



George Wright in Yosemite National Park ca. 1928.

By Jerry Emory

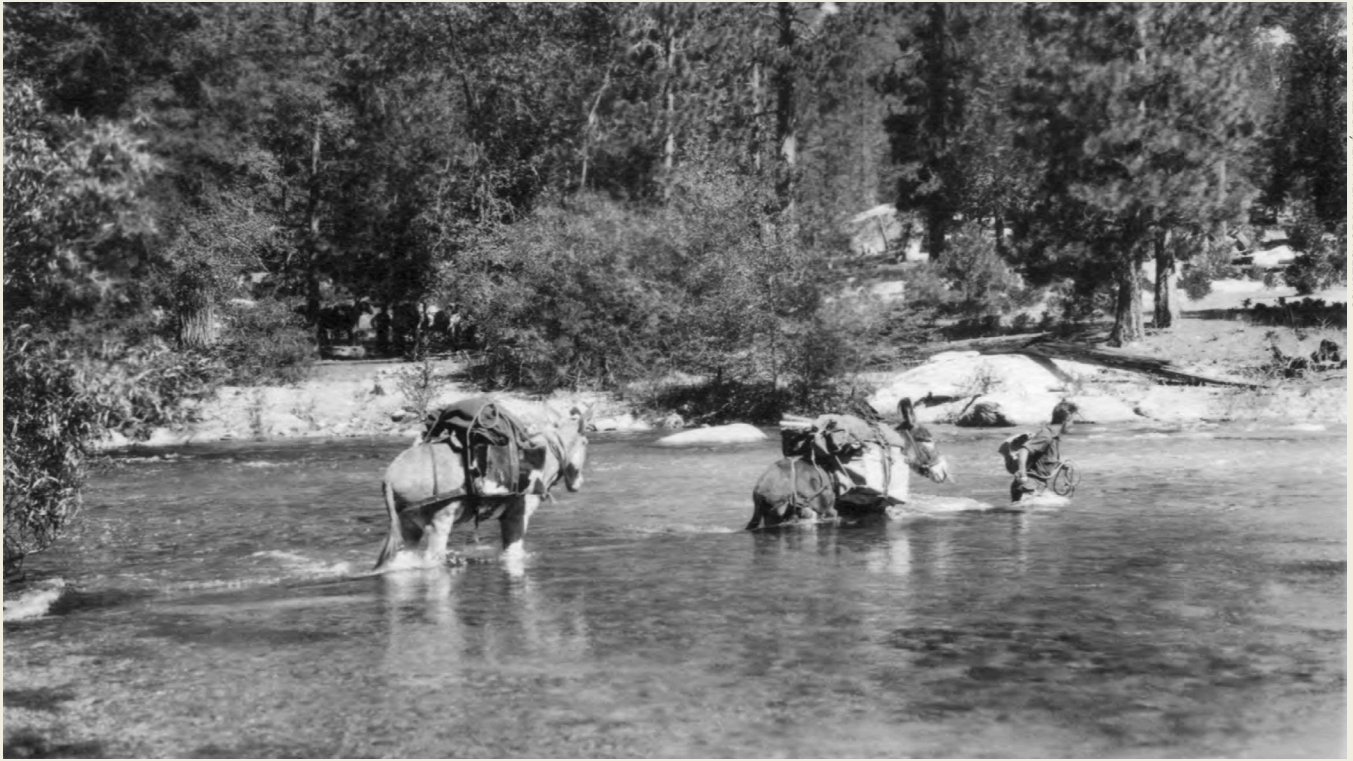
George Meléndez Wright’s career with the National Park Service (NPS) has been described as brilliant;¹ his views on wildlife and ecosystem management (before, even, the term “ecosystem” was coined), predator control, and wilderness preservation, as revolutionary.² And yet, his pioneering ideas were initially stymied in the early 1930s by an entrenched park service bureaucracy and culture that prioritized so-called “façade management”: management that disregarded wildlife except for the role it played as spectacle for visitors in its large western parks.³ Nonetheless, Wright’s ideas prevailed.

