Jerry Emory
Pamela Wright Lloyd

George Melendez Wright
1904-1936:
A Voice on the Wing

I arrived at Cracker Lake shortly after ten. Over the west wall great shafts of sunlight from the breaking clouds shot downward through the purple haze. Some angles of the rocks reflected the light dazzlingly.... Some goats posing on rocky prominences were illuminated from behind by these beams so that they looked twice natural size. Radiant pagan gods framed in silver halos they gazed at lower earth from their high thrones.

George Melendez Wright
Field Notes, September 1, 1931
Cracker Lake, Glacier National Park

George M. Wright's professional accomplishments and his views on wildlife and park management have been written about by several distinguished authors (see "Writing on Wright," below). This article hopes to illuminate Wright's life beyond the professional dimension. We hope to offer an insight into Wright as a keen naturalist, energetic field biologist, loyal friend, and loving husband and father. That is, George M. Wright as a person. We do so by relying heavily on excerpts from Wright's unpublished field notebooks (both authors read 716 pages of his 1924-1933 notes), personal papers, a 1987 interview with Ben Thompson, and family remembrances.

This is not simply an exercise in nostalgia for two people for whom the life of George M. Wright still looms large more than six decades after his death. Instead, it is clear to us that Wright's intense dedication to wildlife biology and the national parks, his friends, and his family were so inextricably intertwined, that by painting a more complete picture of Wright—albeit somewhat informal—we might more fully understand his thinking and his accomplishments.

Unfortunately, much is still unknown about Wright's childhood years. What we do know is that George Melendez Wright was born

on June 20, 1904, in San Francisco, California. His mother, Mercedes Melendez Wright, was born in El Salvador and died in 1906; his father, Captain John Tennant Wright, a native New Yorker, died in 1912. His great aunt, Cordelia Ward Wright, helped raise the young boy from an early age and officially adopted him in 1913. George M. Wright had two brothers, Charles and John, who returned to El Salvador to live with relatives. His brothers also died relatively young, but their families, and some of the relatives of Mercedes Melendez, still live throughout that country—living reminders of George M. Wright's Latin American heritage.

Cordelia Wright, fondly referred to simply as "Auntie" by George (and later by many rangers in Yosemite and the wildlife survey team), might be responsible for his early interest in nature. Apparently the young Wright was allowed to hike all around the San Francisco Bay Area where he undoubtedly developed the love of birds and bird songs that permeated all his work. After graduating from San Francisco's Lowell High School in 1920 (where he was senior class president and president of the Audubon Club), Wright and Auntie moved to Berkeley, where he attended the University of California.

While at U.C. Berkeley, Wright majored in forestry, but it is well documented that he was heavily influenced by the teachings and personage of Professor Joseph Grinnell, one of America's leading zoologists and wildlife researchers. Knowledge of Wright's non-academic activities from 1920 to1925 is rather sketchy, not unlike his early years. There is no question, however, that his intense interest in wildlife biology was developing and maturing quickly. It is believed that during summers and school breaks he often took to the road and backcountry, visiting Yosemite and other parks on the West Coast. In the summer of 1922, for example, Wright helped lead students during a Sierra Club "High Country Trip" as an instructor of natural history.

Wright's first known recorded "field trip" lasted nearly two months during the summer of 1924. Along with fraternity brothers Robert Shuman and Carlton H. Rose, he ventured throughout the West visiting numerous national parks and wildlife areas (see "Chronology of George M. Wright's Field Notes" elsewhere in this issue). Wright recorded this trip in a journal he titled "The Perils of Ponderous Peter." "Peter" was his well-seasoned Model T Ford, and many of his entries discuss the most recent mechanical failure of the aging vehicle (such as the 72 flat tires they fixed). Other entries are quite revealing.

In Yellowstone National Park on July 14, Wright—not knowing where the future would take him—both expressed an interest that would occupy the rest of his life while showing us his humor.

George M. Wright, young Forestry student, U.C. Berkeley, early 1920s.

> I like the country very much. It is reported full of wild game. While cooking supper in the dark I made the grave mistake of warming the peas in a pot containing our dish rag and washing soap. We could not make a go of the soapy peas—quite impossible to keep them on the knife.

A few weeks earlier, at Montana's Flathead Lake, his love of the outdoors comes through clearly. "Is there anything on this earth that approaches the heavenly state more closely than a night spent at the foot of a noble pine beside a beautiful lake? So endeth the longest day of the year." And, when visiting Crater Lake National Park on June 30 with his occasionally reluctant traveling mates, it becomes clear that Wright had covered some of this territory before. "It is wonderful to see Crater Lake once more. I hope that Carl and Bob find it worth the risk."

Wright graduated with a degree in forestry in 1925 and eventually became a field assistant to Joseph Grinnell. In the summer of 1926, Wright and Joseph S. Dixon (an economic mammalogist on Grinnell's staff) were sent to Mount McKinley (now Denali) National Park to collect specimens and conduct natural history studies. These field notes, held by the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at U.C. Berkeley, not only show that Wright was using the now-legendary journal system taught to all Grinnell students, but that his observational and writing skills were being honed.

As fortune would have it, the McKinley trip would also help Wright establish himself in the ornithological world as the discoverer of a nesting surfbird—a bit of knowledge coveted by Grinnell and other ornithologists. On May 28, 1926, Wright recorded the following.

> Mr. Dixon stayed home with a strained ankle while I went prospecting for specimens in general and a hoary marmot in particular.... While following the contour of the hill at approximately 4,000 feet through sheer good luck I happened to make the find of my young life.... A quick movement some five or six hundred feet away attracted my attention to a grayish bird that was sneaking hurriedly along.... Here was a surf bird in the nesting season....When Mr. Dixon heard the good news he was inclined to think it some sort of a bum joke but was soon convinced and eager to be on the firing line.

In Dixon's notes of the same day, also held by the MVZ, he recounts what happened when Wright returned to fetch him, bad ankle and all. "Wright came on to camp to tell me the good news and by 6 o'clock we packed up and left camp to investigate the nest.... The surf bird was on the nest when we arrived and Mr. Wright was correct when he said 'I'm sure it is a surf bird.' To Mr. George M. Wright then belongs the credit of finding the first nest of this species on May 28, 1926 at 4 p.m. He is, so far as we have record, the first white man to set eyes on the eggs of this bird which hither to have been unknown."

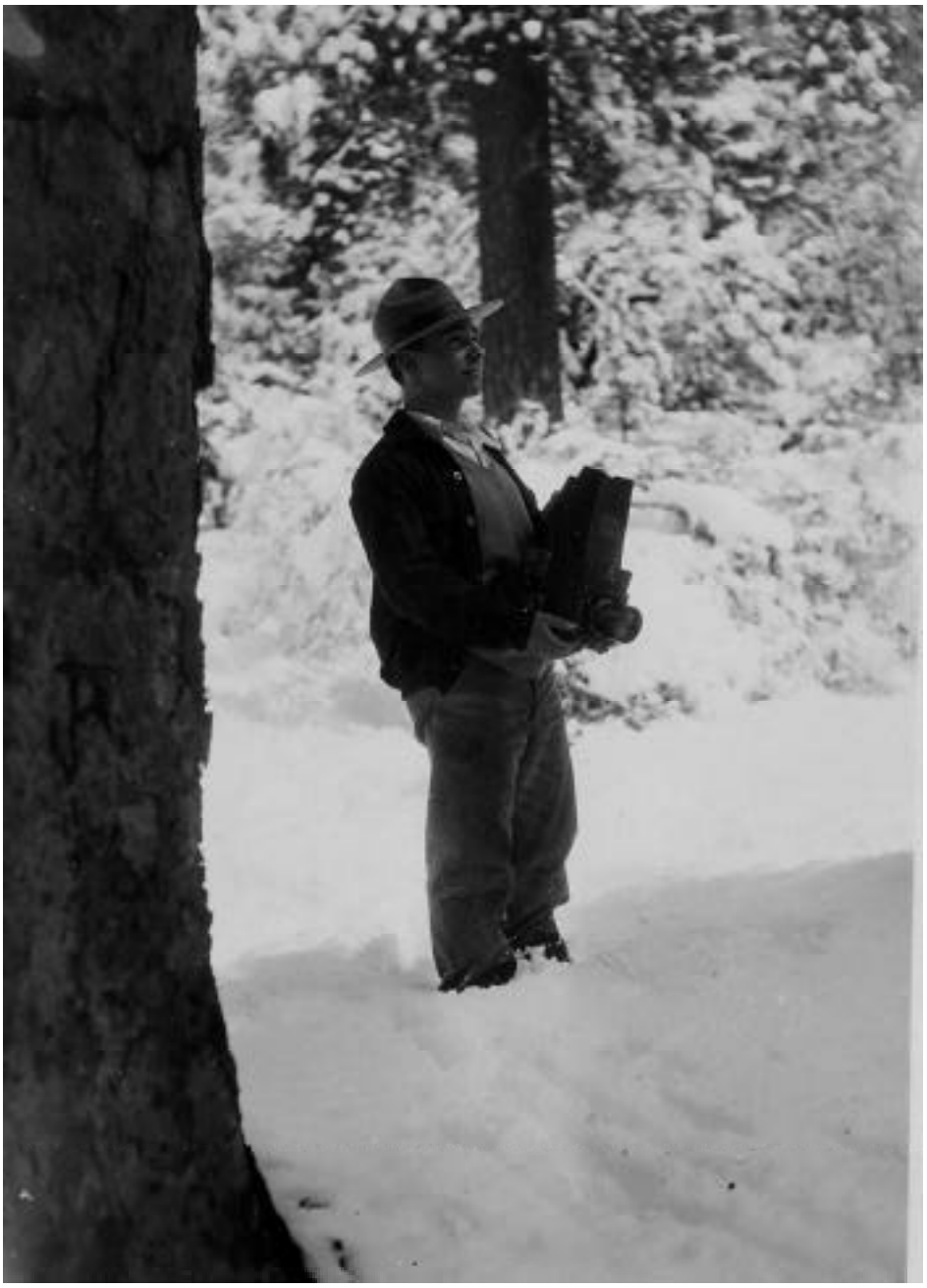
Wright and Dixon then retreated to a nearby knoll to observe the surfbird into the twilight of the next morning. Here Wright discloses that he could be moving and eloquent in his observations while hunkered down against the rain and cold.

