the next three years, Wright's team circled the west surveying most of the existing national parks and monuments, interviewing park superintendents and rangers regarding wildlife and habitat, and recording their observations. The objectives for the survey included determining both original and current conditions and recommending actions that would restore wildlife to natural conditions. Special attention was paid to rare and endangered species, including the trumpeter swan; to the conditions of elk and deer; and to the causes of conflicts between park visitors and park wildlife, notably bears. The survey's findings and recommendations for restoration were published in 1932 in *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States*, a Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks. The first of the Fauna series, this report formulated wildlife-management policies and helped institute science as a vital ingredient in park management.

In 1934, Wright, his wife Bee, and their two daughters moved to Washington, D. C., where as the first chief of the National Park Service's Wildlife Division, he was charged with strengthening the agency's research program. Under Wright's leadership, each park began to survey and evaluate the status of wildlife and identify urgent problems.

After just a few months in Washington, President Roosevelt appointed Wright head of the National Resources Board. In that position, Wright influenced nationwide planning for public parks and recreation areas. In 1936, while serving on a commission establishing new park areas along the Mexican border, Wright was killed in an automobile accident. He was 31 years old.

Despite his abbreviated life, Wright's contributions to our national parks and his influence on the way they are managed are unequalled. Wright's revolutionary proposals for managing wildlife laid the foundation for the National Park Service's current emphasis on science as its primary decisionmaking tool.



George Melendez Wright, 1930. National Park Service Historic Photograph Collection, Harpers Ferry Center.