Wright was born June 20, 1904, to a Salvadoran mother and an American father in San Francisco. Two years later his mother died suddenly and his father passed away shortly thereafter. Wright’s two brothers were sent to El Salvador to live with the Meléndez family. Wright, however, stayed in San Francisco and was raised by his step-grandmother, Cordelia Wright, whom he called “Auntie.”

Auntie encouraged Wright’s intense interest in nature and the outdoors, and soon he was exploring the San Francisco peninsula and beyond. While attending San Francisco’s Lowell High School, he wrote for the school newspaper and organized the school’s first Audubon Club. “Many field trips will be made,” Wright announced in *The Lowell*. “The purpose of the Audubon Club is to study animal life, particularly birds. The work is very interesting.”⁴

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George Meléndez Wright (1904–1936)



COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ-WRIGHT LLOYD

George Wright crossing a stream in California's Sierra Nevada, Kings River Canyon, on a Sierra Club High Country trip, 1922.

His senior year the gregarious and popular Wright was elected class president. Then, in late 1920, Wright and Auntie moved to Berkeley, and he matriculated at the University of California at the age of 16.

BENEFITTING FROM CROSS-FERTILIZATION

His timing was fortuitous. While at Berkeley, he became a student of Joseph Grinnell, head of the school's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) and a noted conservationist and early advocate of managing forests for wildlife habitat. Though Wright would later be known for his wildlife conservation work, what few today remember is that he actually graduated from Berkeley's Division of Forestry after studying under one of the nation's leading foresters, Walter Mulford.⁵ Mulford and Grinnell shared an enthusiasm "for complete

interdepartmental cooperation in many projects" and worked toward the school taking "the long lead in forest biology."⁶ They even lectured in each other's classes. Wright benefitted from this rich cross-fertilization of forestry and zoology. After graduation, Wright maintained close relations with both professors, and his forestry training served him well in the NPS while working as a biologist.

Although little is known about Wright's academic records in forestry (they were inadvertently destroyed), it is well documented how he built on his formal classroom lessons during his summers—foretelling his future with the NPS. In 1921, he ventured north to Alaska, via steamship, winding through the Inside Passage. The next summer he hiked into California's Kings Canyon and the Sierra Nevada high country just north of Sequoia National Park as part of

the Sierra Club's annual outing, one of many he participated in. With other club members, Wright trekked to the top of 14,505-foot Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the lower forty-eight states, and summited several mountaintops well over 10,000 feet.

Over the next few summers, Wright and a handful of school friends packed into "Peter," his Ford Model T, and visited all of the western national parks—no easy feat in the mid-1920s, when paved roads were scarce. An early convert to journal keeping and photography, Wright memorialized his 1924 trip with a small illustrated booklet: "The Pilgrimage of Ponderous Peter." While on the shores of Flathead Lake in Glacier National Park, he was moved to write, "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?"⁷

Back on campus, at the MVZ he met Joseph S. Dixon, a former student-turned-colleague of Grinnell's who served as the museum's economic mammologist. Twenty years Wright's senior, Dixon would quickly become one of Wright's key mentors, alongside Mulford and Grinnell.

