

*Interested in all things natural, George Bird Grinnell was a powerful force in shaping the late-nineteenth-century conservation movement. Publisher of Forest and Stream, he established the first Audubon Clubs and co-founded the Boone and Crockett Club, and through these means fought to preserve Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks.*

*His energetic commitments and political savvy blazed the way for Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and Progressive Era conservationism.*

# PATHBREAKING CONSERVATIONIST

*GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL (1849–1938)*

**B**orn into an upper-class family on September 20, 1849, in Brooklyn, New York, George Bird Grinnell lived a multi-faceted life that stretched over nine decades. In that time, he had been a sportsman, explorer, scientist, author, editor, publisher, rancher, conservationist, and Plains Indian ethnographer.

It would be in the last two roles that he would make his greatest contributions.

In 1857 Grinnell's family moved to "Audubon Park," the thirty-acre former estate of artist-naturalist John James Audubon. Here, in a still-rural setting, Grinnell came to know the Audubon family, who were a constant source of stimulation for Grinnell's budding natural history interests.

Although a relatively poor student in secondary school, Grinnell entered Yale in 1866 and graduated in 1870 with an A.B. That same year, Yale paleontologist Othniel C. Marsh accepted him as a volunteer assistant on a "bone hunting" expedition to the Great West, a land typified by huge bison herds and free-ranging Plains Indians. Traveling west over the recently completed tracks of the transcontinental railroad, the Yale students and their professor eventually reached the Pacific. On the way the young Grinnell had many adventures, not the least of which was having the train stopped in eastern Nebraska by a thunderous stream of bison that crossed the tracks for three hours! He also became acquainted with such luminaries as William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody

and Frank J. North, leader of the Pawnee Indian scouts; his life-long love affair with the American West had begun.

In 1874, Grinnell returned to Yale to assist Marsh at the Peabody Museum and to pursue graduate studies in osteology and vertebrate paleontology. That summer, Marsh sent him west to accompany George Armstrong Custer, as a collector of living and extinct life forms, on his Black Hills expedition; and in 1875, Grinnell served in that same capacity on army engineer William Ludlow's survey of the Yellowstone region. In the process of collecting specimens and making scientific reports, Grinnell discovered that market hunters were, even then, inside the recently announced Yellowstone National Park, killing big-game animals for the commercial hide market. Grinnell's outrage over this exploitation was the beginning of his career as a conservationist.

After working under Marsh at Yale for several more years, Grinnell received a Ph.D. at the commencement of 1880. Earlier, he had decided not to pursue a scientific career, and with the financial help of his father, gained control of the New York hunting and fishing weekly, *Forest and Stream*, and became its editor-in-chief on

*BY JOHN REIGER*

January 1, 1880. That was a momentous event in the history of American conservation. Until 1911, Grinnell would use his unique position to wage one editorial crusade after another in behalf of “conservation,” a term that he was one of the first to use in regard to natural resources. And from the beginning of his 30-year tenure at *Forest and Stream*, it is obvious that he defined conservation in its modern sense, as the preservation and management of the natural world for—as he put it in an 1882 editorial—“generations yet unborn.”<sup>1</sup>

To achieve that goal, Grinnell understood that conservation should have utilitarian and aesthetic components, depending on the issue at hand. He was an “aesthetic conservationist” when it came to his editorial campaign to eliminate hunting, timber cutting, and all forms of commercialization from the recently created, but inadequately protected, Yellowstone National Park. But he was a “utilitarian conservationist” in his crusade to have the state and federal governments adopt a system of European scientific forestry for the management of the nation’s timberlands. In a similar vein, Grinnell would fight to create national wildlife refuges, where hunting was forbidden, and public shooting grounds, where it was encouraged.

What tied together all of his editorial campaigns, and his extensive private efforts, was his earnest belief that Americans must take responsibility for the natural world upon which they depended, not only in a practical, economic sense, but in a spiritual one as well. Once that sense of responsibility took root in the public’s collective mind, the only sure way to have conservation succeed was to have the state and federal governments adopt a program of continuous, apolitical, scientific management. This approach would become the basis of the Progressive conservation creed under President Theodore Roosevelt in the early years of the twentieth century, and as a formula for dealing with all sorts of environmental issues, it is just as effective today as it was then.

During the 1880s, Grinnell’s conservation aims became easier to attain as *Forest and Stream* developed into the leading outdoor journal of the period. His editorials now reached an ever-larger readership, most of whom were upper-middle and upper-class “sportsmen,” who hunted and fished for recreation rather than for commerce or necessity.

By the time Grinnell took over the helm of *Forest and Stream*, American sportsmen had, for many years, been developing a European-derived code of behavior and “world view” that separated them from the great majority of hunters and fishermen. Game animals, birds, and fish could only be taken with “appropriate” methods that tested the skill of the sportsman before he could make a kill. In addition, he had to have at least some sense of responsibility for the future of the game and the habitat upon which it depended.

