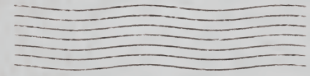




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



To Lift All Boats: An interview with Jerry Emory, author of *George Meléndez Wright: The Fight for Wildlife and Wilderness in the National Parks*

Rolf Diamant

The previous *Parks Stewardship Forum* issue (May 2023) featured an excerpt from historian Jerry Emory's recent biography of George Meléndez Wright, recognized champion of scientific-based management of national parks (*George Meléndez Wright: The Fight for Wildlife and Wilderness in the National Parks*, University of Chicago Press, 2023).

Wright has always been an iconic hero to rank and file National Park Service (NPS) resource managers and wildlife conservation professionals. His relatively brief career (cut short by a fatal car crash in 1936) fundamentally changed the trajectory of early NPS resource management practices that had prioritized the entertainment of park visitors over the preservation of natural and cultural resources. In effect, park managers manipulated fauna and flora to

create and sustain a façade, where some charismatic and photogenic species were favored, and theatrical spectacles were staged for visitors, such as fire falls and bear feedings. These practices included the managed suppression of natural predators such as wolves and coyotes and other interventions that destabilized and wrecked natural systems. A little

▲ Wright surveying for trumpeter swans, Yellowstone National Park, early 1930s PHOTO COURTESY PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD



GEORGE MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT

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JERRY EMORY

more than a decade after the National Park Service was created in 1916, George Meléndez Wright and his able colleagues made it their mission to convince park managers to abandon these practices and establish new service-wide policies to professionalize NPS resource management.

Emory's book is revelatory, not only because of its telling of the fascinating story of Wright's wildlife conservation campaign in the national parks, but also its account of his work in Washington during President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. This side of Wright—the savvy, politically adept New Deal utility player—has until now been largely overlooked.

FDR profoundly re-shaped the national park system, vastly expanding its size and scope, giving NPS a significant role in addressing a broader social agenda under the mantle of “Emergency Conservation Work,”

or ECW. NPS was transformed almost overnight from a small, western-based custodial land management agency to the guardian of a much larger and diversified system of natural, cultural, and recreational units including new historic sites, parkways, seashores, and recreational demonstration areas. Concurrently, NPS's administrative and professional skills were tapped to meet the recreational needs of growing metropolitan areas across the country. NPS ran most of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps, many located in national parks. While much work was done within the national parks, by far and away the NPS/CCC's most significant accomplishment was the building of over 700 new state parks and recreation demonstration areas, the foundation for many of today's state park systems.

Wright used his considerable talents to advance this agenda while at the same time skillfully employing New Deal programs and resources to staff out his new Wildlife Division in Washington and out in the national parks. Wright was able to hire park biological technicians with ECW funding to work for the Wildlife Division in much the same way the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) was able to hire unemployed architects. Wright intrinsically understood that the best environment to achieve his dream of professionalizing park wildlife conservation was not a small, financially constrained, static national park system, but rather, a dynamic system of national parks run by an expanding agency that was valued and generously funded for its high-profile contributions to New Deal initiatives and policies.

For this 31st “Letter from Woodstock,” I turned to biographer Jerry Emory to shed more light on George Meléndez Wright's NPS career, particularly his work during those early New Deal years when he undertook a number of important collateral duties while still serving as head of the NPS's Wildlife Division. He was in fact working on one of those projects, a potential trans-national park along the Rio Grande, when, in 1936, at the young age of 31, he met his untimely death in the crash mentioned above, which also took the life of his NPS colleague Roger Toll, who at that time was superintendent of Yellowstone.

Here is our conversation.

Rolf Diamant: Before we get started, I wish to repeat what I said in the George Wright Society webinar we did together back in May: that your book is the most important publication about the development of the US National Park Service since Richard West Sellars's *Preserving Nature in the National Parks* (1997.)

Jerry Emory: Dick Sellars was always gently pushing me to write this biography. We served on the George Wright Society board together, and we talked often. While he was researching *Preserving Nature*, he'd send me copies of fascinating letters or documents he'd found having to do with Wright, like teasers, as if saying, "Jerry, there's a very important story here, and you have to tell it."