> Shelter provided by a small rock outcropping, along with a smoky fire of alder dragged from the little creek basin some distance away, helped to make our storm vigil more endurable. Hardly a scant half hour had passed before it commenced to rain with an accompaniment of chill wind that fairly froze.
>
> Misty clouds would come drifting slowly up the cañon and over the rocky ridge tops in great white swirls. They moved on with a relentless sureness until finally they hung at dead level over the valley from the North mountains to the main Alaskan Range. All underneath this heavy gray mist from foothill slopes to the winding shallow river looked mysteriously unreal in the Northern twilight.
>
> Sometimes the rain would let up as a shifting wind turned back the clouds. Then a little light filtered down to show us whole troops of mist ghosts rise right out of the tundra and go chasing away up the valley. No doubt they were on their way to join the cloud ranks again.

Beginning with Wright's 1927 to 1929 Yosemite field notes (held by the Yosemite Research Library at the national park), and continuing through 1933, we can begin to find the seeds of his formal scientific writings and the ideas contained in the Fauna Series. Clear thoughts and concerns illuminate the pages. But there is more. In addition to his continuing sense of humor, we can now begin to read about his disgust (Wright's term) with a variety of wildlife situations in the national parks, his amazing ear for the sounds of nature, accounts of his arduous hikes into the backcountry (often solo hikes), and an intense dedication to classic field work.

Field people know that field notes are typically rewritten at the end of the day in a formal journal, such as those used by Wright. In a 1987 interview with Ben Thompson at his home in Glenwood, New Mexico, Thompson made the following comment regarding Wright and his field notes. "His observations were intense, but always with pleasure. At night, he was very self-disciplined about writing his notes. You know, when you're by a campfire, and maybe you're tired, and maybe it's cold, and damp and so on. It takes self-discipline to make yourself write those notes. He was very conscientious about that."

For the two years that Wright was in Yosemite working as an assistant naturalist for the Park Service (November 1927 to October 1929) his travels seemed to be confined to the back country of Yosemite, the Sierra foothills, Berkeley (where he maintained a home), and the California coast. The vast majority of his observations, mostly short entries, took place in Yosemite Valley where he always noted and listed the birdlife (he often went out all day solely for birdwatching trips), but he was also



George M. Wright, Yosemite Valley (photo by Carl Russell)

possessed with the status of large mammals: deer, bear, elk. In addition to his duties as assistant park naturalist (Carl Russell was head naturalist at the time), he wrote many natural history pieces for the *Yosemite Nature Notes*, taught field classes, and cared for his Auntie. Cordelia Wright moved into the newly finished Ahwahnee Hotel to be close to George. She died in Yosemite on December 19, 1928, at the age of 88. From all reports Auntie was an extraordinary person. For Cordelia Wright, George was "My Boy," and surely she stood behind him for at least 16 of his most formative years.

Carl Russell and George M. Wright, Yosemite Valley, September 26, 1928

Before Cordelia Wright's death, in September of 1928— approximately a year into his stay—there is a brief entry that, like many early observations, foreshadows an issue that will preoccupy him for years. "The elk problem bothers me very much. There are many sides to the question."

Ironically, one of his most detailed species observations during this period concerns the rather mundane brown towhee from a hospital window in Oakland (we don't know if Wright was in the hospital for an ailment or if he was visiting a friend).

> Birds are not numerous in this thickly populated part of town. A brown towhee is very evidently singing for joy that he is the father of a family or at least a prospective father. The song appears to be certain definite arrangement of a series of notes almost exactly similar to the usual call note. Spacing them to give time interval they are somewhat like this: [drawing of song]. There are about fifteen notes to the song but the last are so rapid that it is difficult to count them. All are pitched alike and the variation comes in intensity and spacing. The song gives an effect almost depressing in its monotony.

After conceiving the plan for a wildlife survey of the national parks in 1928, and receiving the approval of Director Horace M. Albright the following year (see accompanying box, below), Wright assembled his team. For the next three years he was almost always accompanied in the field by Ben Thompson and Joseph Dixon, either together, or separately.

George M. Wright interviewing Maria Lebrado, "The Last Yosemite Indian," July, 1929 (photo by Joseph S. Dixon)

Berkeley, California
August 17, 1930

To All Park Superintendents and Managers of Park Operations—
Hotels, Lodges, Stores, Etc.:

One of the most important of the newer activities of the National Park Service is our wild life research branch, the work of which is being carried on by Mr. George M. Wright, Mr. Joseph Dixon, and Mr. Benjamin H. Thompson. Mr. Wright is personally carrying a major portion of the financial burden of this work, owing to the fact that Congress has not yet provided adequately for it. Because of Mr. Wright's generosity and public spirit, we have been able to move ahead much more quickly than would have been the case had we had to wait until full recognition was given by Congress to the needs of this division.

All Superintendents and others connected with the national parks are requested to extend all practicable courtesies and assistance to Mr. Wright and his associates as they go from park to park. They are entitled to receive the benefits of all special rates as well as the opportunity to have work done in our shops, obtain gas and oil, etc.

Messrs. Wright, Dixon, and Thompson are just now starting on an important trip that will keep them out in the field until November, and, in view of the lateness of the season and the danger of encountering bad weather, it is especially important that all available National Park Service facilities be placed at their disposal, in order that their work may be carried on with the utmost expedition and efficiency.

Finally, let me say that there is no work going on in the National Park Service today that interests me more than the undertaking of Mr. Wright and his associates. Therefore, any assistance and courtesies extended to them personally, as well as officially, will be appreciated by me.

