

How the West Was Saved

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Already a noted outdoorsman, naturalist, explorer, and hunter, in April 1903 President Theodore Roosevelt embarked on a cross-country trek, to be joined by pioneering conservationists John Burroughs and John Muir. It would take him deep into the glories of Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and Yosemite, inspiring his greatest legacy and challenging one of his greatest obsessions. In an excerpt from his new book, DOUGLAS BRINKLEY traces Roosevelt's mark on environmental history: the preservation of some 230 million acres of forest and wilderness

On a wintry morning in 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt arrived at a White House Cabinet meeting with fire in his eyes. To the men before him, his look conveyed exuberance

—or gravity. “Gentlemen,” he asked, almost breathlessly, “do you know what has happened this morning?”

Roosevelt’s team, an accomplished but somber lot, was accustomed to receiving word of national tragedy. Three Republican presidents had been assassinated in their lifetime—Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, and William McKinley. So, upon seeing an agitated Roosevelt, the men leaned forward, bracing for bad news.

“Just now,” said the president, “I saw a chestnut-sided warbler.” He paused for effect. “And this is only February!”

His Cabinet probably should have known. Roosevelt was an ardent wildlife preservationist and the son of one of the founders of the American Museum of Natural History. These warblers, with their greenish-yellow caps, white breasts, and maroon streaks down their sides, usually wintered in Central America; so the fact that Roosevelt had spotted one in the nation’s capital was truly an aberration. But this elation was vintage T.R. He was just having one of his bird epiphanies. And it was common talk in Washington circles that when it came to saving American wilderness President Theodore Roosevelt—who had already served 17 months after the murder of McKinley by a crazed anarchist—was a strenuous advocate, virtually peerless among the country’s political class.

Though the term “conservationist” had been around since 1865, it wasn’t until the turn of the century that men such as Roosevelt, Frank Chapman, John Muir, John Burroughs, and Gifford Pinchot would help launch the modern conservation movement. Roosevelt, an avid outdoorsman, was spearheading the effort to create preserves for bison, elk, moose, and antelope. He’d written best-selling books about his hunting experiences in the Dakota territory. While living on a remote Badlands ranch for extended periods in the 1880s and 90s, he’d developed a Thoreauvian “back to nature” aesthetic and hatched progressive theories about land management and wildlife protection.

To T.R., Charles Darwin was practically a god. (Out in the wilds, in his saddlebag, Roosevelt would often carry Darwin’s 1859 masterpiece, *The Origin of Species*, published the year after Roosevelt was born.) He believed every American needed to get acquainted with mountains and deserts, rivers and seas: one ethereal experience with nature, he insisted, made the world whole and God’s omnipotence indisputable. Roosevelt, historian John Morton Blum would conclude, accepted the Darwinian belief in “evolution through struggle as an axiom in all his thinking. Life, for him, was strife.”

Excerpted from *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*, by Douglas Brinkley, to be published in June by HarperCollins; © 2009 by the author.

And yet, over the years, Roosevelt has been denied his environmentalist due. In hindsight, he is often regarded not as a preservationist but as a bogeyman developer: the man who approved the Panama Canal and the hulking Roosevelt Dam, near Phoenix; the only 20th-century president whose mug, 60 feet high, graces—or mars—the side of Mount Rushmore. More to the point, he was one of New York’s aristocratic “gentlemen hunters,” and his home, Sagamore Hill, in Oyster Bay, New York, was lined with trophy heads and the skins of birds and mammals. He was particularly proud of Boom (an elk), Pow-Pow (a wild turkey), and Pop-PopPop (a massive 28-point blacktail buck head spanning more than 50 inches). But in the 1902 collection *The Deer Family*—the first book ever published by a president while in office—Roosevelt called for federally funded deer reserves. And unlike many of his contemporaries, he recognized the distinction between hunting game birds and laboring to save all bird species unfit to eat.

It was fitting, then, that the Hunter in Chief, just weeks after he’d spotted that early warbler on the White House lawn, agreed to meet with two of the nation’s leading ornithologists, William Dutcher and Frank Chapman. Their subject: the pernicious use of feathers to adorn women’s hats.

“WE LAY AMONG THE CINNAMON-COLORED TRUNKS OF THE SEQUOIAS. IT WAS LIKE LYING IN A GREAT SOLEMN CATHEDRAL.”

