

The North American Conservation Model: Triumph for Man and Nature

George Bird Grinnell: The Father of American Conservation, Part 2

by Shane Mahoney

Editor's note: This is the 5th in a series of articles dedicated to helping hunters and anglers throughout the United States and Canada appreciate their history of achievement in wildlife conservation and to encouraging greater commitment to the cause. In this issue Newfoundland scientist and historian Shane Mahoney concludes the story of one of the greatest North American conservationists of them all.

When Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, the protected area was originally considered a museum of natural wonders more than a wildlife preserve. In fact, little in the way of wildlife protection policy had been devised before the land was designated a national park. But this was to change after George Bird Grinnell visited

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Grinnell, fourth from left, visiting with Native American acquaintances. Date and location not known.

Yellowstone in 1875, as a naturalist with a government-sponsored reconnaissance under the command of Colonel William Ludlow. Their visit confirmed big game was being slaughtered and timber and other resources extracted at a vicious pace. Grinnell returned from the expedition determined to provide better protection for the park and to set before the American people a platform of discussion regarding just what a national park should represent. In so doing he was to lay the foundation for the national park system we have today.

His official report expressed his outrage over the slaughter and unbridled commercialization of wildlife ongoing in the Yellowstone region. If wildlife and other resources could be wantonly destroyed and wasted in a national park, where would they survive? Over the next 15 years he labored relentlessly through his editorials in *Forest and Stream* to define the goals and roles of Yellowstone and to encourage a rational system of administration and management. He would eventually succeed. He would also call for and then negotiate the creation of Glacier National

Park, securing its purchase at a fair price from the Pikuni Blackfoot. Only his reputation as a true friend to the Indians of that region could have enabled this arrangement to proceed. That splendid landscape, now protected for all time and for all generations, we owe, incontestably, to Grinnell.

His Yellowstone visit also made Grinnell more determined than ever to eliminate the commercial exploitation of wildlife wherever it occurred and to establish a new platform perhaps best described as "prudent takings." Grinnell was not, after all, protesting hunting. He was then, and remained all his life, an ardent hunter. But commercial killing was an entirely different matter; and he saw this earlier and more clearly than any other hunter.

Just as he was to be responsible for the protection of big game in Yellowstone and the preservation of wildlife and landscapes in Glacier Park, Grinnell would also lead the charge for waterfowl protection. At the time, few considered waterfowl to be at risk. Massive kills by market hunters were still being reported and large flocks of birds regularly seen. But the transcontinental railways in the United States and Canada—and new shotgun designs—were effectively increasing the reach and impact of recreational and commercial hunters alike. Just as he had foreseen the disappearance of buffalo and the Plains Indians cultures, Grinnell saw the inevitable demise of ducks and geese long before others and fought to avert it.

At first people refused to believe the declines were real, suggesting that flyway patterns had changed. But eventually no hunters could deny that waterfowl numbers had dwindled drastically, and they too began to speak out, demanding that something be done. Spring shooting was abolished and waterfowl placed under the custody of the federal government (the Weeks-McLean Act of 1913). This would lead in turn to many other legislative changes, including the now famous Migratory Bird Treaty of 1916 between the United States and Great Britain, which still governed Canada. No one today questions the enormous impact these changes had on the recovery of waterfowl populations. Too few, however, recognize the role George Bird Grinnell played in their establishment or that they

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Grinnell at age 74, on his namesake glacier in Glacier National Park, Montana, 1926.

represented another plank of modern conservation, namely, that wildlife is an international resource that must be managed cooperatively by jurisdictions, and such management must derive from laws and policies that are based on science.

Grinnell's achievements in bird conservation were not restricted to waterfowl. When ladies developed a hunger for hats festooned with the feathers of egrets and other shore, song and wading birds in the late 19th century, a wholesale slaughter occurred. Grinnell was at the forefront demanding a halt to this practice. His efforts defined another founding principle of the North American Conservation Model: the prohibition of frivolous killing of wild creatures. Grinnell's views on the killing of birds to decorate ladies' hats were delivered as stinging editorials in *Forest and Stream* and were echoed by the American Ornithologist's Union (AOU), which he helped found in 1883.

