

## GEORGE M. WRIGHT 1904 - 1936

*By Ben H. Thompson*

George Wright's enjoyment of nature set his brief life course. Because of his knowledge of plants and animals he served as natural history instructor for two seasons in a Boy Scout summer camp, when he was 14 and 15 years old. At about that age he backpacked alone through largely undeveloped country along the coast from San Francisco to the northern boundary of California.



*GEORGE M. WRIGHT, from a portrait photo taken between 1930 and 1936, which now hangs in the NPS offices in Washington.*

At the University of California in Berkeley he majored in forestry under Prof. Walter Mulford and minored in vertebrate zoology under Dr. Joseph Grinnell. In the summer of 1926 he and Joseph S. Dixon, Economic Mammalogist on Dr. Grinnell's staff, spent 72 days collecting birds and mammals and making life history studies in Mount McKinley National Park, Alaska. There George found a surfbird (one of the shore birds) nesting on a rocky ridge 1,000 feet above timberline. Previously, the surfbird's nest and eggs had been unknown. Thus, knowledge grows.

Joining the National Park Service in 1927, George was assigned to Yosemite as Assistant Park Naturalist. He and Park Naturalist Carl P. Russell often discussed wildlife conservation and the presentation of park wildlife to the public. Deer in Yosemite Valley were too abundant and tame. Cougars and other large predators in the Park were believed to be very scarce or nonexistent. Black bears raided campgrounds for food and were fed garbage each evening several miles down the Valley from the village and lodges. A small remnant of the Tule elk, native in the San Joaquin Valley, were kept in a paddock in Yosemite Valley, as an emergency conservation measure. Hunting and trapping along the Park's boundaries were believed to affect park wildlife adversely. But the NPS had no full time staff or program devoted to the necessary field research on which better wildlife conservation and presentation could be based.

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In 1929 George proposed that there be established a wildlife survey office and program for the National Park Service, to be funded by him until the program's value could be demonstrated and the program provided for as a regular part of the National Park Service. Director Horace M. Albright approved the proposal and strongly supported it. Personnel of the program included Dixon as economic mammalogist, Wright as scientific aide, myself as research associate, and Mrs. George Pease, secretary. Office space was leased in the Union Trust Building in Berkeley for about the first year, office and field equipment (including a car designed and built for prolonged periods of field studies) and an excellent natural history library were provided.

George was a productive, orderly and systematic person. Useful office procedures were quickly formulated. Longhand field notes and research notes were typed and filed with useful cross references. Negatives and prints were each filed in separate envelopes, numbered and labeled for subject, place, photographer and date. Library books and journals were organized similar to the Library of Congress system; pamphlets and reprints were kept in orderly condition for ready access.

Preliminary surveys of the status of wildlife and the identification of urgent wildlife problems in the national parks began in 1929. In each park, effort was made to determine original and present wildlife conditions, to identify causes of adverse changes and to try to recommend actions that would restore park wildlife to its original natural condition, insofar as possible.

Most of the then existing national parks and several of the large national monuments were studied in the first three years by members of the survey group. Special attention was devoted to ascertaining what was happening to rare and endangered species, such as the trumpeter swan; what were the conditions and carrying capacities of park elk and deer winter ranges; what were the causes of conflict between park visitors and park wildlife, notably black and grizzly bears, and what could be done to achieve the desired harmony?

In 1932 the Department published a report on the Survey's preliminary findings and recommendations, entitled, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States, a Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks*, the first of the *Fauna* series.

The Roosevelt emergency conservation programs, particularly the Civilian Conservation Corps, spurred protection and construction programs on public lands. Many professionals were employed in these programs, including biologists assigned to the National Park Service's Wildlife Survey unit.

In 1934 George, with his wife Bee and their two little daughters, spent several months in Washington, D. C., working with Assistant Director Harold C. Bryant to strengthen the wildlife research program. By that time it was being supported almost wholly by public funds and was designated as the Wildlife Division, in the Branch of Research and Education.

That summer, as part of the wide-ranging planning studies of the newly created National Resources Board, the National Park Service was assigned responsibility for preparing a report on "Recreational Use of Land in The United States." Wright was designated head of the group to carry out this assignment. As I recall, among the group were Herbert Evison, for state parks, Roger W. Toll, Superintendent of Yellowstone, for national parks, L. H. Weir, for city parks and recreation, and representatives of several NPS divisions. Miss Harlean James of the American Planning and Civic Association was one of the helpful consultants. The report's due date was November 1, and the NPS gave it highest priority. Many days the group worked until midnight and the last day they worked all night. Mrs. Wright brought in midnight snacks and coffee. In the morning the voluminous report was hand carried by George to the Board, on time.

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Many of the areas later established as local, state, and national parks were recommended in that report and nationwide planning for public parks and recreation areas was strengthened.

