

Joseph S. Dixon Collection

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Yosemite National Park Archives

5083 Foresta Road

El Portal, California 95318

(209)379-1282

Paul_Rogers@nps.gov

<http://www.nps.gov/yose/historyculture/collections.htm>

2016

Descriptive Summary

Title: Joseph S. Dixon Collection

Dates: 1909-1948, 1970

Collection Number: YCN: 2002 (YOSE 218595)

Creator/Collector:

Extent: 11,206 items; approximately 35.15 linear feet(108 boxes: 723 lantern slides, 433 35mm slides, 2138 nitrate and acetate negatives, 287 glass plate negatives, approximately 500 negative prints, 1396 albumen prints, 206 oversize prints, 255 pages of documents, 11 containers, 1 film and approximately 5256 negatives and corresponding contact prints)

Online items available  https://voro.cdlib.org/user-pdf-dav/yosnpa/Dixon_Finding_Aid_FINAL_2013_03_13.pdf

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Abstract: The Joseph S. Dixon Collection contains photographic documentation created or collected by Dixon during his career as a naturalist, field biologist, mammologist, wildlife biologist, educator and photographer and some field notes. The majority of the images relate to fauna in the western United States and Alaska with many created for the first field survey of wildlife in the western national parks that was conducted by Dixon, George M. Wright and Ben H. Thompson. These findings were published in the first and third book of the NPS Fauna Series; *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in Natural Parks* (1933) and *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Birds and Mammals of Mount McKinley National Park* (1938). In addition, some of the photographs were highlighted in Dixon's *Wildlife Portfolio of the Western National Parks*, (1942). The material in this collection documents wildlife, flora, and scenes from California, Alaska, and National Park Service (NPS) sites throughout the western United States. It was produced between 1909 and 1948 with the bulk of the material compiled and created by Joseph Dixon from 1925 to 1938. The collection is comprised of several thousand photographic images of various formats including lantern slides, 35mm slides, nitrate and acetate negatives, glass plate negatives, albumen prints, oversize silver gelatin prints, and one 16mm film. The collection also contains a few images by other photographers and some from 1970. The small amount of textual documentation included in the collection is comprised of Yosemite Field School notes and class history, manuscripts of his article "Birds of Kings Canyon National Park Area, California", and correspondence regarding his scientific work.

Language of Material: English

Access

Material by photographers, other than Joseph S. Dixon, is subject to U.S. copyright laws. Otherwise, no restrictions.

Preferred Citation

Joseph S. Dixon Collection. Yosemite National Park Archives

Acquisition Information

The Joseph S. Dixon collection consists of two donations. YOSE-07024 included 10 boxes of photographic material and some correspondence donated by Joseph Dixon's son, David Dixon. YOSE-07025 included 638 lantern slides and prints donated by the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at University of California, Berkeley through Joseph Dixon's personal friend, Willis A. Evans. The donors assumed the materials should go to the MVZ because he had spent a significant amount of his career there. However, MVZ staff determined that most of the material pertained to Dixon's work with the NPS. It was then decided to transfer both assemblages to Yosemite National Park where Dixon spent the majority of his NPS career. The two accessions were transferred to the Yosemite Archives in December of 2008 and accessioned 11 March 2009. Another small batch of material relating to Dixon's work with George Wright and the NPS wildlife survey was donated by David Dixon in 2001. This material was not assigned an accession number and was accreted into the collection 14 August 2011. Also included in the MVZ accession, YOSE-07025, were 155 pen and ink drawings of arctic mammals by Belmore H. Browne. This collection of drawings is outside the scope of Yosemite National Park collections and was returned to the donor.