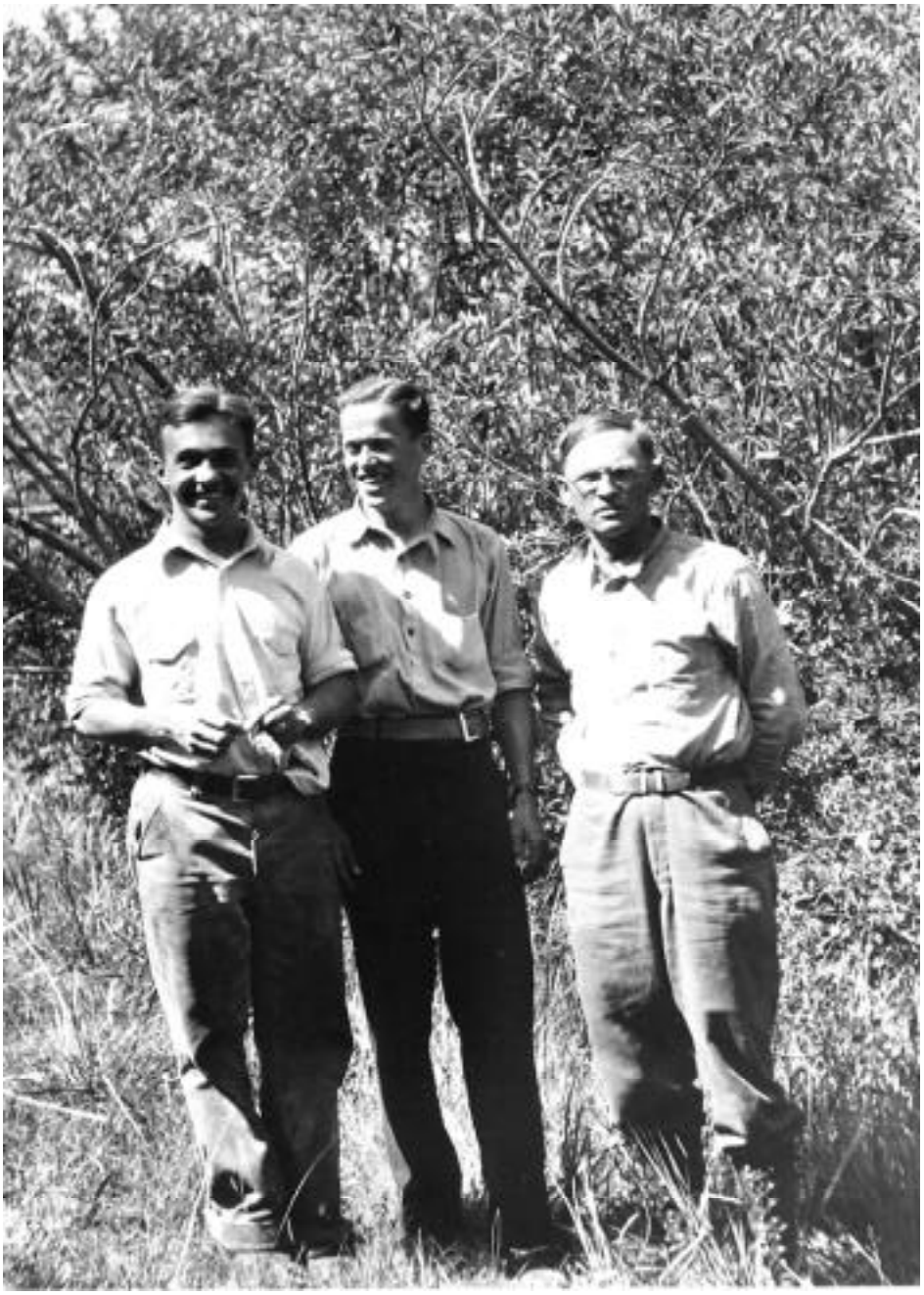
Sincerely yours,

Horace M. Albright
Director

HMA: RN
cc Mr. Wright

Wright's field notes during the wildlife survey are far richer than his previous notes. His entries are longer and more detailed. During this three-year period the wildlife team made several circular trips through the West, typically starting with parks and wildlife areas in the Southwest then moving north, back out to the coast, then home to Berkeley and the wildlife office on the University of California campus.

In addition to the team's personal observations, Wright interviewed as many park superintendents, rangers, and employees as possible regarding



Wildlife Survey Team, George M. Wright, Ben H. Thompson, Joseph S. Dixon, Mono Lake, California, July 24, 1929

wildlife and range conditions. He also sought out local ranchers and other residents who lived near the parks, many resident from as early as the 1880s. After talking with the locals, and recording their comments, he would often note their reliability as informants.

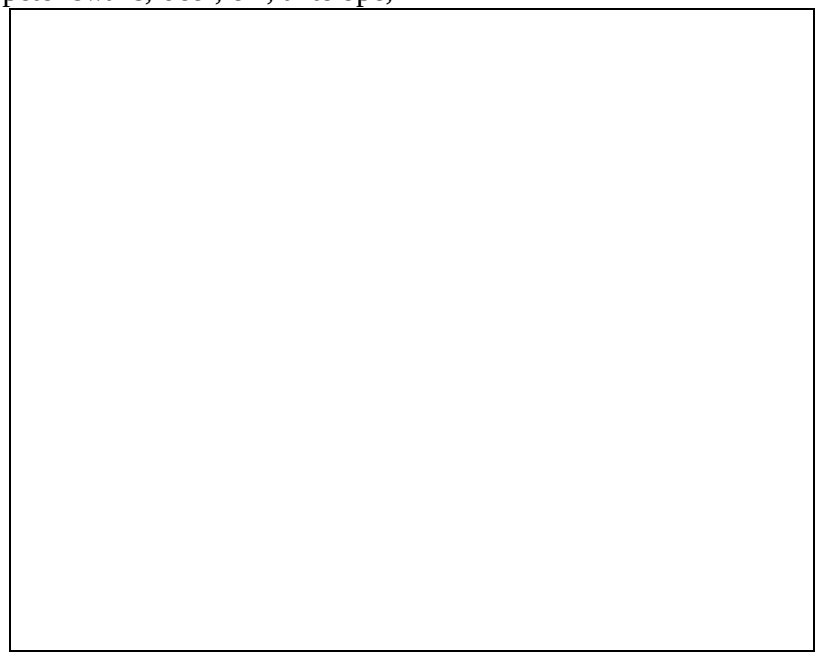
Below are selected excerpts from the wildlife survey field notes, in chronological order, with an occasional comment by the authors or others regarding aspects of Wright's work and his personal life. It soon becomes apparent that Wright was focusing in on a number of issues discussed at length in the Fauna Series: wildlife species (particularly trumpeter swans, deer, elk, antelope, grizzly bears, black bears, badgers, martens, wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions), the "frightful" range conditions he observed, predator control, and hunting in and around parklands.

1930

The following is Wright's introductory page to his 1930 notes.

A Survey Of Animal Problems In The National Parks Of The United States

April and early May have been spent in preparation. After numerous delays which have delayed our starting nearly three weeks we are on the way. No one can know how glad we are.



"Joseph S. Dixon and Ben H. Thompson in field car used for animal surveys in the national parks. Taken at Lake Merritt, Oakland, California, May 23, 1930" (photo by George M. Wright)

May 24 (most likely in Berkeley):

> This is the first official field season of 'was,' wild animal surveys in National Parks. This party consists of Joseph Dixon, economic mammalogist at the University of California, George M. Wright, scientific aide, U.S.N.P.S., and Benjamin H. Thompson, field assistant. We start in a car of the latest vintage (registering 160 miles only) which the members of the party have had built from an idea of their own.

In Thompson's 1987 interview, he tells a bit more about the research vehicle. "It was a Buick Roadster and three could sit comfortably in the front seat. They cut the conventional back off, and built a truck bed on the back, like today's trucks. There was a water-tight compartment built right behind the front seat for camera equipment, books, and other things you needed to protect. Camping gear, pots, and bedding and everything else was under a tarp in the back."

March 30, Yosemite Valley to Merced, California:

> Wild flowers too are at their height in the Merced Cañon particularly as regards the poppies which swept up the steep slopes in glorious tongues of flame.

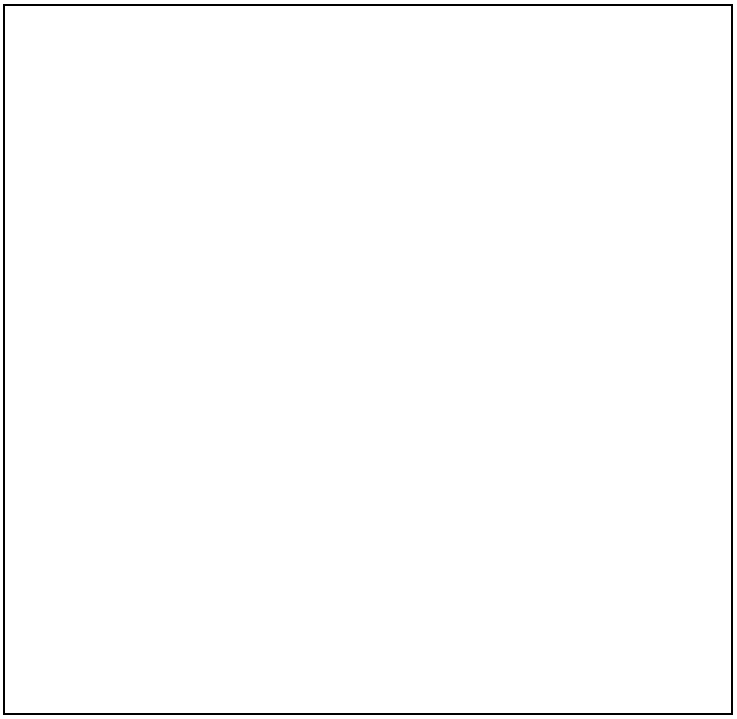
June 1, VT Ranch, Kaibab National Forest, Arizona:

> I believe that the Kaibab will yield more over a long period of time in deer hunting than it ever would from the few cattle that could range there. As it is now the deer will go down. Then there will be a cry to stock more cattle on the extra range and there will be a temporary increase of revenue from these grazing fees. We saw about 8 head of cattle feeding near the road about half way in from Point Sublime. This is within the park boundaries.
>
> Ranger Brown reported trapping for coyotes and wild cats on the north rim last winter. He said that trapping was good. When other animals were caught he released them. He spoke of badgers and three red foxes, said

Many miles later, Survey Team research vehicle, Pipestone Pass, Continental Divide Montana, n.d.

