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A visionary's lens on wildlife and parks revealed: *George Meléndez Wright and the National Park Service's Wildlife Division photographs*

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The National Park Service (NPS) History Collection has released over 4,600 images from the NPS Wildlife Division photo file for research access. Digitized through the generosity of the George Meléndez Wright family in honor of his legacy, the images date primarily from the late 1920s to the early 1950s and document a wide range of species, wildlife management issues, historic structures, and other subjects, primarily in the national and state parks. These Wildlife Division images are an invaluable resource for the NPS; other federal, state, and tribal land managers; academics and other researchers; and the general public.

The first 4,607 scans from NPS Wildlife Division photo file can be accessed online at no charge through the Park Service's public NPGallery site (<https://npgallery.nps.gov/HFC/History/>). The images can be searched by species or subject, keyword, theme, park, date, and photographer.

The creation of wildlife management in NPS

Today NPS is widely acknowledged as a leader in natural resource management and wildlife protection, but it wasn't always that way. Established on August 25, 1916, as a bureau in the US Department of the Interior, the fledgling NPS began with 14 national parks and 21 national monuments—plus the Hot Springs and Casa Grande Ruins reservations—but little understanding of their ecosystems and or how to manage wildlife populations.

In 1927, at the age of 23, George Meléndez Wright conceptualized, organized, and eventually funded the first wildlife survey of western national parks, forever changing how NPS would manage wildlife and natural resources. The young biologist was a recent graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, where he graduated in forestry, but his true passions were wildlife and national parks. They were passions that flourished, and were refined, under the watchful mentorship of legendary zoologist and conservationist Joseph Grinnell, director of Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. By the time Wright arrived in Yosemite National Park in 1927 to work as a ranger naturalist—the first Hispanic to occupy a position of authority in NPS—he had already visited every national park in the Western United States, many several times, including spending almost three months deep inside Alaska's Mount McKinley National Park (now Denali) in 1926 conducting fieldwork with Joseph Dixon, Grinnell's right-hand man. Dixon, 20 years Wright's senior, was instrumental in thinking through the wildlife survey idea with Wright, as was Grinnell, and Wright's first supervisor in Yosemite, Carl Russell.

Because of his extensive travels, Wright knew more about the national parks than most employees of the relatively new NPS, and this knowledge led to a deep concern about some park management practices. He realized that the completely unnatural activity of feeding garbage to bears at "shows" to entertain tourists in many Western

parks, the systematic extermination of all predators in and around parks, abnormally large populations of deer and elk, severe overgrazing, and the precarious status of the endangered trumpeter swan in the Yellowstone region (whose population was estimated to total less than 20 birds at the time), were all practices, ailments, and symptoms of a park system out of balance.

Wright convinced NPS Director Horace Albright about the need for the survey in order to scientifically ascertain the best way to “restore and perpetuate the fauna in its pristine state by combating the harmful effects of human influence.”¹ It was a groundbreaking concept at the time, and one that set the stage for modern scientific management of our parks and other public lands. Wright and his team traveled the West for three seasons during that historic survey (through the heart of the Depression and a prolonged drought that contributed to the Dust Bowl).

Headquartered on the Berkeley campus for most of its existence, the Wildlife Survey team consisted of Wright, Dixon, and research associate Ben Thompson (who was studying under Grinnell for his master’s degree), with Maurine M. Pease serving as secretary. Wright, Dixon, and Thompson began their first official field season in May 1930 (although Wright and Dixon traveled to Yellowstone in the fall of the previous year). As they traveled throughout the West, they witnessed and documented other wildlife mismanagement issues, including the relentless killing of mountain lions, coyotes, eagles, and badgers (wolves having long been eliminated from most parks and the West) by park employees and by the staff of the Bureau of Biological Survey. Not only did they record wildlife conditions, but they also suggested management solutions in two classic reports, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks* (1933), and *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Wildlife Management in the National Parks* (1935). By the end of the Wildlife Survey in 1933 the trio had already captured 2,523 photographs.² Both of the *Fauna* books are illustrated with photographs from the NPS Wildlife Division photo file.