Biography/Administrative History

Born in Kansas in 1884, Dixon spent his first years near Galena, Cherokee County, Kansas.¹ In 1888, the Dixon family relocated to California. With his parents Benjamin and Eva, siblings Charles T. (b. 1876), James B. (b. 1886) and Pearl (b. 1890), Dixon spent his youth in Escondido, just north of San Diego.² After graduating from Escondido High School, Dixon attended Throop Polytechnic Institute (now the California Institute of Technology, or Caltech) in Pasadena, where he began his training in biological fieldwork. At Throop, Dixon took a biology course with a young instructor named Joseph Grinnell, forming a mentorship and professional association that would last many years.³ While still a student at Throop, Dixon was recommended by Frank Stephens, an expert specimen collector who Dixon knew from an ornithological club, to be a bird collector for Annie Montague Alexander's expedition to Alaska in 1907.⁴ During this trip, Dixon collected numerous bird and mammal specimens and took a good deal of field notes pertaining to local bird species.⁵ Upon the expedition's return,

Alexander established and financed the University of California's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) at Berkeley, and named Grinnell as the founding director in 1908. Dixon joined Grinnell at MVZ soon-after and began his graduate studies there. In 1913, Dixon participated in another expedition to the Arctic waters of Siberia and Alaska, this time organized by a group of Harvard graduates including sponsor John E. Thayer, a wealthy amateur ornithologist. The trip was in the interests of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, and with the cooperation from MVZ, Dixon was able to join Harvard ornithologist Winthrop Sprague Brooks in the observation and collection of zoological specimens. The expedition was planned to last from April to September 1913 only, but the team's ship became locked in ice in early September, seven miles off the coast of Alaska's Humphrey Point due to the seas not thawing over the summer. The team made a base camp and survived on hair seals, polar bear, and many birds that may have otherwise been kept as specimens.⁶ Despite the conditions, Dixon was able to go on extensive collecting trips, gathering approximately 1,000 specimens of bird and mammal with an accompanying 200 pages of field notes. After nearly one year, the expedition got navigating again on July 27, 1914, and Dixon arrived back to California in mid-October, over a year late for his own wedding.⁷ Starting in 1914, Dixon contributed to Grinnell's formal field work in Yosemite, which aimed to conduct a complete survey of the natural history of vertebrates in the region. All eight members of the team participated in the exploration, at one point or another, until 1920. Altogether, the team used forty collecting stations and surveyed 1,500 square miles of land. The results of the investigation were published in *Animal Life in Yosemite* (1924).⁸ By 1915, Dixon had completed graduate school and subsequently joined the faculty at MVZ.⁹ Around this time, Dixon conducted formal field work in the region of the southern Sierra Nevada with H. S. Swarth and Halstead White. The group traveled by pack train, and in eight weeks covered areas including Horse Corral Meadow, Bullfrog Lake, Kearsarge Pass, Charlotte Lake, and Hume Lake. Dixon's group collected over 1,000 specimens, about 300 of which originated within the current Kings Canyon National Park.