It had become the rage among upper-class women of the Gilded Age to wear feathers plucked from male birds, whose fancy plumage attracted would-be mates. As a result, plume-hunters were continually pouring into the state of Florida, determined to bag wading birds. A pound of roseate-spoonbill or great-white-heron wings, for example, was worth more than a pound of gold.

For unrepentant old Confederates and lowlifes on the lam, Florida’s tangled thickets, especially around Pelican Island, offered safe haven and easy income. Along the banks of Florida’s coastal rivers, the pallid glow of kerosene lamps was a common sight at plumer camps. Hired as day laborers, uneducated country bumpkins would wade through the shallow pools along the Atlantic, using low-gauge shotguns (and, on occasion, semi-automatic rifles) to stalk their prey. A lone plumer could collect 10,000 skins in a single season; a full-size egret could yield 50 suitable ornamental feathers. Besides skinning the curlews, plovers, and turnstones, the hunters would put the carcasses on ice and ship them to New York by the barrel.

By 1903, five million birds were being massacred each year to satisfy the booming North American millinery trade. Along Manhattan’s Ladies’ Mile—the principal shopping district, centered around Broadway and 23rd Street—retail stores sold the feathers of snowy egrets, white ibises, and great blue herons. And dense Florida colonies were being wiped out just so women could make a fashion statement among the private-carriage crowd.

Chapman—who routinely delivered a lecture titled “Woman as a Bird Enemy,” hoping to shame society ladies into abandoning their crass habits—considered the president a “born bird-lover.” Roosevelt had spoken out for avian rights as the governor of New York and as McKinley’s vice president. And so, as the future of the birds on Florida’s Pelican Island hung in the balance, Chapman believed that only one man had the power to save them. But how to persuade Roosevelt to make the bold move of banning bird slaughter on the islet?

Chapman and Dutcher arrived at the White House on a day in early March. Even though President Roosevelt had a packed schedule— rounding up support for an anti-anarchy bill, meeting with newly elected senators—he eagerly greeted his guests. At the time, T.R. was 44. He was thickset, with piercing blue eyes. His rimless spectacles and robust mustache dominated a remarkably youthful face. He spoke in clipped sentences and made emphatic hand gestures and grimaces to underscore a point. He was infectiously gregarious, forever flashing the enamel of his big white teeth, and his hearty laugh seemed to bellow up from his very depths.

In public and in the press, many referred to him as Teddy, a sobriquet the president loathed. (Teddy bears owe their name to Roosevelt.) And whenever an acquaintance such as J. P. Morgan or John Hay used the T-word, it was a sure sign he knew *nothing* about the real Roosevelt. “No man who knows me well calls me by my nickname,” Roosevelt once confided to a friend. Instead, intimates called him “Colonel,” harking back to his days with the U.S. Cavalry’s Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War.

As expected, Roosevelt, who happened to be an honorary founder of the Florida Audubon Society, assured Chapman and Dutcher that he cared a great deal about the fate of the state’s pelicans and egrets and ibises and spoonbills. In fact, he had recently read Chapman’s *Bird Studies with a Camera* and loved the vivid chapter on Pelican Island. His visitors couldn’t have had a more receptive audience.

The men explained that the American Ornithologists’ Union had been trying for three years, to no avail, to buy the islet outright from the federal government. But by petitioning the Interior Department, they risked opening up the land, inadvertently, to homesteaders’ claims. Instead, a public-surveys official had come up with an ingenious way to circumvent the bureaucracy. Roosevelt could go through the Department of Agriculture and simply issue an executive order classifying Pelican Island as a bird refuge.

After listening attentively to the quandary, and sickened by his guests’ descriptions of the plumers’ bloody toll, Roosevelt asked, “Is there any law that will prevent me from declaring Pelican Island a Federal Bird Reservation?”

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The answer was a decided “No”; the island, after all, was federal property.

“Very well then,” Roosevelt said with marvelous quickness. “I so declare it.”

And so it happened that on March 14, 1903, for the first time in American history, the government set aside a parcel of land in what would become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s National Wildlife Refuge System, which today encompasses 550 sites and more than 150 million acres.

Westward Ho!

That same week, Roosevelt was busy with last-minute plans for a working vacation that would include stops at Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, and Yosemite. Calling it his “Western trek,” Roosevelt had mapped out a 66-day venture that to this day remains the longest, most elaborate cross-country journey ever taken by a sitting U.S. president. Desperate to sneak in some cougar (mountain lion) hunting around Yellowstone, Roosevelt was furiously corresponding with the park’s superintendent, Major John Pitcher, about obtaining a permit and arranging to have the proper hunting dogs available for him upon arrival. “I am still wholly at sea to whether I can take that trip or not,” Roosevelt wrote Pitcher. “[War] Secretary [Elihu] Root is afraid that a false impression might get out if I killed anything, even though it was killed ... strictly under Park regulations and though it was only a mountain lion — that is, an animal of the kind you are endeavoring to thin out.”