> that he 'tapped them on the nose' making them unconscious until he released them from the traps and that they later recovered and ... off. I think this practice very questionable. He also said that occasionally he had to take animals that he should have released because they were too greatly injured.

It must be remembered that although Wright became a leading opponent of predator control and unregulated hunting in and around parks, he was not opposed to hunting in general. In fact, it is not surprising to realize that as a field biologist he had collected dozens, possibly hundreds, of specimens (many are still held by the MVZ in Berkeley). More than once Wright notes how, during field trips in a variety of parks, local rangers would stop the car he was riding in, or get down off their horse, in order to shoot at a coyote. There is no hint of reprimands. Wright simply observed and took notes (when Wright came across coyotes on his own, he would stalk them for as long as possible, detailing their behavior.) This is also true when he is told by park employees how they trap coyotes (and by mistake take the occasional eagle), and when Yellowstone's "Buffalo Keeper" informs Wright that he has been dynamiting badger dens.



George M. Wright and rubber boat for observing trumpeter swans, Yellowstone, n.d.

Trumpeter swan observations in the greater Yellowstone area take up many pages of Wright's notes. On June 11, at Yellowstone's Tern Lake, we find his first entry regarding swans and two other species. "Mr. Thompson and I crossed the outlet of the lake took off our clothes and crossed the tules toward the nest. The nest was right on the open water & was separated from the main body of tules by a stretch of water twenty-five feet across. I went in up to my neck in crossing to the nest which was floating & was anchored to a few tule stems.... This association of the sandhill crane, canada geese, and trumpeter swans is very thrilling when one considers the desperate status of two of them and the acute case of the third."

September 30, Mount Rainer National Park:

> Hornquist at the Mt. Rainier National Forest headquarters said in commenting on the hunting season for elk that it was necessary to clean them out as they were taking the range from cattle and sheep.
>
> He [an unnamed ranger] said that grouse were scarce largely due to the large hawks which I took to be goshawks. He stated that he shot as many of the latter as possible.

November 11 to 14, Mesa Verde to Kaibab Plateau:

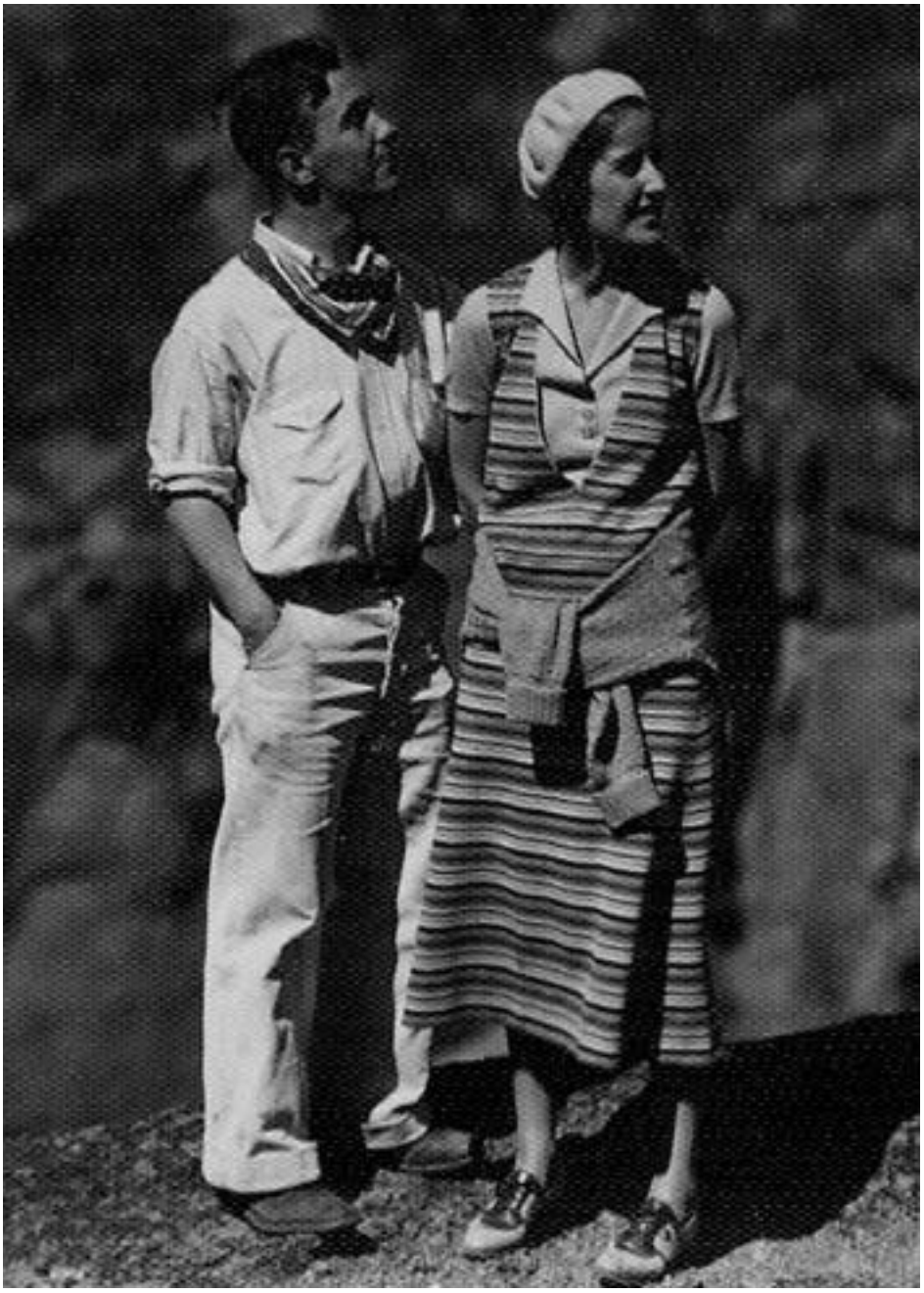
> These four days were spent as happily as any I have ever known. The desert scenery, for color, and fantastic formation surely must be as fine as any in the world.

1931

The year began with the marriage of Wright to Bernice "Bee" Ray on February 2, 1931, in a Phoenix hospital. Wright apparently was suffering from a bout of malaria. He soon recovered, and returned to work. For the next two years Bee often accompanied Wright into the field to help with observations or record species lists (particularly bird lists). He once dispatched Bee to the Yellowstone River to watch a pair of swans while he stayed at Tern Lake observing a pair to make sure they were two distinct pairs. His newlywed status may have influenced the following entry.

April 26, Carlsbad, New Mexico; Mr. J. Stokely Ligon's game farm:

> Once during our several visits I heard the 'chiming' song of the Mearns [Montezuma] Quail. The several notes, all of the same quality and equally spaced are silvery clear and totally sweet, soft and yet penetrating. The song came from no direction. It was just on the air. About it there was a timeless quality. There was no beginning and never an end, just the voice of eternity in the wind on the desert.
>
> I fight strongly against the natural inclination to interpret the actions of other animal species in terms of human emotions. But I could not watch the two mated pairs of Mearns Quail at Ligon's for very long without being convinced that here were the perfect lovers. They were constantly together. The male never letting his lady get more than a few inches from him. When they were perched out of their hiding places they nestled right against each other in the most peaceful satisfied manner. If it was cold it actually looked as though the male partially covered the female with his feathers while she crouched low under shelter of him. When hiding in



George M. Wright and Bee Wright, newlyweds on the road, March 1931

George M. Wright and Bee Wright, Yosemite Valley, n.d.

their little protection nests they snuggled so close that in the shadow it was almost impossible to distinguish that there were two birds.

May 27, Yellowstone National Park; interview with Chief Ranger George Baggley:

In reference to the trumpeter swans he stated that he would have removed the otters from Trumpeter Lake last fall but for the fact that the whole thing had had too much publicity. He said that those things had to be done quietly and that is certainly true of any control measures practiced in a national park.

May 30, Trumpeter Lake, Yellowstone National Park:

In the mud & grass about 5 feet from the water lay an elk calf. It did not act so jumpy as the other. After taking its picture lying down Bee tried to coax it to rise but even pushing with her hand was ineffectual.

Bee Wright with baby elk, Yellowstone, May 30, 1931 (photo by George M. Wright)

So intense was Wright's interest in trumpeter swans that he spent countless hours tracking down potential nesting areas, feeding sites, and recording general observations. On May 31 of this year he stayed in a single location observing swans from 5:15 AM to 8:40 PM.