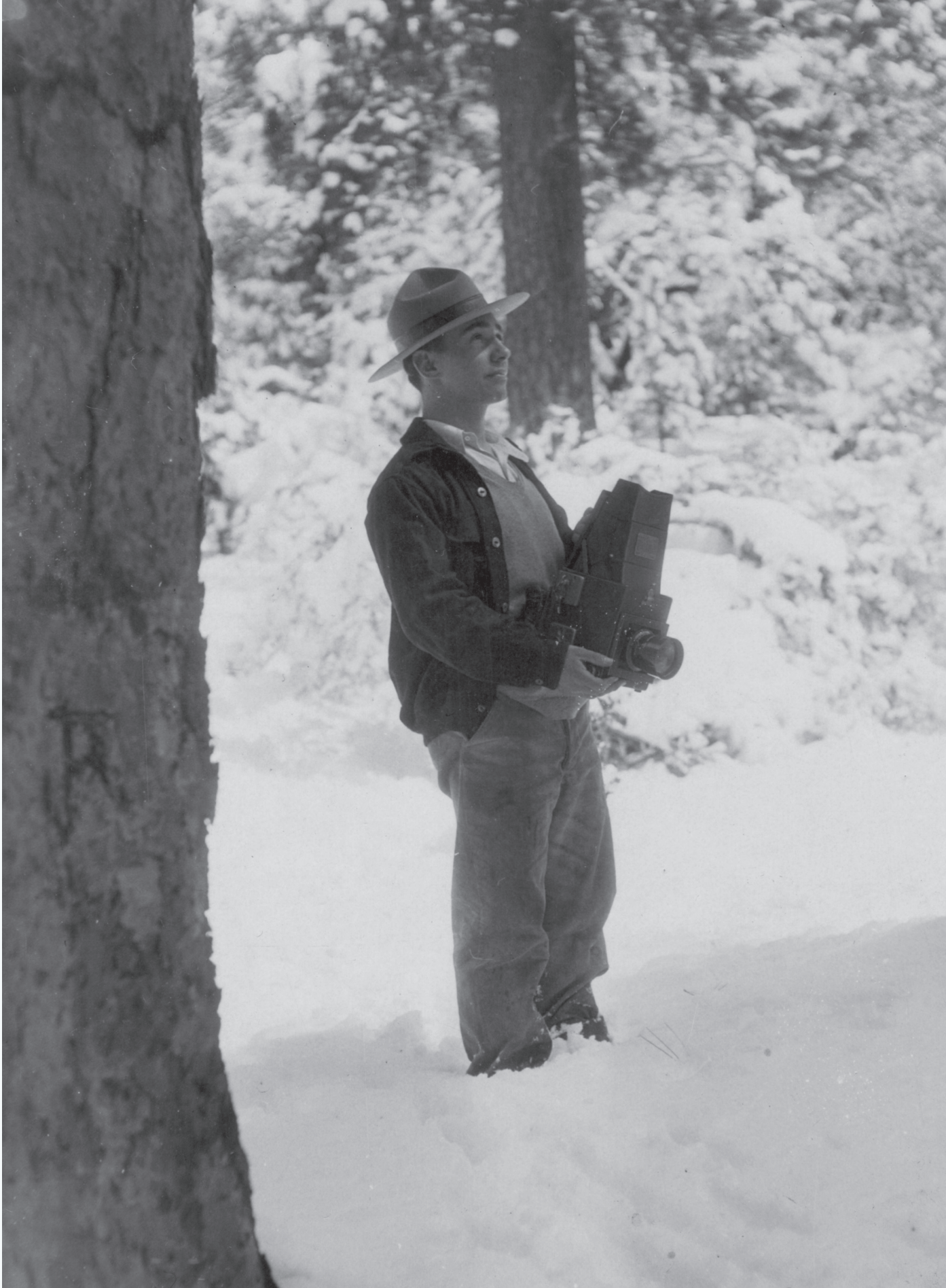
Wright worked tirelessly within NPS to demonstrate the need to establish and implement policies to manage wildlife and, in 1933, Albright created the NPS Wildlife Division at Wright’s urging. Wright was appointed division chief, and Dixon and Thompson staff biologists. As chief, Wright eventually moved to Washington, D.C. (followed by Thompson shortly thereafter), but Dixon remained in Berkeley and continued to work in the Western parks (principally Crater Lake, Yosemite, and Sequoia). Returning to Mount McKinley National Park



The wildlife survey team (l-r): George M. Wright, Ben H. Thompson, and Joseph S. Dixon at Mono Lake, California, on July 24, 1929.
FRANCIS CHAMBERLAIN / IMAGE HELD BY PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

in 1932, Dixon completed the work he and Wright began in 1926, publishing his findings in the third book of the series, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Birds and Mammals of Mount McKinley National Park* (1938).