Three years later, he decided another organization was needed to protect non-game bird species. His childhood experiences inspired him to name this new organization the Audubon Society, after the widow and family who had played such formative roles in his life. It grew to 50,000 members within two years and by 1905 had metamorphosed into the National Audubon Society. Grinnell became a director of and mentor to this new incarnation.

At about the same time he helped found the American Ornithologists Union and Audubon, Grinnell made the acquaintance of a young sportsman and author rather incensed over a review of his book, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* that had appeared in the July 2, 1885, edition of *Forest and Stream*. Sitting in his office, Grinnell explained to the greenhorn that although he admired the enthusiasm and freshness of the young hunter's work, many of his observations of the western frontier were more myth than fact. This initial engagement was to develop into a warm friendship and one of the most powerful coalitions in conservation history.

Individually Grinnell and Theodore Roosevelt were forces to be reckoned with; taken together they were reckoning itself. Their collective contributions to the conservation of wildlife and wild land, and to the advancement of

hunting as a founding tradition for the new crusade, are beyond comparison. The formidable inertia of a young nation bent on wasteful destruction of the natural world was held at bay largely by these two men. Their achievements are the very spine of the hunter-conservationist success story. There were other "greats," but none to surpass Grinnell and Roosevelt.

One outcome of their many discussions was the formation of the Boone and Crockett Club. Grinnell wanted a sportsman's society that was action-oriented and would do for the larger mammals what the Audubon Society was doing for birds. He had lobbied for such an organization years before, one that would look after the national interests of wildlife rather than taking the local perspective usual for sportsmen's organizations of the day.

Grinnell appealed increasingly to the conscience of recreational hunters, urging them to become the champions for wildlife. Long before sportsmen were recognized as a force for conservation, Grinnell knew they should and must become just that.

While the Boone and Crockett Club included many aristocratic and influential sportsmen, including future U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt and future governor of Pennsylvania and head of the U.S. Forest Service Gifford Pinchot, none had the influence or vision of its original founder. As many writers of the time opined, Grinnell *was* the Boone and Crockett Club. He was responsible for virtually every major idea and campaign the club would launch in its early years. He would effectively use it to advance his view that all natural resources, including the forests and waterways of the nation, should be placed under the efficient administration of experts and held in trust for future generations. In doing so he was endeavoring to hold commercial interests at bay.

He would simultaneously use *Forest and Stream* to advance the Boone and Crockett Club itself, once again showing his strategic genius for multiplying the impact of a growing network of conservation organizations and policies that he had largely created. In Roosevelt, Grinnell was setting the seeds for ideas that the “Old Lion” would first consider, then accept and finally force through the antagonisms of politics and into law. As Grinnell recognized, give ideas to Roosevelt and he could wheel them through hell!

In 1894 Grinnell announced his boldest plan yet for the preservation of wildlife. In an editorial in *Forest and Stream* entitled, “A Plank,” Grinnell argued for the total abolition of the sale of game. In so doing he struck at a tradition as old as the United States itself, and one that not only encompassed the market hunter but many sportsmen as well. Until this time it was common practice for sportsmen to sell legal takings they considered surplus to their needs. But thanks to the work of Grinnell’s AOU Committee on Bird Protection and to agitation by organized hunters in various states—plus the widespread dismay over the destruction of the buffalo and passenger pigeon—commerce in wildlife soon was restricted. On July 1, 1897, Iowa congressman John F. Lacey, a close friend of Grinnell’s and the man responsible for sponsoring the 1894 Act to

Protect the Birds and Mammals of Yellowstone National Park, introduced a bill to prohibit the sale and interstate traffic of illegally taken wildlife or their products. Defeated in the initial attempt, the bill was reintroduced and finally passed in 1900. Once sufficient individual states passed their own laws prohibiting the sale of wild meat taken legally and/or illegally, the noose was drawn, and wildlife imperiled became wildlife protected.

The Lacey Act, as it is now known, undoubtedly saved from extinction many of the species we so admire and love. It also engendered an entirely new way of thinking about wildlife, transforming it from a commodity to be taken at will to one worthy of our greatest consideration and protection. Wildlife now mattered, and to a growing echelon of citizen activists its protection was a matter of pride. Grinnell, through his editorials and the network of associations he founded, led or helped direct, had relentlessly focused on ending the commercial taking of wildlife. It took 30 years, but this battle, like so many of his efforts, ended in victory.