Wright was the first wildlife biologist to be hired by the Park Service, in 1927, and he is often referred to as the "Father of Science in the National Parks." There were naturalists in the service, but Wright studied at UC Berkeley under the prominent American forester, Walter Mulford, and one of the country's leading zoologists and conservationists, Joseph Grinnell, director of the Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. Wright's ideas about managing wildlife in the parks, and resources overall, were groundbreaking, and they can be directly linked back to his mentors at Berkeley.

After initial research in the parks, his first official publication, co-authored with his colleagues Ben Thompson and Joseph Dixon, was *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in National Parks*. Sellars believed *Fauna #1*, as it became known, was a "landmark" document that "proposed a truly radical departure from earlier practices."

I first became aware of George Wright because I married one of Wright's granddaughters, Jeannie Lloyd. It was through Jeannie and her mother, Wright's daughter, Pamela Meléndez Wright Lloyd, that I first learned about Wright. I began working on the book idea, off and on, for decades. I finally had time in 2019 to dedicate myself to it full-time. I used a variety of interesting sources for the book. Even though Wright died early he had already published widely and had given numerous conference

presentations. All these materials, and a lot more, were saved by his wife, Bee Ray Wright. And she kept his memory alive for their two daughters. So, I had access to several family albums, original manuscripts, reprints, and photographs.

Because Wright's mother was Salvadoran, and his two brothers—Carlos and Juan—moved to El Salvador to be raised after their parents died early, there are many Meléndez and Wright relatives in El Salvador. I was able to introduce myself to many of them, and they were extremely helpful.

The National Park Service correspondence—and I copied hundreds of letters—was like finding a hidden treasure. They really helped me understand many

Wright on campus at Berkeley, 1920s. PHOTO COURTESY PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD



JE: *Between 1916 and 1928, the US Biological Survey, often working alongside the Park Service, and in the parks, killed a staggering 8,370 wolves, 324,915 coyotes, 1,877 mountain lions, 36,597 bobcats and lynxes, 1,277 bears, countless numbers of prairie dogs and ground squirrels, and innumerable nontargeted species.*

personal relationships and issues. Wright's original fieldnotes covering his ground-breaking wildlife survey of the parks between 1930 and 1933 were held by the family, so I had access to those, and they are impressive to read. I was also able to obtain copies of the notes of his two NPS colleagues and dear friends, Joseph Dixon and Ben Thompson. Fortunately, I was able to personally interview Thompson in 1987 before he died.

Diamant: We can easily forget that the national park system in which Wright got his start in the late 1920s had a relatively small footprint, mostly centered in the high-elevation West. It was a very small bureau. NPS Washington headquarters had a tiny staff (regional offices came in the 1930s to coordinate CCC responsibilities) and limited professional expertise to share with the parks.

Stephen T. Mather and Horace Albright, the first two directors of NPS, were constantly worried that their little agency might be swallowed up by the much larger and more established US Forest Service. Ironically, it was the Forest Service that had the most to worry about, fighting off its aggressive sibling agency as NPS incorporated USFS lands into new parks at places like Olympic, Grand Canyon, and Grand Teton.

In fact, one of my first NPS assignments in 1974 was with a Denver Service Center team sent to quietly scout US Forest Service lands in Idaho's Sawtooth and White Cloud mountains as a potential national park. NPS was still trying to create a park in the Sawtooths almost 60 years after Mather first attempted to get a bill through Congress in 1916 to designate a park there. Never happened.

Emory: There were some 20 parks in the system—as you say, with the vast majority of those in the West—when Wright joined the park service in the fall of 1927, at the age of 23, and moved to Yosemite to become an assistant naturalist. And, except for those in Hawaii, he had been to all the western parks, including McKinley (today's Denali), many of them several times. He knew more about the parks than almost all his colleagues.