¹⁰ In 1924, Dixon became involved in another long-term survey with Grinnell, this time investigating the Lassen Transect. Dixon, Grinnell, and MVZ colleague Jean Linsdale covered a 3,000 square mile band of northern California running from the Sacramento River to the Nevada border over a five year timespan. The team surveyed a wide variety of habitats throughout Lassen Volcanic National Park, Eagle Lake, Lassen National Forest, and the Tehama Wildlife Area, as well as portions of the Great Basin ecological region. Visiting dozens of sites, the team documented over 350 animal species and collected nearly 5,000 specimens, which are still available for scientific research at MVZ. The survey results were later described in *Vertebrate Natural History of a Section of Northern California through the Lassen Peak Region* (1930).¹¹ Dixon's work in the wildlife biology field during this period led him to be a major voice for the cause of wildlife protection and conservation. In 1924, alarmed about the drop-off in numbers of fisher due to fur-trappers, Dixon urged the California Fish and Game Commission to legislate a three year closed season on fisher trapping; however, his recommendation was ignored.¹² Nearly twenty years later, E. Raymond Hall at MVZ reported the near extinction of the fisher in California. Hall questioned the lack of action on the part of the California Fish and Game Commission and argued for an immediate action on Dixon's earlier recommendation.¹³ In 1926, Dixon embarked on yet another expedition to Alaska, again sponsored by Thayer. This time Dixon was accompanied by George Melendez Wright, a biology undergraduate student at U.C. Berkeley. Dixon and Wright spent 72 days at Mount McKinley National Park (now Denali National Park and Preserve) collecting specimens and conducting field work. On May 28, 1926, at 4 PM, Wright discovered a surf bird nesting above the timberline of Mount McKinley. After alerting Dixon, the two men stayed at the site and observed the nest overnight.¹⁴ This marked the first recorded sighting of a surf bird nest, and is considered to be the last discovery of a North American bird's nesting habitat. Wright went on to join the National Park Service in 1927 as an Assistant Park Naturalist at Yosemite. Concerned about the lack of scientific research and data about the park, he established a wildlife survey office for NPS, which he personally funded for several years.¹⁵ Wright recruited Dixon to be an economic mammologist for his team, which Dixon accepted, leading him to resign from MVZ in 1931.¹⁶ The newly formed wildlife survey team composed of Wright, Dixon, and U.C. Berkeley graduate Ben H. Thompson spent its first season in the field starting in August, 1930.¹⁷ For the next few years they made several trips throughout the West, always ending back at the wildlife office in Berkeley, CA. Dixon and his colleagues made an effort to document wildlife conditions in western national parks and presented their conclusions on how to reduce the impact of human activity on the parks' fauna in *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: A Preliminary Survey of Faunal Relations in Natural Parks* (1933).¹⁸ On July 1, 1933, responsibility for the wildlife survey team was assumed by the NPS with the formation of the Wildlife Division; Wright became division chief, while Dixon and Thompson were named staff biologists.¹⁹ When Wright moved his administrative and research offices from Berkeley to Washington, D.C., Dixon stayed behind and continued his NPS work in the agency's Western Region. He returned to Mount McKinley National Park in 1932 and completed the survey of animal life begun by him and Wright in 1926, publishing his findings in the third book of the Fauna Series, *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Birds and Mammals of Mount McKinley National Park* (1938).²⁰ In 1933, he became Director and an instructor at the Yosemite School of Field Natural History (commonly referred to as the Yosemite Field School), where he taught for nine years.²¹ As an instructor, Dixon provided intensive instruction for the student nature guides and attempted to instill an interest in field work in others by continuing to serve as an NPS field biologist. He devoted a great deal of attention to the mule deer of Yosemite, and in

