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WILLIAM BEEBE – Explorer, Naturalist, Conservationist, Author



Theodore J. Holsten
EMERITUS MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

One day in September 1932, throughout the world, people sat by their radios, straining to hear the voice of William Beebe who had descended in a tiny bathysphere to 3,028 feet below the ocean's surface. Beebe was

accompanied by Otis Barton, the sphere's designer, and was broadcasting what he saw while viewing the life of the deep for the first time.

While we hung in mid-ocean at our lowest level... a fish poised just to the left of my window, its elongated outline distinct and its dark side lighted from sources quite concealed from me... I saw it clearly and knew it was something wholly different from any deep-sea fish which had yet been captured by man.

The bathysphere was one of Beebe's most daring attempts to discover more about life on earth. It was the first time man had descended more than 525 feet into the ocean, and it captured the attention of the world.

William Beebe was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1877. As a young boy, his hobby was collecting animals, birds, and insects, and he learned to be a skilled taxidermist. Because of his strong interest in zoology, he enrolled at Columbia University. This began his close relationship with Henry Fairfield Osborn who headed Columbia's zoology department. Osborn also was president of the American Museum of Natural History and a member of the committee, heavy with Boone and Crockett members, that founded the New York Zoological Society. The efforts of this group led to the opening of the Bronx Zoo in 1899. Osborn appointed young Beebe, then only 22 years old, as assistant curator of ornithology, and a year later, as head curator.

From this start, Beebe began a series of worldwide expeditions that continued throughout his life. He was an articulate writer, mixing scientific matter with adventure that made his books readable and popular. During his lifetime he wrote 21 books and more than 800 articles and scientific papers. "Will" as he was generally known, was an outstanding fundraiser to finance his expeditions. His strong public image reflected well on the Zoological Society and he was

given a great deal of latitude in scheduling his scientific adventures.

A wealthy benefactor sponsored one of his early and most highly regarded expeditions. He was asked to study and write a work describing all the pheasants of the world. This led to nearly two years of travel throughout Asia. It involved slipping and sliding down icy Himalayan slopes, paddling up plague-ridden rivers in Malaysia and bushwhacking through malarial jungles in Borneo. All this resulted in his four-volume work, *A Monograph of the Pheasants* published over a four-year period, 1918–1922. It has been described as perhaps the greatest ornithological work of the century, not only for its beauty and wealth of information, but also for the grace of its prose and the beauty of its original paintings, accurately reproduced.

Beebe formed a close relationship with then-president Theodore Roosevelt. Will admired Roosevelt's skill as a field naturalist and conservationist. Also, Roosevelt's support was highly valuable in his scientific endeavors. Will was a frequent visitor at Sagamore Hill and Roosevelt wrote introductions to two of his books. When Will established a field research station in British Guiana, the Roosevelts, Theodore and Edith, were his guests. The last letter Roosevelt wrote before his death in 1919 was to Will Beebe.

Throughout his life, Will Beebe experienced respiratory and throat health problems that flared up in cold climates. This tended to direct his efforts to the tropics and after British Guiana, he founded temporary research centers in Haiti, Venezuela, and Bermuda. In 1950, he used his own funds to purchase an estate in Trinidad that he donated to the New York Zoological Society. He named it Simla after the hill in India that was featured in Rudyard Kipling's writings. He spent most of his last years at Simla and died there in 1962 at the age of 84. At his request, he was buried in Mucurapo Cemetery in Port-of-Spain.

William Beebe's private papers were eventually donated to Princeton University and access to them was restricted until finally granted to Carol Grant Gould who in 2004 published the first detailed biography of his life. It provided much of the background for this article. ■

Theodore J. Holsten Jr.

A SELECTION OF BOOKS BY WILLIAM BEEBE

Two Bird Lovers in Mexico (1906)

A Monograph of the Pheasants, four volumes (1918-1922)

The Arcturus Adventure (1926)

Nonsuch, Land of Water (1932)

Half Mile Down (1934)

High Jungle (1949)

Also
The Remarkable Life of William Beebe
by Carol Grant Gould (2004)

BELOW: Beebe, with his friend Teddy Roosevelt, Georgetown, British Guiana, 1916.

PHOTO FROM *THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF WILLIAM BEEBE*