After Grinnell became editor, he not only continued to work



George Grinnell. This was reportedly his favorite photograph of himself.

FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL COLLECTION.

to inculcate the code and accompanying world view, but extended them to encompass a sense of responsibility for the *total* environment. As illustrated in his 1882 editorial, “Spare the Trees,” reproduced below, it would not be long before Grinnell acquired a sophisticated understanding of how land, forests, wildlife, and water were intimately interconnected.

Through his insightful editorials, Grinnell influenced, for the better, the thinking of countless hunters and fishermen, among them Theodore Roosevelt. They met after Grinnell had published a negative review in *Forest and Stream* of Roosevelt’s *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, which brought an irate Roosevelt to Grinnell’s office for an explanation. The editor must have made a strong case, for Roosevelt and Grinnell parted amiably. In fact, the friendship that developed between the two men would have profound

consequences for the history of American conservation, the first of which was the founding of the Boone and Crockett Club, named after the hunter-heroes Daniel Boone and David Crockett.

After Grinnell became intimately associated with Roosevelt, he stressed the need for an effective, national sportsmen’s organization, to do for the larger game animals what the Audubon Society, which Grinnell founded in 1886, was doing for birds. Roosevelt agreed and invited Grinnell and a few other hunter friends to a dinner party in Manhattan in December 1887, where Roosevelt suggested, and those present accepted, the founding of what would soon become the first private conservation organization in American history to deal effectively with conservation issues of national scope.

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Grinnell became editor-in-chief of *Forest and Stream* on January 1, 1880. It was a momentous event in the history of American conservation.

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Shortly after its creation, Roosevelt, Grinnell and another founding member, Archibald Rogers, “formulated the purposes and objects of the organization.”<sup>2</sup> While most of these focused on the promotion of hunting, exploration, and natural history, the third goal would prove crucial: “To work for the preservation of the large game of this country, and, so far as possible, to further legislation for that purpose, and to assist in enforcing the existing laws.”<sup>3</sup>



Avid outdoorsman and naturalist Theodore Roosevelt, taken in 1885. Grinnell gave Roosevelt a more sophisticated, broader grasp of "conservation."

Immediately, the club, with *Forest and Stream* as its "natural mouthpiece,"<sup>4</sup> turned its attention to Yellowstone National Park, which was still being ravaged by commercial hide hunters, timber cutters, and other "vandals," as Grinnell called them. For years, he had been fighting to have a "government" created for the park that would be founded on his principle of continuous, apolitical, scientific management. Though it would take several more years of struggle, the club finally gained success when a poacher was caught inside the park shooting some of the very last bison left in the United States. After an editorial barrage by Grinnell in *Forest and Stream*, which included graphic photographs of dead buffalo in the snow, and lobbying efforts by Roosevelt and other club members, the "Act to Protect the Birds and Animals in Yellowstone National Park" became law on May 7, 1894. It not only protected wildlife, but forests and mineral deposits as well, and was, in fact, the precedent-setting legislation that defined a national park as an inviolate wilderness and wildlife sanctuary.

Earlier, the club had also played a key role in the setting aside of the first national forest adjacent to Yellowstone National Park in 1891, the beginning of what is today a 193-million-acre system of forests and grasslands. Here again, Grinnell had led the way on the forestry issue with editorials in *Forest and Stream* such

as "Spare the Trees." The club had achieved success with the 1891 legislation before the park-protection law, because the latter battle took place in the public arena, against some outspoken Western opposition, while the 1891 act became a reality largely by circumventing public debate.

The 1890s had proven to be a pivotal decade in Grinnell's life and in the history of conservation: he helped pass key legislation and deepened his friendship with Theodore Roosevelt. There is no doubt that Grinnell had been influential in giving the future president a more sophisticated, broader grasp of "conservation" that included both aesthetic and ecological components as well as the obvious utilitarian one.

After 1901, and the ascendancy of his friend to the presidency, Grinnell turned his attention more and more to the study of Plains Indian ethnography, while also fighting for social and economic justice for Native Americans. His works on the Cheyenne would become classics in the field.

Though his fascination with Indian cultures occupied more of his time, Grinnell's conservation efforts continued. He remained the crusading editor of *Forest and Stream* until 1911, a year after the creation of Glacier National Park, which he had led the movement to establish.

He also participated in organized conservation work as a leader of groups like the American Game Association, the National Association of Audubon Societies, and the National Parks Association. Grinnell would, however, never again have the influence, and power, to do good that he possessed when he was the owner and editor-in-chief of *Forest and Stream*, the "last word" on all matters relating to hunting, fishing, conservation, and nature appreciation.