The Park Service was only 11 years old in 1927; and there were many “old school” management techniques Wright observed. These practices included a culture of intense predator control, feeding of the bears and other wildlife, and the maintenance of ramshackle zoos in the parks filled with maimed and unhealthy wildlife. With predators alone, the statistics are almost unbelievable. Between 1916 and 1928, the US Biological

Survey, working on public lands across the West, and often in the parks alongside the Park Service, killed a staggering 8,370 wolves, 324,915 coyotes, 1,877 mountain lions, 36,597 bobcats and lynxes, 1,277 bears, countless numbers of prairie dogs and ground squirrels, and innumerable non-targeted species. Wright knew the parks, and the surrounding landscapes, were devoid of many species and woefully out of balance. He intensely disagreed with all these practices, and he would set out to change them through research and science-based management suggestions.

Diamant: But Wright also understood that relationships really matter and still do in NPS. Wright built a broad

Wright talking strategy with past Sierra Club President Philip Bernays (left) and Acting Club President Ernest Dawson (right) during a July 1935 High Country Trip to Kings Canyon, California. Proof print by Ansel Adams.
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network of friends and colleagues that enabled him to be extremely effective in this relatively small organization. I think we can agree that much of his success can also be attributed to his winning character and personality, but he knew how to build trust—at all levels of the agency.

Emory: When I interviewed Ben Thompson in 1987, he made it clear that Wright had a dynamic and engaging personality, a quick wit, and a keen intellect. Combined, these attributes made it possible for him to disagree with park service superiors and others in government about management policies, without being confrontational, and remain friends. That, Thompson pointed out, while standing only five feet four inches and “with a dark complexion” in an organization dominated by older Caucasian men. He was an excellent listener, yet gregarious and persuasive. Heck, when Wright met Ben Thompson in Yosemite in 1928, where Thompson was working as a busboy, Wright convinced him to leave Stanford and a graduate program in philosophy and instead enroll at Berkeley, study under Grinnell, and come work for him in the Park Service. Thompson did exactly that!

According to long-time NPS biologist and fellow Grinnell student Lowell Sumner, whom Wright hired in 1935, Wright knew the names of all the rangers in the parks, even the backcountry rangers, and he developed relationships with everyone, regardless of rank. And it paid off, because over the years he could write to them and ask questions and favors. They became his unofficial eyes and ears in the parks when he wasn't there.

Wright and his team knew all the superintendents and most of the head rangers, many of them very well. Wright became close friends with Roger Toll, especially when Toll was in charge of Yellowstone. The same could be said of his first boss at Yosemite, head naturalist Carl Russell, and he had a good working relationship with superintendents Charles Thomson at Yosemite, John White at Sequoia—both



Wright and Thompson with survey truck, Hayden Valley, Yellowstone National Park, May 20, 1932. PHOTO BY FRANCES CHAMBERLAIN, COURTESY PAMELA MELÉNDEZ WRIGHT LLOYD

of whom were much older than Wright—as well as superintendent Elbert Solinsky at Crater Lake. They didn't always agree on issues, but the bottom line was he needed their help when it came to changing old harmful policies. His “most excellent roommate” while in Yosemite living in the Rangers' Club, Bill Godfrey, became the head ranger at Crater Lake. And, except for Thomson and White, these men moved around in the system, from park to park, so he had this unofficial as well as professional network throughout the West. And Dixon, who was 20 years Wright's senior, had been conducting fieldwork throughout the West and Alaska for decades, and he was also very well connected.

JE: ...excellent fieldwork, patience, and willingness to sit down and talk through issues with their colleagues in the parks. They developed relationships. Communication was key.



Wright with colleagues on a commission investigating potential international park and wildlife refuge areas in the Big Bend region of the Rio Grande, México and Texas, February 1936. Above: The party at Picacho Vaca, México. Wright is at the bottom left, examining the map while lying down; Toll is at the center, facing camera. Left: The commission members along the border, Santa Elena Canyon, Big Bend, Texas, February 18, 1936. Wright is at the center, in white shirt; Toll kneels in front of him, hat off. PHOTO BY GEORGE GRANT, COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE HISTORY COLLECTION

For example, after many in-person conversations, Wright was able to convince Grand Canyon’s superintendent, Miner Tillotson, to stop the aggressive predator control throughout the park. Tillotson admitted they had gone “too far” killing predators. When the superintendent saw the light, so to speak, Wright immediately suggested that the rangers who carried out the predator control during the winter months could, instead, start making wildlife observations, and Wright was willing to help make that happen. That one example could not have

taken place without the wildlife team’s excellent fieldwork, patience, and willingness to sit down and talk through issues with their colleagues in the parks. They developed relationships. Communication was key.