Wright tragically died in a car accident in 1936, at the age of 31, but the work of the NPS Wildlife Division continued. At the time of his death, he had built up the division with almost 30 staff biologists scattered throughout the park system. In December 1939, however, without Wright’s dynamic and diplomatically persuasive personality to keep the division together, the duties and personnel of the division were transferred from NPS



The visionary: George Wright with his Graflex camera. Yosemite National Park, circa 1927–1928. CARL P. RUSSELL / IMAGE HELD BY PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

to the Bureau of Biological Survey and the Bureau of Fisheries. These two agencies merged in 1940 to form the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Personnel of the Fish and Wildlife Service continued to work in close cooperation with NPS.

Biological work was resumed by NPS in 1944. Dixon was one of three NPS biologists, along with Adolph Murie and Victor H. Cahalane, who were allowed to remain focused on fieldwork, while all others were transferred to other NPS activities considered crucial to the war effort. NPS research biologist E. Lowell Sumner, Jr. (an early recruit of Wright's), and others, continued adding images to the Wildlife Division photo file into the early 1950s.

The significance of the photographs

The NPS Wildlife Division photo file began with Wright's wildlife survey and grew to comprise approximately 11,000 images of interest to a wide variety of federal, state, and tribal land managers; biologists and botanists; archaeologists, cultural resource managers, and historians; and other researchers. The breadth of the geographic areas and resources represented makes this a unique collection for study, while the record of species and habitat conditions provide an invaluable resource for biological inventories, ecological studies, and new photographic surveys.

The bulk of the photo file dates to the 1930s but images as early as the late 1920s through to the 1950s are also included. They document species of reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds, mammals, invertebrates, plants, and fungi from national and state parks from New York to Hawai'i, and from Alaska to Florida. The collection also includes images of Native American cliff dwellings, historic structures, landscapes, habitats, invasive species, geology, and resource management issues such as logging, grazing, and erosion. Some images may represent the earliest photos of these subjects created by NPS at individual park units.

Although large Western, Intermountain, and Southwestern national parks such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, Crater Lake, Olympic, Denali, Rocky Mountain, Glacier, Grand Canyon, Zion, and others are well represented in the collection, Eastern parks are also documented. Images of the newly established Great Smoky Mountains and Shenandoah national parks and the proposed Everglades National Park document resources as NPS assumed management of the parks. Cave sites such as Wind Cave, Mammoth Cave, and Carlsbad Caverns are also well documented in the collection.

Species and other natural and cultural resources in smaller national monuments across the country were

also photographed in the 1930s. Examples include Lava Beds, Canyon de Chelly, Chiricahua, Tumacácori, Organ Pipe Cactus, Pipe Spring, Colorado, and Dinosaur, among many others. Some of the national monuments, including Fort Jefferson (now Dry Tortugas), Jackson Hole (now Grand Teton), White Sands, Katmai, Petrified Forest, Pinnacles, Death Valley, and Channel Islands, have since been designated national parks.

Although most of the images are of animals and wildlife management issues, this collection will also be of interest to archaeologists, historians, and cultural resource managers. For example, there are stunning photos by Dixon of Mesa Verde's prehistoric structures, many park historic structures, and various Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) projects from the 1930s.

Because NPS was responsible for implementing ECW projects in national and state parks in the 1930s, the images have broader value to state land managers, as well as historians interested in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and other New Deal work programs. State parks in New York, Tennessee, Washington, Oregon, Missouri, Colorado, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, and California, among others, are well represented. Photographs of state and federal lands near or adjacent to national parks, such as Kaibab National Forest, also offer additional research potential.

Noting the variety of national parks, state parks, and other areas throughout the United States represented in the collection, NPS Deputy Chief Scientist John G. Dennis stated that the images "offer good potential for repeat photography studies and documenting species occurrence" while providing "examples of geologic formations, soil erosion features and treatment methods, and habitat and nest characteristics for some species."

Many photographers are represented in the collection, including Wright, Thompson, Murie, Cahalane, and Sumner, among others. Dixon, however, took the vast majority of the images. As with a handful of naturalists in the early 20th century, Dixon was an early adopter of photography as a means to augment traditional fieldwork that entailed collecting numerous species, and recording extensive and detailed fieldnotes, as Joseph Grinnell taught all of his students. Grinnell, too, used photography, with some of his images dating back to 1905. Dixon's use of photography for biological work dates to at least 1913.³

Dixon trained Wright in the art of field photography, and Wright, in turn, made sure his team had access to all of the photographic equipment they needed. Additionally, Dixon and Wright created an exacting archival system to

preserve the research value of the photographs. Prints of each image were made and adhered to pre-printed oversized cards that recorded the negative number, location, date, species, photographer, and other relevant information. (The team also took early movies of wildlife, but few of these reels have been located.) As preserved in the NPS History Collection, the NPS Wildlife Division photo file retains the images' original classification and terminology.