May 31, Trumpeter Lake, Yellowstone National Park (mistakenly recorded as April 31 in field notes):

> This day have kept a continuous watch over Trumpeter lake to record the actions of a pair of Trumpeter swans during a typical day in the incubation period. I watched them entirely from a distance where they took no note of me in order that their movements should not be altered by human presence.

June 2, Trumpeter Lake, Yellowstone National Park:

> Several times we have heard coyotes howling in the distance. Last evening we heard them just before dark and previously it was about nine in the morning. At 11:45 last night one howled many times from the immediate vicinity of camp. A meadow lark sang twice. Strange duet, I thought, and turned over.

June 14, Yellowstone National Park:

> This day (a long one lasting from 6 AM until 9 PM) I walked from a point on the east entrance road 2 1/2 miles beyond Squaw Lake up Pelican Creek towards its source, thence west to Tern Lake, along the east shore of White Lake, and thence down Astringent Creek from it source to where it joins Pelican Creek and down Pelican Creek again to the point of starting.
>
> At 8:10 PM while walking down Pelican Creek I was startled by a loud wailing which could only have been coyote. They are evidently abundant in this section.
>
> While looking for the source of this sound I spied a black form moving through the sagebrush across the Creek. It was a large grizzly bear, the first I have ever seen away from the immediate vicinity of a feeding platform.
>
> The grizzly did not see me, though moving leisurely it covered ground at a rapid rate.... The large size, the grizzly cast to the dark coat, the hump & dish face made identification exceedingly simple and certain.

July 7, Grand Teton National Park:

> This day I walked from park headquarters to Taggart Lake, Bradley Lake, Teton Glacier, Jenny Lake store and back down the valley to headquarters. Distance traversed was about sixteen miles and the elevation from 6,500 to 11,000 feet.

July 25-28, Yellowstone National Park:

> The Heart Lake fire covered an area of approximately 20,000 acres and burned approximately 11 days.... In company with Chief Ranger George Baggley for a large part of the time and by myself, I covered the entire perimeter of the burn, a distance of over fifty miles. Sometimes we walked right through the heart of burns, often right at the line, and occasionally over stretches untouched by the devastating enemy. I took pains to discover everything I could relative to the effect of the fire upon the fauna of the area. Several observations were of unusual interest.

Wright continues this entry noting the curious behavior of nighthawks, meadow mice, chipmunks and marvels that "animals and birds alike went about their daily routine much as though nothing had happened."

Betty Russell (Carl Russell's wife), George M. Wright, and Bee Wright, Bechler River, Yellowstone, 1931 (photo by Carl Russell)

August 27, Glacier National Park:

> This grazing and poaching [in the park] are harmful but to eliminate it would really mean starving the ranchers out. The only fair thing will be for the government to buy out their holdings. Glacier Park has poaching from ranchers on the west, railroad riff raff along the south, and Indians on the east. Undoubtedly this is why the game remains as wild as it does.

September 5, Red Eagle Lake, Glacier National Park:

> Horned Owl. We saw one along the highway driving back toward Two-Medicine last night. The ranger told Dixon that they were hated by the Indians because they frequently made away with their pet cats. Hooray for the horned owl.

1932

When the 1931 season wrapped up in November, Wright apparently returned to Berkeley and the wildlife office to begin writing Fauna Series #1 with Thompson and Dixon, and prepare for the next season. He remained in Berkeley until early April, then traveled directly to Yellowstone.

The following disturbing entry regarding white pelicans on Yellowstone Lake's Molly Islands, marked "do not type" by Wright in his notes, was mentioned in far less detail in

Fauna #2. Wright includes no commentary after this entry, but the practice of killing pelicans to improve fishing soon stopped.

April 28, Yellowstone National Park:

> American White Pelican. The confidential report indicates that control work began in 1923 and has resulted in reduction of the colony from about 600 to 250. In '23 every young pelican was destroyed; in '24 & '25 all eggs were destroyed; in '26 83 young were destroyed & about half escaped; in '27 all young were destroyed; '28, '29, '30 no data available; in '31 75 young reported but only 43 could be found. Estimate is of 175 killed each year of control.

May 13, Yellowstone National Park:

> Last summer for the first time two grizzly cubs became tame and were fed by hand around Old Faithful. This will not do and must be stopped before it is well started or the bear problem will be worse than ever.

On May 19, Wright relates the story of Mrs. Wright and Francis L. Chamberlain driving from Old Faithful to Mammoth Hot Springs. An osprey flew in front of their car with a large fish and proceeded to land on the road. The bird abandoned the fish, and flew away. Bee and Francis stopped their car, picked up the fish, and brought it to Wright. The keen biologist studied the markings on the fish left by the osprey's talons, weighed the specimen (two-and-a-half pounds), then proceeded to fry it up for dinner!

June 11, Red Rock Lake, Montana:

> Lower Red Rock Lake is the best lake I have ever seen for trumpeters.

July 7, Grand Teton National Park:

> Interview. Al Austin is chief mechanic in Teton Park. He first came to Jackson's Hole in 1900 and among other things was a ranger with the forest service for 14 years. His hobby is the study and photography of game.... Mountain Lion. Lions were abundant when Austin first came here. Over two hundred were taken out. He believes they may be gradually returning.

In the following passage from a letter dated August 9, addressed to his friend and colleague Carl Russell in Yellowstone, Wright doesn't mention why he is absent from the field, but it was undoubtedly because his first daughter — Charmaine "Sherry" Wright — was born in Berkeley five days later. The reason for the letter is that Wright had just heard that Russell wished to leave his post in Yellowstone. Although there is no mention of the impending arrival of his child (he sent Russell a humorous telegram after her birth), we learn about his relationship with Ben Thompson. Wright returned to the Yellowstone area on November 7.

> Ben is back like a fresh gust of wind and with lots of news for us. It was so sad a thing to me to have to go away from the park during the height of the season and while all our projects were the most interesting. But next to being there myself it is nearly the same having Ben there. We think and work so

nearly along the same lines that it is like one person divided.

November 13, Gallatin Station, Yellowstone National Park (along the Gallatin River during hunting season, with "Ranger LaNoue"):

With one possible exception all the men we saw were meat hunters and were not concerned with thoughts of sport. Most of them had come up from Bozeman.... To us the whole looked like a scene from other days, the era of the market hunter.... In the camp on Buffalo Horn Cr. we counted 39 elk and 52 cars at 4:30 PM. A number of cars had gone out that day with their elk and others had only just come into camp. Of course the camp was without orga-

George M. Wright and Ben H. Thompson, in snowdrift, Yellowstone, n.d.

nization. It clung together by virtue of being where car travel ended. The location was a little lodgepole covered flat by the creek. The trees had beauty and order and dignity but they roofed a jumbled ugly human community. Tents, big and little, cars and trucks. Men and boys, and elk in the trees and on the ground all huddled together on the cold snow. Our gov't license and ranger hats were viewed with suspicion at first but in a short time were accepted along with other distasteful features of the place in an amazing spirit of equanimity. Here was an elk heart speared on a dead limb, there a sprawling liver hardened by cold to the consistency of the front tire toward which it seemed to flow and yet never reach. This same kindly cold rendered innocuous for the time elk legs, and head, and quarters and whole carcasses and tent interiors and human refuse. All was in a refrigerator but a thaw would have driven out the hardiest man in camp.

1933-1936

During 1933 Wright's itinerary is less than clear. According to his notebook he begins the year in Berkeley with a few brief entries through early March. On March 2 two paragraphs, apparently written in Yellowstone, record winter movements for trumpeter swans, as reported to Wright. The next entry jumps to the end of July at Platt National Park (now Chickasaw National Recreation Area), then a prolonged stay back in Yosemite through September. His last entry for the year—regarding American pronghorn—is on September 24.

Wright was probably working on Fauna #2 with Thompson during 1933, and his second daughter—Pamela Melendez Wright—was born on October 17. He might have also made a trip to Washington, D.C., during this period. After the wildlife survey Wright and his family moved back and forth between Washington and Berkeley before settling in the nation's capital in late 1935.

He had also taken enthusiastically to family life with two young daughters during this period. In a letter to friends on December 19, 1933, Wright alludes to his unfolding domestic scene. "You would think I'd have my hands full with four women on my hands [Wright's wife, two daughters, and maid] ... but not me! I still have room in this ample heart for you poor lambs so far away.... Anyway & again, Merry Xmas & Happy New Year. Togo."