Diamant: In this way Wright was also demonstrating, perhaps for the first time in the fledgling agency’s development, just how the national park system could really function as an interdependent system, drawing on the strengths of the entire organization

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and partners, rather than functioning as a loose confederation of isolated and semi-independent fiefdoms.

As you point out, Wright understood the power of park superintendents in the NPS hierarchy and so he assiduously cultivated the friendships and collaborations with these individual managers that you describe. But he also made sure his “authorizing environment” in the Washington Office was backing him up. Sometimes I think the only thing Wright didn’t do was teach was a course in leadership—but he certainly could have.

Emory: Wright knew directors Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, especially Albright. And although Albright and Wright didn’t agree on everything, particularly the bear shows, they had a good working relationship and a mutual respect.

Because of this “gift of his character,” as Thompson put it, when Wright moved to Washington DC, part-time in 1934, and then full-time in 1935, to head up the new Wildlife Division during the New Deal, he learned the power structure quickly and made his presence felt.

During the early New Deal, starting in 1933, Wright figured out how to use some of the emergency conservation funds to hire CCC park biologists to join his team. By the end of 1935 he had a total of 27 biologists located in the parks or working out of Berkeley or Washington, DC.

Diamant: As you indicate in the book, Jerry, Wright intrinsically understood that a rising tide lifted all boats. He rode the wave, so to speak, capitalizing on opportunities associated with New Deal emergency conservation programs. But he also believed the American people directly benefited from this greatly expanded NPS mission. Wright advocated for the establishment of new seashores, recreation areas, and scenic parkways, but always highlighting the role

of wild areas and wildlife as an essential component of this larger national park portfolio. This is the opposite of the “thinning the blood” school of thought later espoused by leaders like former NPS Director James Ridenour.

Wright was also prepared to make himself useful in Washington in any way he could, and was always willing to do more than what was expected of him. Wright set an example of moving beyond one’s professional silo and comfort area to work collaboratively with other interests and agencies to achieve multiple objectives. I guess it can be said that once Wright got to Washington, he remade himself into kind of a utility player for NPS.

Emory: It wasn’t so much he remade himself, as it was more that he matured and expanded. Remember, he was barely 30 years old! I think that his drive to collaborate was simply part of his DNA, part of his personality. I have some ideas I explore in the book about how that trait might have been fostered and expanded, but it’s clear that he worked with the Forest Service, Biological Survey, the Indian Service in the Office of Indian Affairs, state fish and game agencies, hunting and livestock interests, and countless individuals. And it wasn’t easy. As you pointed out, the Forest Service and NPS were rivals. But Wright was a trained Berkeley forester, he spoke their language. That, combined with his personality, took him a long way down the road to working with them.

Wright and his team kept the big picture in mind, a landscape-scale view, and they knew it would take a long time to change things. It turns out, they were correct. Some of the most egregious practices and lack of coordination were resolved, but many issues remained and waxed and waned well after Wright’s death, some even to this day.

Diamant: Speaking of having a landscape-scale view, a good example you bring up in your book is Wright’s secondment to the multi-agency National

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Resources Planning Board. The board was set up by President Roosevelt in June 1934 with the broad and unprecedented remit “to study and plan for the better utilization of the land, water, and other national resources of the country.” Wow.

It is good to remember this was a time when hundreds of thousands of small farmers were bankrupted on worn-out, eroded agricultural lands. In cities, swelling urban populations had little or no access to public open space and recreation at a time of terrible unemployment and poverty. In response, the National Resources Planning Board recommended a program of national land use planning to begin to address some of these problems. Wright was appointed chief of the Board’s Recreation Division.

