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George Shiras III – The Father of Wildlife Photography



Theodore J. Holsten
EMERITUS MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

Ernest Hemingway described him as “the most interesting man I know.” Theodore Roosevelt wrote to him urging him to write about his pioneering photography:

“I feel strongly that this country stands much more in need of the work of a great outdoor faunal naturalist than of the work of any number of closet specialists and microscopic tissue-cutters.”

George Shiras III was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1859. He was from a family long interested in hunting and the outdoors, as well as law and politics. His father was a U.S. associate Supreme Court justice.

Shiras graduated from Cornell in 1881 and in 1883 received his law degree from Yale. He served as a member of Congress from 1903-1905 during which time he prepared and introduced in the House the now famous Federal Migratory Bird Law. He helped write legislation creating Olympic National Park. He discovered several species of wildlife, including *Alces americana shirasi*, the “Yellowstone” moose.

In his early years, Shiras was an avid hunter, spending his vacation time in Michigan’s remote Upper Peninsula. By

1889 he laid aside his gun and picked up a camera, becoming the first to photograph wild animals in daytime from a canoe or blind. He developed pioneering techniques for flash-photographing animals and invented special camera equipment using a

outstanding photographs in the two-volume work *Hunting Wild Life With Camera And Flashlight*, dedicated to his mentor, Theodore Roosevelt.

George Shiras III was a member of the Boone and Crockett Club. On behalf of the Club and several other wildlife organizations, George Bird Grinnell wrote to him regarding his lifelong work:

“It was your genius which discovered the legal distinction between animals that are migratory and those that are sedentary, or local. Through this discovery we owe to you the greatest single accomplishment ever made in wild life protection. No man has rendered a service in this respect so great as yours.”

George Shiras III donated all his pioneering negatives and equipment to the National Geographic Society. He died in Marquette, Michigan, in 1942 and was buried in Park Cemetery. ■



George Shiras III.

Books by George Shiras III

Hunting Wild Life With Camera And Flashlight (Two volumes) (1935)

specially devised apparatus by which wild-fowl can be photographed while flying.

Shiras was a member of the governing board of the National Geographic Society for 25 years. He contributed much material to National Geographic magazine over a period of many years. He finally followed Theodore Roosevelt’s admonition and published his observations of North American wildlife along with 950 of his



ABOVE: In June 1918, Theodore Roosevelt (second from left) and George Shiras III (right) both received Doctor of Science degrees for distinguished work as field naturalists from Trinity College, Hartford.

ABOVE RIGHT: Photo of the author out-of-doors on a camera hunt.

RIGHT: Shiras with his camera mounted in the bow of a boat.