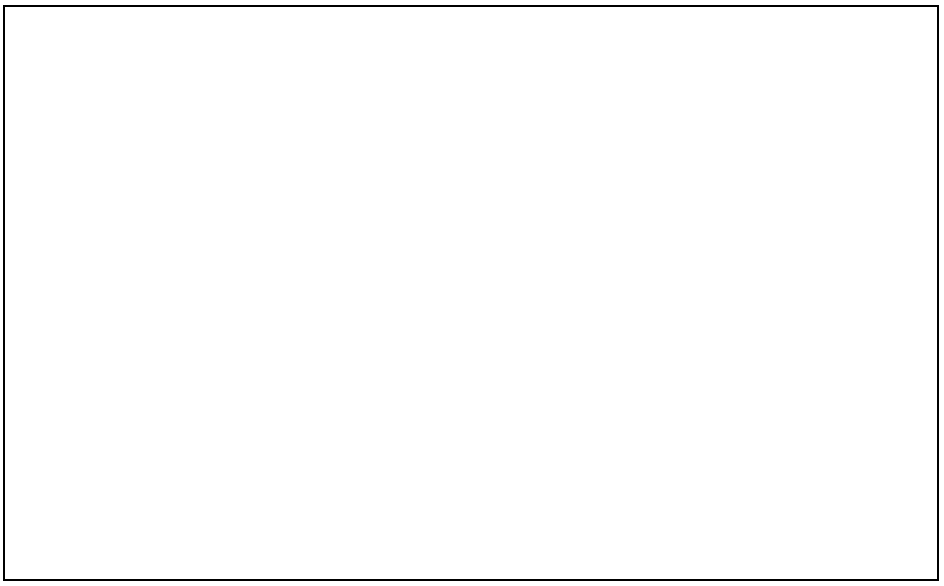
"Togo"? What is that? Wright, apparently, was rarely referred to as "George" by his friends but instead by the nickname "Togo." Ben Thompson tried to explain. "I asked him once how people came to call him 'Togo.' He said he thought it was from some fraternity and sorority party ... so he was 'Togo' or 'Tog' the rest of the way through college. That's about the best I can do. We never called him 'George.'"

September 5, 1935; letter from Wright to his father-in-law, William F. Ray:

Dear Dad:

Ever since our arrival I have wanted to write but the old hurry and flurry caught up with me before I caught

Bee Wright with daughters Sherry (L) and Pam (R). Florida, 1934, while George M. Wright was researching the proposed Everglades National Park (photo by George M. Wright)



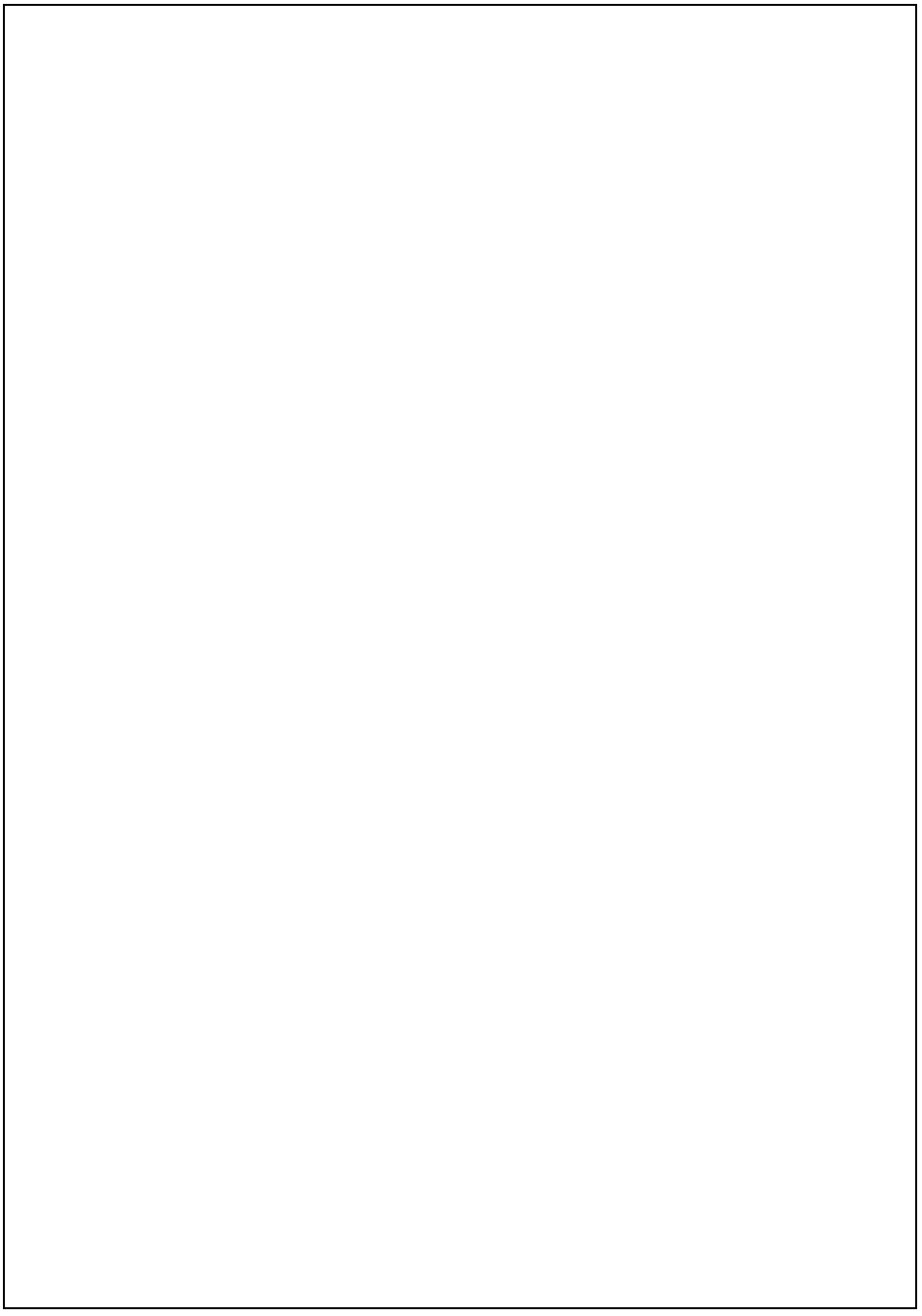
Researching proposed Everglades National Park, via the blimp "Resolute," December 7, 1934. L-R: Roger W. Toll, John B. Ricker (co-pilot), George M. Wright, Capt. J.A. Boettner (pilot and manager of airship operations for the Goodyear Company), O.G. Taylor, Dr. H.C. Bryant

> up with Washington.... I am pretty lucky to have a wife so perfect and in-laws that I can love so much too.... Bee & the babes are in the very pink of good health. You must be sure to come see them and us when we get settled in our new home. You are good travelers so don't hesitate.
>
> Lots of love,
> George

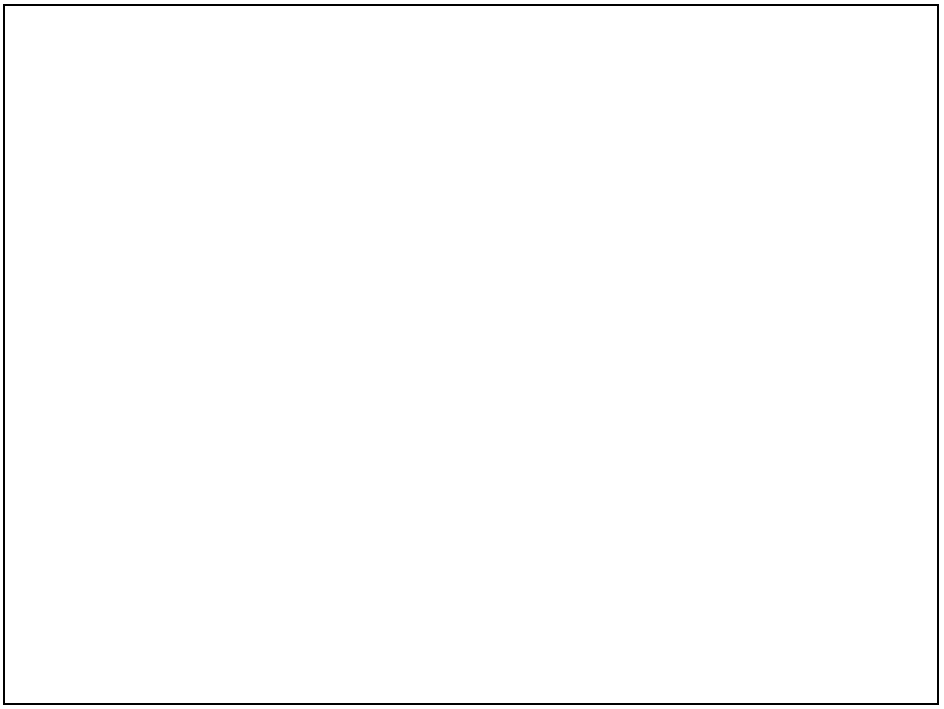
With his wildlife survey field work behind him (but never far from his thoughts), Wright turned to convincing the powers-that-be in Washington that the proper management of wildlife in the national parks and elsewhere was a critical issue. He did, however, visit the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico with Harold Bryant in the summer of 1934 and was appointed by President Roosevelt to head up the National Resources Board. Later that year, and in early 1935, he ventured to the Florida Everglades (once with Bryant, Roger Toll, and Oliver Taylor). All these trips were undertaken to research the possibilities for establishing parks.