In the summer of 1926, Wright accompanied Dixon on a three-month expedition to Alaska's Mount McKinley National Park (today's Denali National Park). Their overall objective was to collect bird and mammal specimens. Specifically, however, they were on the hunt for an active surfbird nest, to solve an early twentieth-century ornithological mystery: where the elusive bird reproduced. It was Wright who ultimately found an active nest—turning him into a minor celebrity in ornithological circles. (The next day the duo collected the nest and eggs, as well as a male surfbird.) While in the park, Dixon and Wright hiked approximately 500 miles—lugging along with them their shotguns and knapsacks. In addition to numerous specimens, the two naturalists captured 350 photographs, and recorded a combined 280 pages of fieldnotes.⁸

PIONEERING NATURALIST

Wright started a four-month internship at the MVZ in January 1927. In early May, he had just enough time to finish his work at the museum, pack, and drive to the Division of Forestry's Camp Califest outside of Quincy, California. Participation at the camp was required of all Berkeley forestry students. However, Wright was busy on the side, applying for a job with the NPS. In October, the Department of the Interior hired him as a ranger at Yosemite National Park. A month later, Wright and Auntie moved to Yosemite Valley, and he



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOSEPH DIXON. COURTESY OF PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

Wright interviewed Yosemite park employees and those who lived nearby, like Maria Lebrado, known as “The Last Yosemite Indian,” in order to better understand wildlife and range conditions.

began working as a ranger naturalist. A year later, Auntie passed away in the Ahwahnee Hotel, where she had been living, leaving Wright financially independent.

Based on his extensive travels throughout the western parks and discussions with his mentors, Wright began to conceptualize, organize, and eventually self-fund a pioneering wildlife survey of western national parks. By late 1929, at the age of 25, Wright convinced NPS Director Horace Albright to approve a three-year survey to scientifically study the best way to “restore and perpetuate the fauna in its pristine state by combating the harmful effects of human influence.”⁹ Wright paid for all expenses, including a new customized Buick for field work, and he hired Dixon and Ben Thompson, a student of Grinnell's, to join him on the survey. After two years the NPS began funding a portion of the survey's costs.

Together the team conducted some of the first scientific studies

of elk, deer, and numerous other species, including groundbreaking work on the endangered trumpeter swan in Yellowstone. Wright served as the principal author of the classic two-volume study of wildlife in the national parks based on the survey's findings: *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States*, commonly known as *Fauna No. 1* (1933) and *Fauna No. 2* (1935).¹⁰

At a time when national park rangers organized the routine feeding of garbage to bears as part of “shows” for tourists, and the U.S. Biological Survey oversaw the killing of thousands of “bad” predators such as wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes, Wright argued that both practices should be stopped within the parks—and beyond their borders. The wildlife management policies suggested at the end of *Fauna No. 1* were no less than revolutionary for the NPS. The following year, they were declared as official policy; eventually, they would form the foundation for the modern

science-based management of parks and other public lands for generations to come.

In *Fauna No. 2*, Wright forcefully and eloquently argued for the long-term benefits of and need for a holistic approach to wildlife management in parks and other public lands, giving voice to the shift in thinking then underway by a handful of fellow wildlife conservationists:

If we destroy nature blindly, it is a boomerang which will be our undoing. Consecration to the task of adjusting ourselves to the natural environment so that we secure the best values from nature without destroying it is not useless idealism; it is good hygiene for civilization. In this lies the true portent of this national parks effort. Fifty years from now we shall still be wrestling with the problems of joint occupation of national parks by men and mammals, but it is reasonable to predict that we shall have mastered some of the simplest maladjustments. It is far better to pursue such a course though success be but partial than to relax in despair and allow the destructive forces to operate unchecked.¹¹

After *Fauna No. 1* was published and distributed in early 1933, a memo was sent from the NPS's national headquarters to all field offices with reviews solicited from prominent biologists and academics. Mulford took a decidedly personal approach with his endorsement of Wright, Dixon, Thompson, and the publication: "I am so pleased," he wrote, "that I cannot refrain from sending each of you good friends a note of sincere congratulations. You know how deep and loyal is

my interest in you three and in the pioneering which you are carrying on so effectively. It is all a source of such great satisfaction to me and my mind often turns in your direction with real happiness."¹²

Before publication of *Fauna No. 2* in 1935, Wright had begun the next phase of his career. By this point, he had conceived of the service's new Wildlife Division and was appointed as its first chief—one of the first Latino staff in the NPS. As chief, he managed nearly thirty wildlife technicians working throughout the parks, primarily in the West, who continued to survey and evaluate the status of wildlife, identify urgent problems, and suggest management solutions. The funding for most of this team came through the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). His new position necessitated moving his young family from Berkeley to NPS headquarters in Washington in 1934.

