

## DR. LEE MERRIAM TALBOT

**A Boone and Crockett Club member for 54 years, Lee Merriam Talbot was the primary author of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. That alone is a lifetime achievement, but there is so much more to the man who dedicated his life's work to conservation—and humbly averted death numerous times.**

Dr. Lee Merriam Talbot is the most interesting Boone and Crockett Club member you have likely never heard of. Few members have lived a life and left a legacy as grand. A week after he passed away in May 2021, his son described him "...as an amalgamation of the best aspects of John Muir, Ernest Hemingway, and James Bond. But I think he was humbler and, arguably, more influential than any of those characters." Influential indeed.

Before detailing the near-death experiences involving Talbot, race cars, airplanes, and lions, we should first explain how he left an indelible mark on the conservation movement in the latter half of the 1900s. That started many years ago with his familial roots planted firmly in conservation.

He was the grandson of Dr. C. Hart Merriam, who, in the late 1800s, was a friend of both Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir. Dr. C. Hart Merriam was a naturalist on the Hayden Expedition in 1872 that surveyed Yellowstone National Park, and he was the first Chief of the U.S. Biological Survey, which became the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One of Dr. Merriam's daughters was his field assistant, an ethnologist, and a biologist. She met Merle Talbot, who worked for the Forest Service alongside Aldo Leopold in the Southwest in the early 1920s. They were married, and in 1930, Lee Merriam Talbot was born. A childhood grounded in the outdoors followed.

"Hiking, camping, and pack trips in the wilderness—with the wonderful conservation and ecological insights and guidance of my parents—were an integral part of my early years," Talbot wrote. "The result was one of the strongest pieces of legislation ever submitted to Congress." That legislation refers to the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and we'll dive into that in just a bit.

### A WILD LIFE OF CONSERVATION

The early adventures of Lee Talbot began in the 1950s when he was a field biologist in Alaska. In 1953, he earned a bachelor of arts from U.C. Berkely. As a Marine Corps officer during the Korean War, he taught hand-to-hand combat when he broke his back. Doctors told him he'd never walk again. The injury proved a slight hiccup to his life plans because the National Academy of Sciences hired him to research African and Asian endangered species the same year. He became the first staff ecologist for the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), an organization concerned about endangered species. At some point in his overseas research, Talbot was alone on foot when a lioness charged him. A single shot severed its vertebrae just as it pounced.

In 1959, he met a young lady named Marty, and they were married six weeks after their first date. Marty was an award-winning biologist and author who co-founded the Student Conservation Association just two years before

Boone and Crockett Club members have come from a cross-section of famous accomplished people whose lives and careers have written and recorded the history of this country since the late 19th century. They have been naturalists, scientists, explorers and sportsmen, writers and academics, artists, statesmen and politicians, generals, bankers, financiers, philanthropists, and industrialists. Their diversity of ideas and activities during their careers have made the Boone and Crockett Club rich in its fellowship and achievements.



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Lee and Marty worked on studies together in the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem in the late 1950s through the early 1960s.



they married. The couple traveled to East Africa for a honeymoon to conduct scientific research in the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem. The work helped create Serengeti National Park and Masai Mara National Reserve. They were married for 62 years.

Talbot traveled the world researching the status of vanishing species like the Asiatic lion, Arabian ostrich, and Syrian wild ass. At the same time, he developed conservation plans for those species. In 1960, he published his first book, *A Look at Threatened Species*. By 1963, he had earned a Ph.D. in ecology from U.C. Berkley, where his principal faculty advisor was Dr. A. Starker Leopold, Aldo Leopold's oldest son.

In the early 1960s, Talbot had yet another close call with death. "While conducting an aerial survey for the government of British Hong Kong in the early 1960s, his plane experienced mechanical problems, and crash landed in a harbor, hitting rocks and pinwheeling through the cold, frothing water," explained his son Russell. "He swam to safety, later describing in vivid detail the difficulty of determining which direction was up, while escaping the still-tumbling wreckage."

When not surviving dramatic crash landings, Talbot helped organize the Conference on Conservation in Modern African States in Arusha, Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Years later, working with the IUCN, Talbot generated interest in what became the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), an international agreement signed by 184 parties in 1973 that ensures the international trade in animals and plants does not threaten their survival in the wild.

## ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT OF 1973

By the latter half of the 1960s, Talbot's energy and expertise shifted stateside as he joined the Smithsonian Institution and served as science advisor to the Joint Senate-House Committee on Environment. In 1969, Congress passed the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969, but Talbot wrote that it was "inadequate to address the needs at the time, so early in 1970, when President Nixon asked me to help start the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), I saw an opportunity to place endangered species high on the nation's agenda."

With the support of Russell Train, another Boone and Crockett Club member and the first chairman of the CEQ, Talbot compiled his list of ways to strengthen the ESA of 1969. One hurdle Talbot met was from those who couldn't understand why the original law needed to be revised. To counter this argument, Talbot didn't need to look further than the CITES agreement, which required that all participating nations "establish both scientific and management authorities to implement the convention." A strengthened ESA was needed if the U.S. was to be a part



Lee Talbot served as Director General of IUCN from 1980 to 1982.

of this worldwide agreement.

Working with Congressman John Dingell Jr., Chairman of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee of the House of Representatives, Talbot removed what he called "weasel words" from the statute in an effort to leave little to creative interpretation. He deleted phrases such as "The Secretary may..." and changed them to "The Secretary will...". Talbot wrote, "The result was one of the strongest pieces of legislation ever submitted to Congress." President Nixon signed the bill into law on December 28, 1973.

To date, 54 U.S. species have been delisted from the endangered species list because they have recovered to

the point that they are no longer threatened with extinction. These include the American alligator, bald eagle, Louisiana black bear, brown pelican, Oregon chub...the list goes on.

At the same time Talbot was cleaning up the language in the ESA, he was working with Dingell on the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which prohibits the "take" of marine mammals—including harassment, hunting, capturing, collecting, or killing—in U.S. waters and by U.S. citizens on the high seas." This was signed into law by President Nixon in 1972. More than 40 years later, Talbot defended the law when the oil and gas industry pushed to "eviscerate core

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Lee Talbot was a professor of environmental science, international affairs, and public policy at George Mason University in Virginia for nearly 30 years. RIGHT: In 2016 the IUCN awarded Dr. Lee Talbot their Harold Jefferson Coolidge Medal. One of the two highest honors given by the IUCN, the award recognized Lee's lifelong contribution in the field of international conservation, environmental affairs and his outstanding initiatives in the field of exploration.



provisions” of the MMPA. In an op-ed for *The Hill*, Talbot wrote, “We cannot stand by and allow the oil and gas industry to gut these protections today like industry gutted whale, dolphin and seal populations decades ago. It is more important now than ever before to defend marine mammals—and to save the Marine Mammal Protection Act.”

From there, Talbot joined the World Wildlife Fund as their Conservation Director and Science Advisor in Switzerland, and from 1980-1982 he served as Director General of IUCN. He was a science advisor to Defenders of Wildlife and served on their board of directors for nine years. Before he passed away in 2021, he was a professor of environmental science, international affairs, and public policy at George Mason University in Virginia for nearly 30 years. Over his lifetime, he wrote or contributed to more than 300 scientific and popular articles and 17 books.

Lee Talbot became a member of the Boone and Crockett Club in 1967. His research took him on 160 expeditions to 134 countries on five continents. On top of all that, he served as his son's Cub Scout leader. He had a passion for conservation and the motivation to act on it. As a result, he wrote sound, effective policies that we still benefit from today.



### TALBOT, THE RACE CAR DRIVER

When he wasn't documenting disappearing species, Talbot was driving race cars. His first professional race was in 1948 (when he was 18 years old). His final race was in the autumn of 2017 when he was 87. He raced Grand Prix, formula cars, and vintage cars like a restored and rare 1967 Ginetta G4. This pastime nearly took his life. His son Russell described the crash. “During an early running of the Malaysian Grand Prix, his car flipped into a ditch. His legs were wedged in the car, his head was pinned between the car and the ground, and his body sagged into the ditch. Helmets and other safety features were not required, and multiple drivers died during the race. Naturally, he had researched the efficacy of quality helmets and chose to wear the best one he could get. His helmet kept the weight of the car off his head and bystanders helped roll the car off him. He walked away.”



Talbot in his 1967 Ginetta G4.