Wright's life soon became very hectic as he found himself in the thick of "the old hurry and flurry" of Washington. In a letter dated January 22, 1936 (one month before his death), Beatrice Newcomer (Wright's secretary) wrote to Ben Thompson's wife-to-be, Matilda Jane Ray (Bee Wright's step-sister), regarding a job possibility.

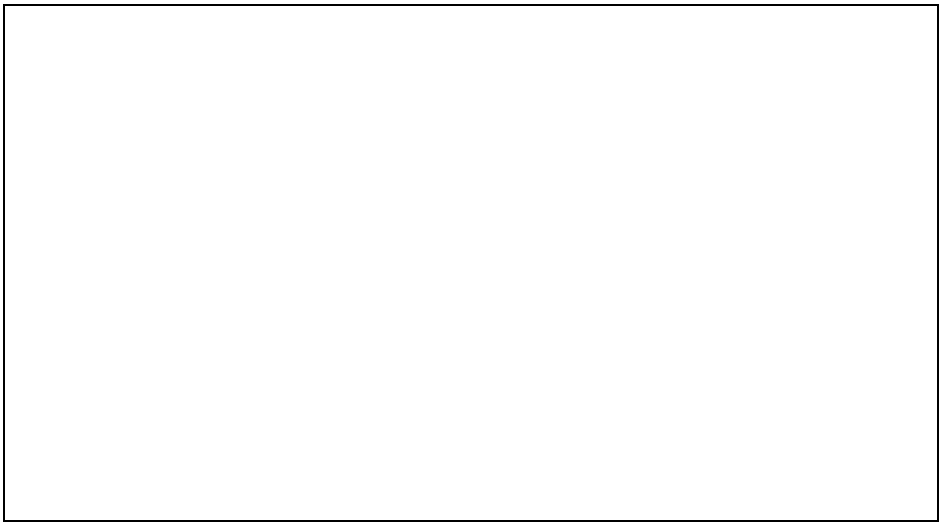
> ... In these rather wild moments, however, he [Wright] is trying to hold



George M. Wright and daughters, Pam (L) and Sherry (R), November 1935.



Group shot in Puerto Rico, Summer, 1934. George M. Wright and Harold Bryant, far right.



Group shot, International boundary park survey: Near Boquillas, Texas, along the Rio Grande, February, 1936

> quietly in his lap: the North American Wildlife Conference, the conference of the American Planning and Civic Association, the program for the assembled wildlife technicians, and the reorganization of the Wildlife Division itself under the new ECW set-up. You may imagine it's an armful.... At any rate, and this is what is of particular interest of course to you, Mr. Wright will do his darndest—and you know that is a darn good darndest—to see that the position in the western office is available, open, and ready for you if and when your name comes up on the Secretary's list of eligibles.

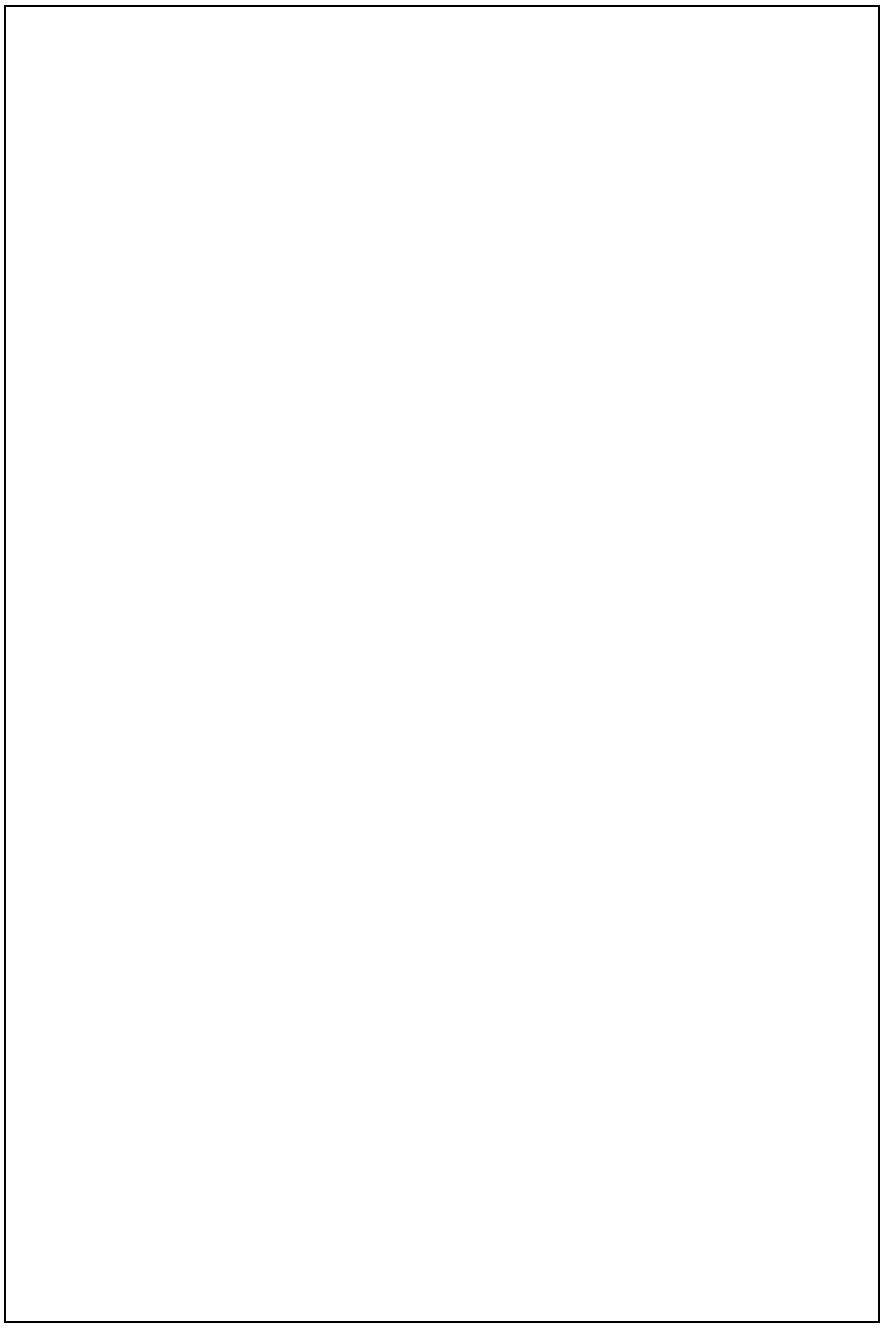
The last known letter Wright wrote, but never finished, was penned just before his departure with Roger Toll to the newly authorized Big Bend National Park. The previous fall, Dr. F. M. MacFarland of Stanford University had made a visit to Wright and discussed the possibility of his becoming the director of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. In his letter, Wright apologizes for being "unprepared" to consider the offer, although he was greatly honored. The last sentence reads: "My chief interest, apart from my family, lies in giving such...."

We have no idea what he was thinking, but it is unlikely he would have left the Park Service at such an important and exciting time.