Just to be safe, the president had Interior Secretary Ethan Hitchcock secretly smuggle three hunting dogs into Yellowstone from a Texas kennel. Roosevelt wrote Pitcher that if word leaked out to reporters that he was plotting 7 to 10 days of cougar shooting, the president would merely shelve the scheme and revert to studying “the game and going about on horseback, or if I get into trim, perhaps on snowshoes.” (As a backup, Roosevelt had the park’s game warden, Charles “Buffalo” Jones, round up even more dogs—two lots of cougar hounds from Aledo, Texas.)

Roosevelt wrote the famed naturalist John Burroughs that March to invite him to join him on the upcoming trip. Burroughs’s popular collections of homespun nature essays had sold millions of copies nationwide. But in the president’s letters he never once mentioned hunting in Yellowstone—even to say that his intention was to go after only cougars, which preyed upon the park’s elk herds. Instead, Roosevelt said he wanted to “see,” in liberal measure, the elk, deer, bears, and antelope. He ended his letter by promising he would make sure “that you endured neither fatigue or hardship.”

Roosevelt’s claim that he intended to kill cougars to help endangered elk had a ring of Good Samaritan to it. But this was a woefully naive view of the predators’ role in the ecological order. The president knew all too well that cougars and coyotes weren’t a *real* problem in Yellowstone; he had just wanted to hunt them for *fun*. Furthermore, Roosevelt was right to

be concerned about damaging his reputation by hunting *anything* in Yellowstone; Congress had begun to view his expensive hunting holidays with increasing disdain. And so, before he left on his sojourn, Roosevelt backpedaled and abandoned his hunting plans entirely. Pitcher would issue a stern statement declaring that the president's gun, just like any citizen's, would be sealed by the military when he entered the park. (Even so, as Burroughs would later write, "I did hear him say in the wilderness [of Yellowstone], 'I feel as if I ought to keep the camp in meat. I always have.' I regretted that he could not do so on this occasion.")

What was becoming painfully obvious to the naturalist community was that the president had a bloodlust. For all of his promotion of egrets and pelicans and Kodiaks, Roosevelt preferred to kill big game. And the president never disputed the characterization, though he grew tired of constantly having to explain himself to animal-rights types. His inability to reconcile this penchant for the chase engendered among environmentalists a deep distrust toward him.

Quite simply, Roosevelt viewed all humans, with the exception of vegetarians, as active or passive agents in conservation because of their presence as predators—consumers of food. The hunter, at least, engaged the natural world directly through active culling and harvesting. Non-hunters, the president believed, risked damaging the circle of life because of their failure to recognize the genuine role humans played as a species. Hence, Roosevelt contended that ethical hunters were almost by default first-rate conservationists.

Cowboys and Chuck Wagons

As departure day neared, Roosevelt was as effusive as a schoolboy before summer break. "I am overjoyed that you can go," Roosevelt wrote Burroughs. "When I get to the Yosemite I shall spend four days with John Muir. Much though I shall enjoy that, I shall enjoy far more spending the two weeks in the Yellowstone with you. I doubt if there is anywhere else in the world such a stretch of wild country in which the native wild animals have become so tame.... Bring pretty warm clothing, but that is all. Everything else will be provided in the Park."

The New York Times laid out plans for the president's western swing, a winding, 14,000-mile, 25-state whistle-stop that would take him across the heartland to Los Angeles. Roosevelt boarded the "Roosevelt Special" on April 1, 1903, in Washington, D.C. The train consisted of six opulently appointed railway cars provided by the Pennsylvania Railroad, fitted out with parlor, kitchen, sleeping compartments, baggage chambers, and a tidy library of books on wildlife, geology, biology, and Native American lore. At his side, with a Santa Claus beard, was a beaming Burroughs, whom Roosevelt referred to, endearingly, as Oom John. "With the exception of a fortnight in the Yellowstone region and a few days in the Yosemite," the *Times* noted, Roosevelt and his party "will be pretty steadily in motion."