In October 1934 he reported on the board’s progress to the 26th National Conference on City Planning in St. Louis, Missouri. I’ve read his presentation.

So here was this NPS “wunderkind” of park wildlife biology speaking to city officials and planners from around the country, proudly declaring that “the

Federal Government is the people’s agency for national planning.” He was fearless.

Wright sounded a lot like Frederick Law Olmsted, telling his audience that providing Americans with recreational opportunities was a basic, patriotic duty. He said, “recreation herein connotes all that is re-creative of the community, state, or nation.” He articulated the Roosevelt’s Administration’s position that it was a federal responsibility to “set aside as public recreation reservations those lands which have unusually concentrated value for active recreation, or which contain the outstanding scenic, historic, prehistoric, or scientific exhibits of the nation.”

Furthermore, the federal government, according to Wright, also had responsibility for encouraging state and local recreational development by shielding potential sites from “competitors of recreational land-use which are of pernicious character.” He then listed those “pernicious” competitors that caused “wanton waste of the recreational resources,” including “erosion, destructive logging, over-grazing, private consumption of recreational areas and wild-life, and pollution.”

A montage of Dorothy Waugh’s illustrations for “Recreational Use of Land in the United States,” November 1934. NPS HISTORY COLLECTION PHOTOS





National Park Service conference of superintendents, Washington, DC, November 1934. Wright is second from right, front row. Thompson is indicated by the red arrow.
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

I'd say that, almost a century later, we still have a lot of this work yet to do.

Emory: Wright was heavily influenced by his work with the Natural Resources Board and his mentor Joseph Grinnell of Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. The board assignment gave him the opportunity to collaborate with people focused on urban parks, with landscape architects, and various professionals from other fields. He came to believe that recreation came in many forms, and that if he wanted to create advocates for wildlife and wilderness, these resources inside of the parks had to have "value" for people and not be locked up or inaccessible.

Diamant: I'd like to conclude our conversation by looking toward the future. Wright's experience, of course, has such significant implications for NPS today as our national government mobilizes its vast resources in response to the deepening climate crisis and strives for greater equity, engagement and access

to our national park system. Now is the time for NPS to get out in front of this change, to ride the wave as Wright did.

Emory: Let's remember that Wright also placed such high value on communications (in his era mainly through letters, written publications, and memorandums,) so it is particularly fitting that the George Wright Society, founded in his memory, provides opportunities for park professionals and scholars from around the world to share their current research and best practices and to continually improve our stewardship of parks, protected and conserved areas, and cultural sites.

Diamant: George Meléndez Wright would have certainly been an enthusiastic member of the Society that bears his name.

Emory: No doubt about it.

The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity, or the George Wright Society.



Co-published by the **University of California, Berkeley, Institute for Parks, People, and Biodiversity**, and the **George Wright Society**.
ISSN 2688-187X



This article is published in Volume 39, Number 3 of *Parks Stewardship Forum*, 2023.

Parks Stewardship Forum explores innovative thinking and offers enduring perspectives on critical issues of place-based heritage management and stewardship. Interdisciplinary in nature, the journal gathers insights from all fields related to parks, protected/conserved areas, cultural sites, and other place-based forms of conservation. The scope of the journal is international. It is dedicated to the legacy of **George Meléndez Wright**, a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and pioneer in conservation of national parks.

Parks Stewardship Forum is published online at <https://escholarship.org/uc/psf> through **eScholarship**, an open-access publishing platform subsidized by the University of California and managed by the California Digital Library. Open-access publishing serves the missions of the Institute and GWS to share, freely and broadly, research and knowledge produced by and for those who manage parks, protected areas, and cultural sites throughout the world. A version of *Parks Stewardship Forum* designed for online reading is also available at <https://parks.berkeley.edu/psf>. For information about publishing in PSF, write to psf@georgewright.org.

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The journal continues *The George Wright Forum*, published 1981–2018 by the George Wright Society.

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On the cover of this issue

This viewpoint of a Union soldier facing Pickett's Charge reveals a pivotal moment at Gettysburg, foreshadowing the Civil War's outcome.

GARY E. DAVIS