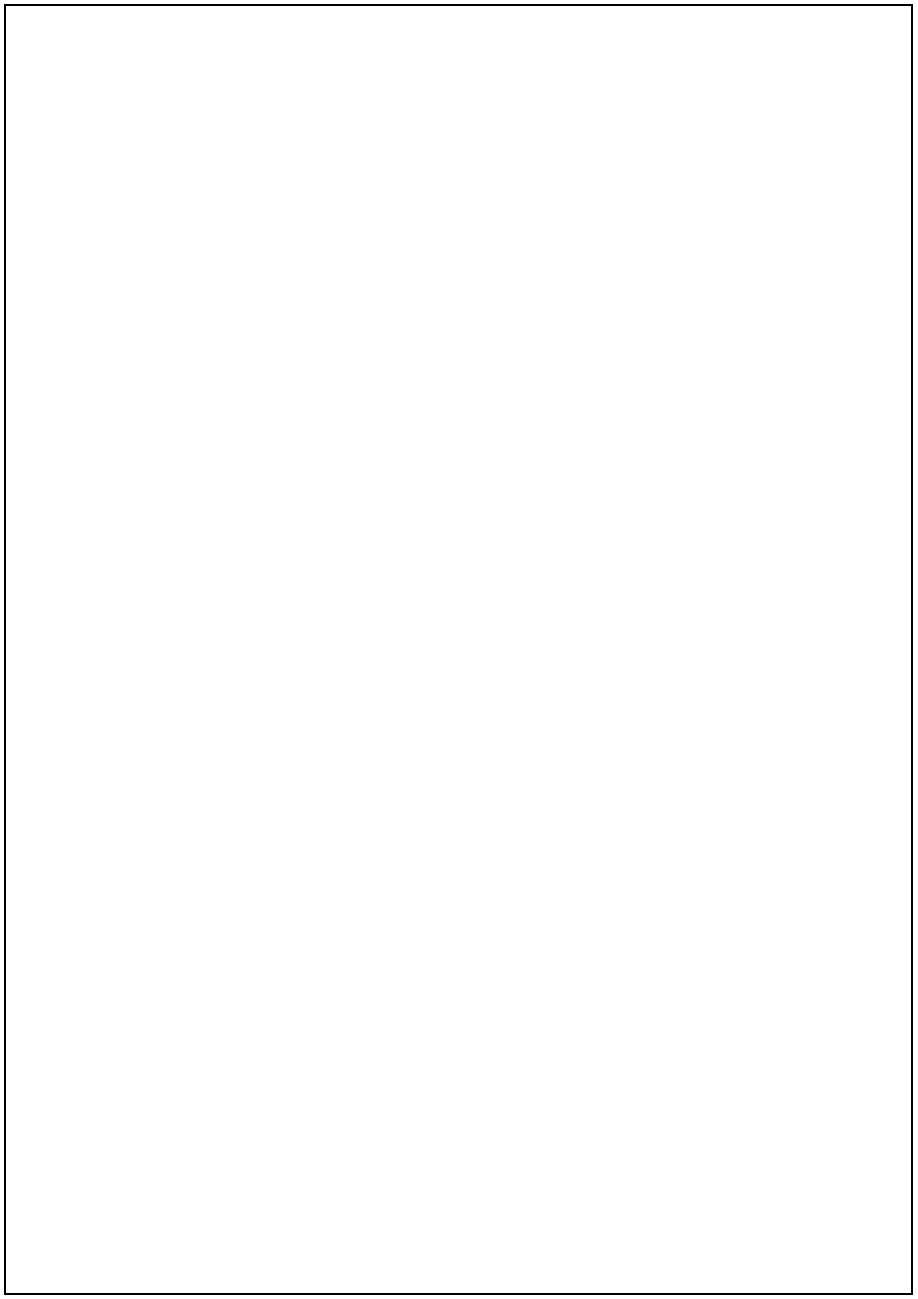
In 1987, when Ben Thompson was asked what made George M. Wright special, he paused, and said: "People reacted positively to him. I don't think he had any enemies. Wherever he went, very quickly he was welcomed. And, I think that has something to do with it. Also, going ahead with his ideas, they weren't universally accepted in the parks at that time. There were a number of longtime employees, superintendents, chief rangers, and others, who liked the good ol' days of predatory animal control and corralling the ungulates so the public could see some of them, like the buffalo, and feeding the elk so they'd concentrate for viewing, feeding the bears at feeding stations and making a big show of it. There was all of that to overcome. And to make progress with that, and have them still like you, was quite an accomplishment. Joe [Dixon] and I didn't have that kind of personality. We knew it. But George did have it. It was a gift of his character. He liked people, was outgoing, and generous, and honest, and motivated, and people sensed that. And they reacted to it."

In a letter postmarked March 13, 1936, from Denver, Marguerite Toll, widow of Roger Toll, wrote Ben Thompson that she received a note from her husband written on the morning of February 25, the day Wright and Toll left from Big Bend and their meeting with Mexican park officials. "We've a new name for George," Roger Toll wrote. "'Chapper' meaning shorty."

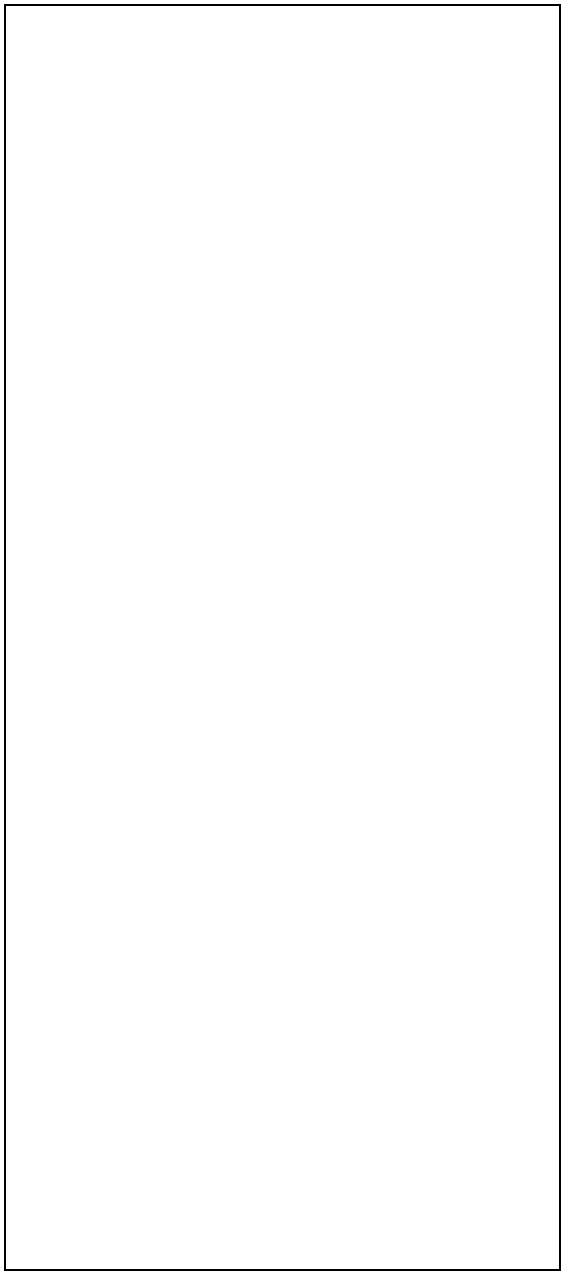
What Toll probably heard was "Chapo," which indeed is a Mexican term of endearment for a short per-



George M. Wright, "The Wright Warplane Costume" for surveying Big Bend region, February 18, 1936 (photo by Roger Toll)



Togo, or "Chapper," Rio Grande, Texas, February 22, 1936. Last known photograph of George M. Wright (photo by Roger Toll)



The account of the accident which claimed the lives of Wright and Toll. Deming (N. M.) *Graphic*, February 27, 1936.

son. George M. Wright stood tall at 5 feet 4 inches, and he had no doubt impressed his Mexican counterparts with his personality and knowledge. If time had been kind to Wright, the new nickname might have replaced "Togo."

Of course, we will never know what might have been if Wright—and Toll—had lived. As Ben Thompson said in 1987, "History does not reveal her alternatives."

What did survive from the brief yet amazing life of George M. Wright is an enduring legacy and a "conviction that wilderness still lives." This consummate field biologist, husband, and father is also remembered by two mountains named after him, one in Denali National Park, and another in Big Bend National Park (where there is also a Mount Toll).

However, for his family—and perhaps for field professionals today—it is George M. Wright's compelling writing that keeps his memory alive, as with the following quotation from Fauna #2, one of our favorites.

> But it is the birds of the water, beautifully wild birds by the thousand, that are encouragement and inspiration to the man who prays for conviction that the wilderness still lives, will always live.... Sometimes while I am watching these birds on the water, the illusion of the untouchability of this wilderness becomes so strong that it is stronger than reality, and the polished roadway becomes the illusion, the mirage that has no substance.

Writing About Wright

George Melendez Wright's influence on the early days of wildlife biology and management in the national parks has been written about for many years, beginning with the numerous detailed obituaries that appeared after Wright and Roger Toll (superintendent of Yellowstone National Park) died in an automobile accident in February of 1936. Ben Thompson, a close friend and colleague from the winter of 1928 until Wright's death, profiled Wright in the first issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM (Summer 1981; reprinted in the Tenth Anniversary Issue, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1990). Lowell Sumner's FORUM article, "Biological Research and Management in the National Park Service: A History" (Vol. 3, No. 4, Autumn 1983), also highlighted Wright's career and influence on NPS (Sumner was another colleague of Wright and Thompson). Additionally, Alton A. Lindsey, Alston Chase, Alfred Runte, and Richard Sellars either mentioned Wright at length or profiled the young wildlife biologist in their respective books (see References). Sellars' tribute to Wright in this issue is an eloquent addition to this body of work.

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Thompson, Ben H. 1981. George M. Wright, 1904-1936. *The George Wright Forum* 1:1, 1-4. (Invaluable brief account of Wright by his colleague and co-author.)

Some quotations in this article are from field notes in the collection of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, and are used with the permission of the MVZ.

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