Born the year the "Forty-niners" rushed into California in quest of the yellow metal, George Bird Grinnell died of pneumonia at his New York home on April 11, 1938. In cataloguing his many achievements, the anonymous author of an obituary in the *New York Times* referred to him as the "father of American conservation."<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not we agree with the *Times* writer, one thing is certain: Grinnell showed the way for a new breed of Americans, those whom philosopher and ecologist Aldo Leopold applauded in his 1933 book, *Game Management*. This new individual was "the

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## Grinnell wanted the Boone and Crockett Club to do for larger game animals what the Audubon Society was doing for birds.

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Crusader for conservation...who insisted that our conquest of nature carried with it a moral responsibility for the perpetuation of...threatened forms of wildlife" and, by implication, the habitats upon which they depend. This acceptance of responsibility, Leopold argued, "constitutes one of the milestones in moral evolution."<sup>6</sup> As a pathbreaker for this new world view, as relevant for our times as it was for his, George Bird Grinnell deserves to be remembered.

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# “SPARE THE TREES”<sup>7</sup>

BY GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL, 1882

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If we have the most perfect code of fish and game laws which it is possible to devise, and have them ever so thoroughly enforced, what will they avail if there is no cover for game nor water for fish? All the protection that the law can give will not prevent the game naturally belonging to a wooded country from leaving it when it is deforested, nor keep fish in streams that have shrunk to a quarter of their ordinary volume before midsummer. The streams of such a country will thus shrink when the mountains, where the snows lie latest and the feeding springs are, and the swamps, which dole out their slow but steady tribute, are bereft of shade.

Here is a field for missionary work, and by such work alone can this evil of tree-murder be checked. No law can be enacted that will oblige landowners to spare the trees which shade their ledges and swamps, but it is possible that they can be made to see that it is to their interest to do so. The thin soil of a rocky hill, when deprived of its shelter of branches, will be burned by the summer sun out of all power to help the germination of any worthy seed, or to nurture so noble a plant as a tree through the tender days of its infancy. But it supports only useless weeds and brambles. Once so denuded, it will be for many years, if not always, unsightly and unprofitable. Some swamps may be, at great expense, brought into tillage and meadow, but nine times out of ten, when cleared of the lusty growth of woods, they bear nothing but wild grass, and the streams that trickled from them all the summer long in their days of wildness, show in August only the parched trail of the spring course.

Our natives have inherited their ancestors' hatred of trees, which to them were only cumberers of the ground, to be got rid of by the speediest means; and our foreign-born land-holders, being unused to so much woodland, think there can be no end to it, let them slash away as they will.

Who has not seen in Yankee [New England] land, ledges and steep slopes that can bear nothing but wood to any profit, shorn of their last tree, and the margins of streams robbed to the very edge of the willows and water-maples that shaded the water and with their roots protected the banks from washing? Who has not known a little alder swamp, in which when he visited it on the first day of the [hunting] season each year, he was sure to find a dozen woodcock? The first day comes some year and he seeks it as usual, to find its place only marked by brush heaps, stubs and sedges; and for the brook that wimpled through it in the days

of yore, only stagnant pools. The worst of it is, the owners can seldom give any reason for this slaughter but that their poor victims were trees and bushes.

It is strange that the Yankee, with his proverbial thriftiness and forecast, should, when it comes to the proper and sensible management of woodlands, entirely lose these gifts. Why can he not understand that it is more profitable to keep a lean or thin soil that will grow nothing well but wood, growing wood instead of worthless weeds? The crop is one which is slow in coming to the harvest, but it is a sure one, and is every year becoming a more paying one. Furthermore, it breaks the fierceness of the winds, and keeps the springs from drying up, and is a comfort to the eye, whether in the greenness of the leaf or the bareness of the bough. Under its protective arms live and breed the grouse, the quail, and the hare, and in its shadowed rills swim the trout. If we would have these, we must keep the woods a-growing. No woods, no game; no woods, no water; and no water, no fish. □

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## NOTES

1. George Grinnell, "Their Last Refuge," *Forest and Stream*, December 14, 1882.
2. George Grinnell to Cromwell Childe, March 24, 1899, Letter Book, p. 215, Grinnell Papers, Yale University, cited in John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, 3rd ed. (Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 2001), 151.
3. George Grinnell, "The Boone and Crockett Club," *Forest and Stream*, March 8, 1888.
4. George Bird Grinnell, ed., *A Brief History of the Boone and Crockett Club...* (New York: Forest and Stream Publishing Company, 1910), 20.
5. *New York Times*, April 12, 1938.
6. Aldo Leopold, *Game Management* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1933, 1986), 19.
7. George Grinnell, *Forest and Stream*, Vol. 18, April 13, 1882: 204.