A robust online resource

The legacy of Wright's vision, his personal commitment, and financial generosity on behalf of NPS wildlife management came full circle in August 2020 when George Meléndez Wright's family donated funding to digitize the complete NPS Wildlife Division photo file. Facilitated by the National Center for Preservation Education (NCPE) at Cornell University, the grant funded two scanning interns to work under the NPS History Collection archivist.

In spite of the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, interns Kiera Schneider and Brian Quann

Getting into his work: Joseph Dixon peeks out from a black bear hibernation den in a red fir tree, Yosemite National Park, July 16, 1935. [NPS HISTORY COLLECTION \(HFCA 1607\)](#)



scanned all 11,000 images in the collection between November 2020 and early June 2021 and generated metadata for over 4,600 digital files. NCPE Intern Eleanore Kohorn continues to process the remaining images.

As noted above, the first 4,607 scans from NPS Wildlife Division photo file can be accessed online free of charge through the Park Service's public NPGallery site (<https://npgallery.nps.gov/HFC/History/>). The remainder of the images will be added in the coming months as metadata entry is completed. Researchers are encouraged to email HFC_Archivist@nps.gov for a searchable finding aid for the photographs, higher-resolution, images for specific needs, or for other questions about the NPS History Collection.

Endnotes

1. 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. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (1933), 4.
2. *Ibid.*, 6.
3. Both Grinnell's and Dixon's early images can be also be viewed online. The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology has scanned some 15,000 images from its large collection created by generations of museum researchers and students. The scanned images can be viewed online here:

<https://calphotos.berkeley.edu/mvz.html>.

Additionally, Dixon's family donated numerous images that now reside with Yosemite National Park, and can be viewed here:

<https://npgallery.nps.gov/YOSE>.

For more information about the collection, contact:

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No. 10 Subject Swan, Trumpeter (Eggs did not hatch)

Neg. No. 3474 ✓

Date June 18-20, Locality Red Rock Lake, Montana
1932

Photographer Dr. Oastler



George M. Wright

Negative No. 7140

Subject FISH: Gargantuan salmon caught by Dave Madsen

Date 8/5/38

Locality Olympic N.P., Washington

By E. Lowell Sumner, Jr.



Negative No. 6929 (No neg. in file)
Subject FISH CULTURE, Trout, Yellowstone: Milk cans on pack horses are used
to transport the "fry" on land, Grand Teton N. P., Wyoming.
Date 1937 Locality Grand Teton N. P., Wyoming By T. E. Whitcraft (?)

(See Superintendent's report Dec. '37)



*Copy neg from this print
11/84*

No. 9 Subject Bear, Grizzly (Black grizzly in food box)

Reg. No. 488

Date Sept. 14, 1920 Locality Lake Lodge, Yellowstone National Park

Photographer J. Dixon



Wright & Dixon

No. 6 Subject Shiras Cow feeding in overflow pond of meadow on Gibbon River. G. M. Wright in foreground taking moving pictures. NEGATIVE NO. 2532
Date May 20, 1932 Locality Norris Junction, Yellowstone National Park Photographer B. H. Thompson



George M. Wright

Neg. No. 2964

No. 2 Subject Wolf, Mt. McKinley Timber -- Track in sand, $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide

Date June 18, 1932 Locality Savage River, Mt. McKinley National Park Photographer J.S.D.



George M. Wright

Slide: Db-3-2

Buildings:

Neg. 1534

No. 19 Subject Man-/"Cliff Dwellers" -- Fire House

Date Nov. 9, 1930 Locality Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado.

Photographer J. Dixon



George M. Wright

Research Area

No neg. in file.

No. Subject Scenery - Range study plot, elevation 4,500, forage type sagebrush & black brush

Date April 12, 1935 Locality Petrified Forest Photographer L. Keller



George M. Wright

No. 5221 Subject ♂ Surf-bird going on to the nest

Date May 29, 1926 Locality Mt. McKinley District, Alaska Photographer J. Dixon



University of California
Museum of Vertebrate Zoology

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On the cover of this issue

A glacial river on Kodiak Island, Alaska, meets the North Pacific Ocean. Coastal deltas represent the critical interface between terrestrial, freshwater, and marine connectivity. | **STEVE HILLEBRAND / USFWS**