About the same time Wright was settling in as Wildlife Division chief, John D. Coffman, a seasoned U.S. Forest Service employee and a fire specialist, had taken charge of the NPS's forestry division, which included overseeing the CCC's efforts within the parks.¹³ Coffman's background and training were at odds with Wright's perspective on forest management in the parks.

Wright and his team possessed an unequivocally holistic view of forests as part of the biotic communities of national parks. Many of Wright's professional beliefs about forests came directly from Grinnell, with additional input obviously from Mulford. Grinnell had argued in 1916 that in order to maintain the "original balance" in national parks, "no trees, whether living or dead, should be cut down. . . . Dead trees are in many respects as useful as living, and should be just as rigorously protected."¹⁴

Wright echoed him in *Fauna No.1*, stating, "It is necessary that the trees be left to accumulate dead limbs and rot in the trunks; that the forest floor become littered."¹⁵ A year later, he wrote, "One standing snag may be worth more than ten or a hundred living trees in supplying the peculiar habitat requirements of certain bird species."¹⁶

So while Wright and his team's NPS forestry colleagues concurred, as a whole, that a holistic approach to the parks' forests was best, Wright's primary focus on wildlife and wilderness nonetheless led to disagreements over suggested forest management plans. And nowhere was this truer than when it came to the aftermath of fires, beetle-damaged trees, and the work of the countless CCC crews in national parks.

To reduce the risk of wildfires and for aesthetic reasons, the CCC crews were instructed by the Division of Forestry to cut down all dead trees along park roadways, vigorously clear the forest floor of brush, and burn all debris. At Crater Lake National Park in Oregon, Ben Thompson came across a CCC crew doing just this. The crew was managed by a civilian "straw boss" who, when asked by Thompson what they were doing, said his instructions were to make everything look "prettier."¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, the biologists quickly became concerned with these efforts in the parks, and debates between the divisions of wildlife, forestry, engineering, and planning would continue for years.

Meanwhile, Wright and his team were also questioning the efficacy and environmental impact of the various bark beetle treatments within the parks; the clearing of dead timber in Glacier National Park after the disastrous 1929 Half Moon fire; and the desire to plant ponderosa pines on the north rim of Mesa Verde

National Park in southwest Colorado to make the sparse forest look more verdant, among many other issues. But if nothing else, Wright was a calm, observant diplomat, and a good listener—someone possessed of the ability to get his position across without alienating his colleagues.

In late February of 1936, along with a few NPS colleagues, Wright and Roger Toll, superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, and a dear friend of Wright's, were dispatched to the Texas-Mexico border by President Roosevelt to research joint U.S.-Mexico parks and wildlife refuges with Mexican colleagues. After exploring the region that would eventually become Big Bend National Park, the party drove west, en route to the borderlands of Arizona, to continue their research.

Outside of Deming, New Mexico, Wright and Toll were killed in a head-on collision. Wright was only thirty-one years old. He left behind a wife, two young daughters, and a résumé of remarkable accomplishments and writings one might expect from a biologist twice his age. With Wright's death, the National Park Service lost one of its most promising men and widely recognized conservationists.

After Wright's death the Wildlife Division was never the same. The staff attempted to carry on, but many of the deep-rooted cultural traditions within the NPS that Wright had been able to keep in check reemerged and found new strength.¹⁸ The NPS's emphasis on park infrastructure during World War II and the postwar period to cope with booming visitor numbers pushed science further into the background, and, seemingly with it, Wright's ideas. They would reemerge in a different form in the 1960s. With them, Wright's name and legacy survived throughout the decades—manifested in varied ways. Mountains in parks where he

did important work were named in his honor: Mount Wright in Denali National Park and Wright Mountain in Big Bend National Park. The NPS named a building at Acadia National Park's research center after him.