1934 his article "A Study of the Life History and Food Habits of Mule Deer in California," was published in *California Fish and Game*. During this time he also conducted wildlife surveys throughout the western United States, with a great deal of focus spent in the areas of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks from 1933 to 1937 and again from 1940 to 1942.²² During the 1940s, Dixon was one of three NPS biologists (with Adolph Murie and Vic Cahalane) who were allowed to remain focused on fieldwork, while all others were transferred to other NPS activities considered crucial to the war effort.²³ However, his progress on the investigation of Sequoia and Kings Canyon was eventually impeded by wartime cutbacks. By the time of his retirement in March 1946, a book pertaining to his research on the parks remained incomplete. As Dixon's poor health post-retirement prevented him from progressing any further on the work, NPS wildlife biologist Lowell Sumner accepted the task to complete it. Sumner himself had studied wildlife in the region for many years, and he brought new research to the project. The book *Birds and Mammals of the Sierra Nevada with Records from Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks* by Lowell and Dixon was finally completed in 1953, several years after Dixon's death.²⁴ Dixon had four children with his first wife, Mary: Barbara (b. 1916), Joseph C (b. 1918), Mary (b. 1920) and David (b. 1924).²⁵ After his retirement from NPS, he spent his final years in his ranch home in Escondido, where he passed away on June 23, 1952. He was survived by his widow, Ethel, and his children.²⁶ Throughout his career with both MVZ and NPS, Dixon was an avid photographer. He had the opportunity to showcase several of his photographs of wildlife produced while working for both institutions in the government publication *Wildlife Portfolio of the Western National Parks* (1942). Dixon was also a productive writer, having many of his articles published in professional journals, especially in *The Condor*, an international journal devoted to research of the biology of bird species. One of the many highlights of his career included the discovery of a new variety of ptarmigan at Mount McKinley which was named after him.²⁷ Greatly admired by his students and colleagues in Yosemite, Dixon was considered a pioneer in wildlife research and one of the most experienced field surveyors and collectors of his time.²⁸ Dixon and his colleagues are now considered to be forerunners of the current discipline of conservation biology. His research and resulting publications are of lasting value and continue to be a primary resource for those interested in the biology and natural history of the national parks of the western United States. 1 Carl P. Russell, "Death of Joseph S. Dixon," *Yosemite Nature Notes* 31, no. 7 (1952): 4. 2 "United States Census, 1900," index and images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M95Q-7YR> : accessed 10 Dec 2012), Joseph S Dixon in household of Benjamin F Dixon, ED 177 Bernardo Township Escondido city, San Diego, California, United States; citing sheet 15A, family 346, NARA microfilm publication T623, FHL microfilm 1240099. 3 Russell, "Death of Joseph S. Dixon," 4. 4 Matthew Laubacher, "Cultures of Collection in Late Nineteenth Century American Natural History" (PhD diss, Arizona State University, 2011), 223-225. 5 Joseph S. Dixon, "Some Experiences of a Collector in Alaska," *The Condor* 9, no. 5 (1907): 128, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360990>. 6 Joseph S. Dixon, "Birds Observed between Point Barrow and Herschel Island on the Arctic Coast of Alaska," *The Condor* 45, no. 2 (1943): 49. 7 *Ibid.*, 51. 8 Carl Parcher Russell, *100 Years in Yosemite: The Story of a Great Park and Its Friends* (Yosemite National Park, CA: Yosemite Natural History Association, 1968): 135. 9 "Historical People and Places: Joseph S. Dixon," Sequoia Parks Foundation, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historical-people-places-joseph-s-dixon/>. 10 "Historical People," Sequoia Parks Foundation, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historical-people-places-joseph-s-dixon/>. 11 "Lassen Transect," Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, UC Berkeley, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://mvz.berkeley.edu/Grinnell/lassen/index.html> 12 E. Raymond Hall, "Gestation Period in the Fisher with Recommendations for the Animal's Protection in California," *California Fish and Game* 28, no. 3 (1942): 143. 13 *Ibid.*, 144. 14 Susan Shumaker, "George Melendez Wright," *Untold Stories from America's National Parks*, 175, <http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/about/untold-stories/> 15 *Ibid.*, 176. 16 "Historical People," Sequoia Parks Foundation, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historical-people-places-joseph-s-dixon/>. 17 Shumaker, "George Melendez Wright," 181. 18 *Ibid.*, 180. 19 *Ibid.*, 184. 20 Joseph S. Dixon, introduction to *Fauna of the National Parks of the United States: Birds and Mammals of Mount McKinley National Park* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1938), accessed December 6, 2012, http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/fauna3/fauna0.htm. 21 Russell, "Death of Joseph S. Dixon," 3. 22 "Historical People," Sequoia Parks Foundation, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historical-people-places-joseph-s-dixon/>. 23 Shumaker, "George Melendez Wright," 192. 24 "Historical People," Sequoia Parks Foundation, accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.sequoiaparksfoundation.org/2011/historical-people-places-joseph-s-dixon/>. 25 "United States Census, 1930," index and images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/XCXJ-F14> : accessed 6 Dec 2012), Joseph S Dixon, Berkeley, Alameda, California; citing enumeration district (ED) 0298, sheet 12A, family 163, NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 111. 26 Russell, "Death of Joseph S. Dixon," 3-4. 27 *Ibid.*, 3. 28 *Ibid.*, 3.

Scope and Content of Collection

This collection is arranged into nine format-based series: Series I: Lantern Slides, Series II: 35mm Slides, Series III: Negatives, Series IV: Prints, Series V: Documents, Series VI: Additional Materials – Negatives and Prints, Series VII: Additional Materials – Oversize Prints, Series VIII: Original Storage Boxes, Series IX: Motion Picture Film. Series X: NPS

Wildlife Survey was an accretion to the collection that includes a photograph and documents. Processing began in 2010; additional photographic material from the original deposits were processed in 2011. Since these materials were processed later, they became Series VI: Additional Materials - Negatives and Prints & Series VII: Additional Materials - Oversize Prints. At this time, the box series was moved from Series V to Series VIII: Original Storage Boxes. The arrangement of the collection preserves original order where possible while also establishing subject groups for increased accessibility.