One day during preparation of that report, George had lunch at the old Cosmos Club with "Ding" Darling, then Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, Roger Toll and me. George told Ding about the great value of the Red Rock Lakes region in Montana, some 50 miles west of Yellowstone, as a trumpeter swan breeding area. As many or more swans were breeding there as were in Yellowstone and Jackson Hole. It was all privately owned and swans occasionally were shot. George urged that the area be purchased as a trumpeter swan sanctuary. He said he would be glad to start the land purchase fund by donating \$500. Roger Toll said he would match that. Ding said that possibly the contributions would not be necessary; that the Biological Survey had some money to buy land for wildlife refuges; that he would be making a Western trip in a few days and would look into the Red Rock lakes area... "if it is as good as you say we may be able to acquire it as a refuge." It was and he did.

After a December 1934 reconnaissance of St. John Island in the Virgin Islands with Dr. Bryant, Roger Toll and Oliver Taylor (they felt that the Island was of national park quality and highly desirable), George and his family returned to his home in Berkeley to continue the work of the Wildlife Division, then headquartered in Hilgard Hall on the University campus. But by the summer of 1935, the Service's wildlife studies program had increased to the point that it was desirable to have the Division's chief in Washington, D. C. Again George moved his family there and worked to strengthen the national parks as ecologically sound wildlife sanctuaries.

In February 1936, George was designated as a member of a "Commission to represent the United States in conferences with a Mexican 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..." The American Commission, in addition to George, consisted of Assistant Director Conrad L. Wirth, Chairman; Roger W. Toll, Superintendent of Yellowstone and Chief Investigator of proposed national parks; Frank Pinkley, Superintendent of Southwestern National Monuments; Herbert Maier, Regional Officer, Region Eight; Lawrence M. Lawson, American Commission, International Boundary Commission, United States and Mexico; and Ira N. Gabrielson, Chief, Bureau of Biological Survey.



*PART OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION investigating potential park and forest reserve lands along the Mexican-US Border in 1936. Shown are [L-R]: George Wright; Dr. Ball, US Biological Survey; Sr. Galicia, Mexico; Connie Wirth, Assistant Director USNPS (later Director); Roger Toll, Superintendent, Yellowstone NP; Sr. Ibarra, Mexico City Forest Service; and Sr. Trexenia, Forest Ranger, Chihuahua. The photo is the property of Ben Thompson and identifications were made by Ben Thompson and Connie Wirth.*

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Near Deming, New Mexico, after the group left Big Bend National Park in Texas, an on-coming car blew a tire and crashed head-on into the car that Roger Toll and George Wright were riding in. They were both killed.

George was an unusually effective champion of his cause—idealistic, hard working, highly sociable, keenly perceptive of other people, always generous, and unconcerned with personal status. At his death, Harlean James said, "I have never known a person of 31 who had as mature judgment as he had."



## ARE THE NATIONAL PARKS IN PERIL?

By Roland H. Wauer

*Editor's Note: On July 20, 1981, Roland H. Wauer, Chief of the Division of Natural Resources Management, U. S. National Park Service, Washington, gave a paper at the 10th Annual Southwest Studies Summer Institute in Colorado Springs. The entire paper is well worth reading and can be obtained from Wauer, NPS, Department of the Interior, Washington, D. C. 20240. Excerpts from the important historical section and the findings are here presented. The conclusions literally bristle with implications for science and education in parks and reserves—most especially for the need to start closing the gap between knowledge and public understanding, in the urgent interests of perpetuating our natural and cultural integrity.*

The 10th General Assembly of IUCN meeting in New Delhi in 1969 resolved that all governments and local and private organizations should agree to reserve the term "national park" to areas possessing specific characteristics. This resolution was endorsed by the Second World Conference on National Parks in 1972. The importance of national parks and equivalent reserves in the fields of international conservation, research, education, recreation and economic development is increasingly evident. Today, 100 of the world's 170 nations have national parks.

Ironically, the popularity of national parks is often its greatest threat. Overuse causes damage and serious problems. Yet modern societies unquestionably need such areas for their mental well-being. An even more insidious impact comes from adjacent land uses—lands that once served as buffers to park resources.

The average park visitor however, is not likely to be aware of the downward trends in park ecosystems. To the untrained eye, only catastrophic changes are evident.

Threats to America's national parks have concerned farsighted conservationists for more than half a century. The loss of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in 1913 to provide water for San Francisco was perhaps the first significant loss. Out of that defeat emerged a more unified and determined park protection philosophy, and the National Park Service Act of 1916 seemed to solidify a park preservation commitment for all Americans.

The mid-1920's saw preservationists react to an effort by farmers and ranchers to usurp Yellowstone Lake for irrigation by extending park status to the Teton Mountains south of Yellowstone. In 1929, Grand Teton National Park was established as a "roadless" preserve.

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