

# Remembering Lowell Sumner

7 December 1907–1 October 1989

*With an undying sense of Gratitude and Appreciation for the Life,  
the Good Works, and the Friendship of Lowell Sumner*

LOWELL studied mammalogy, ornithology and ecology under Joseph Grinnell at the University of California–Berkeley; it was here that he knew George M. Wright in the late 1920s–early 1930s. While working towards his doctorate, he worked for the California Fish and Wildlife Service, writing his dissertation in 1935 on *The Life History of the California Quail, with Recommendations for Conservation and Management*. Lowell joined the National Park Service in 1935 as the Research and Management Biologist in the Western Regional Office in San Francisco. It was from this vantage point that he began a long series of studies in Kings Canyon National Park, which later he combined with the observations and records of Joseph S. Dixon into a major manuscript. In 1953, the University of California Press published this [Lowell Sumner and Joseph S. Dixon] under the title *Birds and Mammals of the Sierra Nevada with Records from Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks*. It also was his Regional Biologist position that involved him in the Park Service's early Alaska studies—notably among them, Katmai, and what would become the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Of the Refuge, Lowell later said "my part in helping to protect this area and to establish this refuge was the crowning achievement of my professional life."

In 1960 Lowell transferred to the National Park Service's Washing-

ton Office where he was Chief Research Biologist. At that time, research was housed in the Office of the Chief Interpreter, and it was here that he met, and soon married, Marietta McDaniels.

In Washington, one of the overriding concerns of NPS in those days was the Mission 66 program. Gotten underway in 1956, it constructed and refurbished physical facilities in the parks which had suffered near total neglect during WWII. One member of the Mission 66 Staff, Howard Stagner, came to realize that nothing in Mission 66 addressed the sad state of the Service's field research capabilities; field researchers could be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the discretionary funds per year were less than the cost of one NPS campground privvy. Howard had convinced the powers-that-be to begin to at least form a plan to correct the situation. That's what led to the appointment of Secretary Udall's *Special Advisory Board on Wildlife Management* (the Leopold Committee), and the *Advisory Committee to the National Park Service on Research of the National Academy of Sciences–National Research Council*. Lowell became not only a chief advisor to the Director regarding biological research and management in the parks, but also a major advisor to these two committees. He could be heard to say many times during this period that if these committees would just read *Faunas 1* and 2, they'd discover that George

Wright had all this figured out years ago. Lowell never knew it, but nearly 20 years later those words inspired the naming of (and need for) The George Wright Society.

During and after the deliberations of these two advisory committees, a small Office of Natural Science Studies was separated off from the Office of Interpretation; it consisted of Lowell, Robert Rose (geology), O. L. (Wally) Wallis (aquatic biology), R. M. Linn (botany), and Mary Mielke (secretary), and it operated under a division headed by Howard Stagner. Recommendations of the two advisory committees led to the establishment of a Chief Scientist position in the Washington Office of NPS, and Stanley A. Cain—the only one to sit on both of those advisory committees—enticed George Sprugel away from his position in the National Science Foundation to fill the job. An attempt to carry out the other recommendations quickly followed, with the augmentation of field research personnel and the formation of Natural Science Research Plans for individual parks. Field researchers in NPS were nearly non-existent, but Lowell knew who they should be and knew where they had been stashed when WWII brought the near demise of George Wright's Wildlife Division (which was headed by Vic Cahalane during the war). Funding was still meager; but the days of Camelot in Washington still persisted for a while following John Kennedy's death, and optimism and enthusiasm were in reasonably good supply. Research Plans for Isle Royale, Sequoia-King's Canyon, Everglades, and Great Smoky Mountains quickly took shape, with Lowell as a major architect. Even though it

later became evident that these plans were so large and involved that they ran the risk of being filed rather than followed, they were a necessary step in the evolution of viable research planning for the Service.

While Lowell, Wallis, Rose and Linn slaved over various research plans and day-to-day exigencies, Chief Scientist George Sprugel had been meeting-up with a bureaucratic reluctance that existed between him and the Director. This finally led George to the practice of carrying a letter of resignation in his inside breast pocket—all he would have to do was date it and give it. One day, to our astonishment, he did just that. Some of us thought George had done a cop-out. But George had a reputation in scientific circles far beyond the Interior Building and his resignation was an embarrassment to the Service. The cry of the scientific and conservation communities forced the closed doors to open, as George had thought it might all along. If only we always knew what later retrospect would reveal!

So, in the early autumn of 1966, Lowell was asked to be the acting Chief Scientist. He immediately declined, as if he had seen it coming his way, saying that he and Marietta had plans to retire in the near future and he would need all the remaining time to finish already started projects. He then suggested that Linn take on that job; Linn, for the second time, was astonished.

Lowell retired from the Service in 1967, but he continued good works long after. One of these involved the Desert Bighorn Council, which he had earlier helped to form. He and Gale Monson, formerly of the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a good friend of Lowell's, collected and edited the invited papers from several authors to form *The Desert Bighorn: It's Life History, Ecology, and Management* (University of Arizona Press, 1980).

Lowell and Marietta had a place in Friendship, Maine, where they spent several retirement summers, alternating with New Mexico in winters. Realizing that this semiannual wrenching was more than they should expect themselves to endure, they finally

settled in the Glenwood area of New Mexico, establishing for themselves a homestead they lovingly referred to as *La Hacienda de Los Sumners*.

Lowell died on October 1, 1989, and on October 21 a memorial service for Lowell was held outdoors, at a place called Los Olmos Ramada near Glenwood—and looking up into the mountains he loved so much. A very longtime good friend, George L. Collins, delivered the following valediction—

*It is my desire to express, on this occasion particularly, something of my feeling for my friend, the late E. Lowell (Doc) Sumner.*

*He was a man of innate sensitivity and courtesy whose good will was projected immediately toward everyone he met — old friends, new acquaintances, all alike.*

*In Doc we had a splendid, often brilliant, professional mind, a reserved yet accessible personality, at ease among the lowly or the most sophisticated, always gracious and kind.*

*I say all this because I have been with Doc on many occasions, in many places, in widely varied circumstances. I always knew where he stood. I think that he was far more often right than wrong. Doc's influence in my life was, and I am certain always will be, profound, everlasting — a certain infusion of character I feel, and see, I think, in others of his associates. He was wise and unusually self-contained.*

*When he disagreed with me he could be indirect and subtle, or direct and forcefully to the point, as friends should be with each other, depending in my case upon how far out of line I might be, in his opinion. I owe him a lot for that.*

*Doc and Ben Thompson for far more than half a century have been my mentors in literally dozens of proposals, a few successes, to protect and improve cultural America — through better understanding of the land, for all of us, for all life, for all time. He did his part very well indeed, with uncommon integrity.*

*What Doc leaves in spirit, in his written and spoken words, are his truly great standards of personal conduct — in land conservation for the land's own magnificence, for understanding and order among all of its creatures, including you and me.*



*Marietta Sumner, George Collins, George Sprugel, O. L. Wallis, R. Linn*