In 1899 Grinnell was chosen by C. Hart Merriam, a founder of the National Geographic Society and first chief of the Division of Biological Survey (a precursor to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), to be part of the Edward Harriman expedition to Alaska. This famous 9,000-mile



Picnic near Grinnell Glacier, 1926. Grinnell standing.

odyssey via steamship began in Seattle on May 31. On board were many of the most esteemed naturalists of the day, including John Burroughs and John Muir. Their extraordinary journey would take them from the southern panhandle all the way to the Pribilof Islands. Merriam had been to these rocky outposts before and wanted his company to view the vast fur seal rookery there. But after reaching their location, he was horrified to see only remnants of the once vast herds remained.

Grinnell's outrage was kindled yet again. Here was another example of inordinate and unsustainable slaughter brought about by unshackled greed. He returned from the journey, poured out his thoughts in a *Forest and Stream* editorial, and with the weight of Merriam at his back urged the federal government to take action before the fur seal was rendered extinct. Like all such episodes it did not stop there. Grinnell believed in campaigns not skirmishes. And so he launched another 10-year program of strategic protest. It, too, was successful, and in 1912 the United States, Canada, Japan and Russia agreed to limits on fur seal hunting and signed the first-ever international treaty to protect wildlife.

Throughout these debates, Grinnell appealed increasingly to the conscience of recreational hunters, urging them to become the champions for wildlife and for ending commercial use of it. Long before sportsmen were recognized as a force for conservation, Grinnell knew they should and must become just that.

He was always proud of his hunting tradition and had great admiration for those who were capable of living from the land. He recognized far earlier than most that wildlife protection was essential if hunting was to be sustained, and only a concerted effort would overcome the dangers of wildlife depletion and extinction.

In his heart Grinnell recognized the power of hunters' association with nature and the current of life and death that so inevitably binds all creatures to the earth. He also recognized implicitly the communication and cooperation that is possible between men of all races, creeds and cultures who live to pursue the chase.

Grinnell suffered the first of several heart

attacks in 1929, and thereafter his pace of work declined. For more than 40 years he had been the very epicenter of conservation policy and progress. It is nearly impossible to name a single natural resource issue he did not influence, and the list of his achievements borders on the unimaginable. A man of great sensitivity, he was also a man of great energy and drive. His life's motto says it all: "The conquering of difficulties is one of the chief joys of life." Given the battles he fought and won, Grinnell must have had one hell of a joyous ride. Along the way, he, more than any other man, established the foundations of the North American Conservation Model. It is hard to imagine his last years, confined as he was to a wheelchair. We may gain some impression of how he felt from words he penned late in life:

Dreamily my thoughts went back over the years to other nights spent in other lodges, with other companions, and memories of brave, tried friends of former days crowded thick upon me. I remembered lodges pitched on the plains . . . camps on the Republican, the Platte, the Loup, the Running Water, the Missouri . . . where with those friends, red and white, I had hunted and feasted, and fought the Dakotas and their allies; I thought of lodges in the mountains, on the fragrant sage plains, or high up beneath the snows, where, by the harrying streams which pour into the Green and the Grand, with one companion I had trapped beaver for a season; of months spent in the lodges of my bothers the Panis, and with the kindly Utes, and of camps scattered far and wide over the West.

Then I see pass before me, as in a vision, the forms and faces of grave, silent, gentle men, whom once I had called my friends. They have fired their last shot, they have kindled their last campfire, they have gone over the Range . . . crossed the Great Divide . . . And none have risen, nor can arise, to fill the places left vacant. The conditions which made these men what they were no longer exist.

The same can be said by those of us alive today of places left vacant by North America's conservation giants. The greatest among them was George Bird Grinnell. He died on April 12, 1938. He was 89.

A riveting orator, passionate hunter and widely respected scholar, Newfoundland native Shane Mahoney has lectured extensively in North America and Europe on wildlife conservation and nature.