

GEORGE MELENDEZ WRIGHT

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



BEN H. THOMPSON

With Additional Information from the
Writings of Lowell Sumner and Others



GEORGE WRIGHT'S ENJOYMENT of nature set his brief life course. He was born in San Francisco, California, June 20, 1904, to John Tennant Wright and Mercedes Melendez Wright. His mother's family was from San Salvador and his father's was among the San Franciscans of 1849. From an early age he displayed a deep interest in natural history and an aptitude for science. 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.

At the University of California in Berkeley he majored in forestry under Professor 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 Wright discovered the long-sought nest and eggs of a surfbird 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, Wright 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 National Park Service had no full time staff or program devoted to the necessary field research on which better wildlife conservation and presentation could be based.

In 1929 Wright 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, Ben H. Thompson 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 truck designed and built for prolonged periods of field studies) and an excellent natural history library were provided.

As Ben Thompson recalls, Wright 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. 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 of the Interior 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 Wright spent several months in Washington, D.C., working with Assistant Director Harold C. Bryant to strengthen the wildlife research program. By that time it

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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. 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 USNPS di-

visions. Harlean James of the American Planning and Civic Association (and later author of the book *Romance of the National Parks*) was one of the helpful consultants. The report's

due date was November 1, and the USNPS gave it highest priority. Many days the group worked until midnight and the last day they worked all night, with George's wife, Bee, bringing in midnight snacks and coffee. In the morning the voluminous report was hand-carried by Wright to the Board, on time.

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, Wright had lunch at the old Cosmos Club with "Ding" Darling, then Chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, along with Toll

and Thompson. Wright told Darling 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 were shot occasionally. Wright 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. Toll said he would match that. Darling said that possibly the contributions would not be necessary. The Biological Survey had some money to buy land for

wildlife refuges, and he was 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 Bryant, Toll, and Oliver Taylor (they felt that the island was of national park quality and highly desirable), Wright 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 Wright moved his family there and worked to strengthen the national parks as ecologically sound wildlife sanctuaries.

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In February 1936, Wright 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 Wright, consisted of US National Park Service Assistant Director Conrad L. Wirth; Toll, the 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.

On February 25, 1936, the group was heading west after having inspected the newly authorized Big Bend National Park in Texas. George Wright and Roger Toll were riding in the first of the group's two cars. Near Deming, New Mexico, an on-coming auto blew a tire and crashed head-on into their car. Both Wright and Toll were killed, as was one of the occupants of the other auto.

Many of George Wright's accomplishments were made possible because of the support his wife gave him. At the University of California he had met Bernice (Bee) Ray of Allison, Iowa, who was to take her degree in Political Science. They were married in the Good Samaritan Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, February 2, 1931, where George was being treated for malaria. They later held a formal marriage ceremony at St.

John's Chapel in Los Angeles. George and Bee had two daughters: Sherry, born in 1932 (now Sherry Wright Brichetto of Greenbrae, California); and Pamela, born in 1933 (now Pamela Wright Lloyd of Mill Valley, California).

Bee had no background in biology, but she strongly supported George in his work. After their marriage she went with him on nearly all of his trips into the parks, collecting information on wildlife conditions, and often camping in remote regions, as in the upper reaches of the North Fork of the Flathead River in Glacier National Park and in the Bechler River country of Yellowstone. A few months after their daughter Sherry was born, they tucked her into a snugly covered basket, with a gauze window above her face, and drove to Yellowstone in winter. Baby and basket rode in the Wildlife Survey's specially equipped truck, behind the driver's seat but in the open air—and thoroughly enjoyed the trip.

Bee and daughters accompanied Wright on his Washington sojourn in 1934. When the Wildlife Division was permanently moved to Washington in 1935, the family established a new home at the corner of 28th and O streets in Georgetown. It was there that Bee received word of her husband's fatal crash.

Soon afterward Bee and the children returned to Berkeley. The federal government had by then assumed financial responsibility for the Wildlife Division. In 1938 Bee married J. Robert Shuman of the San Francisco investment firm of Shuman Agnew. They lived in the city for the rest of their lives. Mr. Shuman died in 1982. Bee, tragically, was killed in an automobile accident in February

1986—almost exactly fifty years after George's death.

Aside from the co-authorship of the first two volumes of the Fauna series, Wright published short biological papers or notes in *The Condor*, *The Gull*, *Scientific Monthly*, *Yosemite Nature Notes*, and the *Journal of Mammalogy*. He also published popular accounts of his interests in various newspapers. He was elected a Life Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1927, and served on various committees of the American Society of Mammalogists from 1931 on.

George Wright is remembered as 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."

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Wright was so far in the forefront of his time that his publications on wildlife management and the ecological protection of parks, though long out of print, still sound modern. His park-by-park description of environmental problems, and the management programs proposed for their solution, could pass for surveys and plans made decades later. This was not lost on scientists of Wright's own era. In an obituary notice published in *Science*, Harold C. Bryant wrote: "To him, perhaps, more than to any one else, must go the credit for developing a concept of conservation in which man mingles

with the other animals and maintains that priceless association by intelligently restraining his own acquisitive and reorganizing tendencies."

Nonetheless, as Wright's colleague Lowell Sumner put it, "the spectacular success which attended his efforts to win acceptance of his ideas and programs on behalf on the parks was due even more to his sunny and persuasive personality than to his scientific attainments." And, as T. S. Palmer wrote in *The Auk*, Wright's "deep appreciation of the importance of conservation" was joined with "a faculty for devising practical methods of work."

Since Wright was independently wealthy, his efforts were not hampered by the subservience of position and status that often is experienced by pioneers and original thinkers in an organizational hierarchy. In addition, the most effective of all his attainments and characteristics was his warm, relaxed, unself-

consciously friendly personality. Rangers in the back country were on the same first-name basis with him as were luminaries in the Administration or the Cosmos and Bohemian clubs.

But, according to Sumner, "no matter how many reminiscences might be recorded concerning George Wright's disarming diplomacy, in retrospect it still seems almost unbelievable that such a young newcomer was able, in so short a period of time, to introduce a set of new management concepts into an old-line Federal organization, and recruit from all over the country a

team of park-oriented biologists, most of them not long out of the graduate schools, to help carry out the new ideas. To succeed, such an innovator would need an extraordinary talent for persuasiveness, or some good friends in high places. Although George relied mainly on the first, he had both. In addition he had rare good luck as well as judgement in timing his efforts to take advantage of developing national resource programs."

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