His intellectual legacy is honored as well. In 2010, the agency named a climate change research fellowship that supports graduate student research for him. Forty years before that, though, perhaps the most fitting honor was bestowed when NPS biologists and other public land scientists established the George Wright Society, a nonprofit organization to promote "protected area stewardship by bringing practitioners together to share their expertise."¹⁹ Through its journal and other publications, and its programming, the society fosters the exchange of ideas and encourages collaboration and cooperation with the goal of improving ecological health for the benefit of all, just as George Meléndez Wright had done throughout his brief but influential and inspiring career.

Writer Jerry Emory lives in Mill Valley, California. His book George Meléndez Wright: The Fight for Wildlife and Wilderness in the National Parks was published by the University of Chicago Press in early 2023.

NOTES

1. *Outdoor America*, Izaak Walton League of America, April 1936, 10.
2. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 98.
3. Sellars, *Preserving Nature*, 4–5.
4. George M. Wright, "The Lowell High Audubon Society," *The Lowell*, Lowell High School, San Francisco, 36, no.1, August 17, 1920, 2.
5. The Division of Forestry became the Department of Forestry in 1939, and eventually the School of Forestry in 1946. Paul Casamajor, ed., *Forestry Education at the University of California, Berkeley:*

The First Fifty Years (Berkeley: California Alumni Foresters, 1965), 33, footnote.

6. Walter Mulford, Letter to Joseph Grinnell, March 27, 1935, Museum of Vertebrate Zoology Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Mulford and Grinnell failed in their attempt to establish a combined master's program.
7. "The Pilgrimage of Ponderous Peter" is held by the Wright family.
8. Joseph Dixon, *Birds & Mammals of Mount McKinley National Park, Alaska*, Fauna Series No. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938), X–XI.
9. George M. Wright, Joseph S. Dixon, and Ben H. Thompson, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks*, Contribution of Wild Life Survey, Fauna Series No. 1–May 1932 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 4.
10. *Fauna No. 1* was finished in May 1932 but wasn't published until 1933. *Fauna No. 2* was completed in July 1934 and printed in 1935.
11. George M. Wright and Ben H. Thompson, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Wildlife Management in the National Parks*, Contribution of Wild Life Survey, Fauna Series No. 2–July 1934 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935), 25.
12. United States Department of the Interior, Office of National Parks, Buildings and Reservations, Washington, DC, "Memorandum for Field Offices," August 25, 1933. Document held by Wright family.
13. John C. Paige, *Civilian Conservation Corps and National Park Service, 1933–1942: An Administrative History* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1985), 39.
14. The only exception, they suggested, would be if lumber was needed for building purposes or trees needed to strategically be removed for fire prevention. Joseph Grinnell and Tracy I. Storer, "Animal Life as an Asset of National Parks," *Science* 44, no. 1133 (September 15, 1916): 377–78.
15. Wright, Dixon, and Thompson, *Fauna* 1, 33.
16. George M. Wright, "Men and Birds in Joint Occupation of National Parks," *The Condor* 35, no. 6 (1933): 217.
17. Ben H. Thompson, Memorandum for Messrs. Vint, Coffman, and Wright, August 7, 1934, RG 79 NPS, Region IV, Regional Naturalist, Wildlife Files, 1929–1940, Accn: 82-001 (FRC 52-0235B), General Program and Pest Control Files, Container #1. NARA–Pacific Region (SF), San Bruno, CA.
18. Lowell Sumner, "Biological Research and Management in the National Park Service: A History," *George Wright Society, Forum* 3, no. 4 (1983): 14.
19. "About Us," George Wright Society, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.georgewright society.org/our-story>.