The agenda was altogether loopy, both geographically and thematically. In Edgemont, South

Dakota, T.R. would attend a rodeo and eat out of a chuck wagon. In St. Louis, he would join former president Grover Cleveland to dedicate the 1903 World's Fair. In Arizona, 50 Rough Riders would present Roosevelt with a live black bear. In Hugo, Colorado, he would be greeted by 200 cowboys in range regalia. In California, he would humbly agree to have a redwood named after him. Before it was over, the president would deliver more than 260 speeches plus five major addresses. And the crowds would continue to swell: 6,000 in Chicago, 50,000 in Omaha, 200,000 lining the streets of San Francisco. Standing on the rear platform of his train car as they made their way through the Badlands, Roosevelt bragged to Burroughs, "I know this country like a book."

The president stocked his railway-car compartment with essentials only: toiletries, clean clothes, a collection of Burroughs's writings. With a life so full of clutter, he seemed to relish the sparseness of train travel. Known to tip generously, Roosevelt usually had a couple of porters loitering outside his compartment, ready to fulfill his every wish. A stenographer sometimes joined Roosevelt in his berth so the president could dictate a rambling letter to an ally or a foe.

Many of his idle hours were spent peering at small towns and hamlets from his open window. And whenever the train rested at a depot, admirers swarmed the platform. In Sharon Springs, Kansas, a little girl suddenly appeared with a two-week-old badger. Her brother Josiah had trapped it alive and she wanted President Roosevelt to raise the little gray furball as a pet. To the surprise of the Kansan dignitaries, Roosevelt roared his delight, saying he would add the badger to the growing White House menagerie. As the trek continued westward, Roosevelt would hand-feed the animal cut-up potatoes and give it servings of milk. At train stops the president would show off his new prize to schoolchildren, pointing out the white stripe that ran down its back. "One treasure [I cherish] is a very small badger," he wrote back home to his son Kermit, "which I named Josiah, and he is now called Josh for short. He is very cunning and I hold him in my arms and pet him. I hope he will grow up friendly— that is if the poor little fellow lives to grow up at all."

Hushed Encounters in the Woods

Upon reaching Yellowstone, Roosevelt, Burroughs, and company decamped for two full weeks. The president wrote a series of long reports for zoologist C. Hart Merriam, head of the Agriculture Department's Bureau of Biological Survey, on how the springtime wildlife was faring, with special emphasis on antelope and elk. And while Roosevelt's gun may have been locked up, that didn't prevent him from collecting a meadow vole for Merriam's perusal. The tiny rodent was considered the world's most productive mammal, the female capable of delivering 3 to 10 pups every three weeks, without a time-out between litters. Roosevelt, using his hat as a net, scooped one up and skinned it. "I send you a small tribute," the president wrote Merriam, describing a pelt "of a microtus [*Pennsylvania*]*—a*. male, taken out of the lower geyser basin, National Park, Wyoming, April 8, 1903. Its length, head and body, was 4.5 inches, tail to tip.....I had nothing to put on the skin but salt [to preserve the

specimen].”

To roam the park, Roosevelt borrowed a sure-footed gray Third Cavalry stallion. Burroughs, meanwhile, hampered by arthritis, was placed in a carriage pulled along by two mules. Roosevelt wore khaki pants, puttees, a dark jacket, and a tan Stetson. Burroughs stayed in his dark suit, a fashionista from the Whitman catalogue of refined dishevelment. They explored canyons, spied songbirds, inspected pinecones, and studied geographical aberrations—for 16 days—headquartered at Superintendent Pitcher’s house. Several camps were also set up deep in the woods, far from Secret Service men and newspaper reporters.

On one evening Roosevelt and Burroughs, though the latter was suffering from a head cold, slept in a snowy hideaway miles into the wilds. “He craved once more to be alone with nature,” Burroughs wrote. “He was evidently hungry for the wild and the aboriginal.” Burroughs believed his companion inherently understood natural-resource management as an imperative. To Roosevelt, species needed to be saved not only for ecological reasons but also for their pure aesthetics.

The men explored Mammoth Hot Springs and the Yellowstone and Lamar Rivers. They rode sleighs to the Upper Geyser Basin and tried skiing around the Canyon Hotel. There were many hushed encounters with wildlife in the keen frost, such as a band of lordly deer, as patient as cattle, that wouldn’t budge when shooed. They tried, unsuccessfully, to roust hibernating bears.

“The Yellowstone Park,” Roosevelt would say, addressing the assembled on his last day on the grounds, “is something unique in this world, as far as I know. Nowhere else in any civilized country is there to be found such a tract of veritable wonderland, made accessible to all visitors, where at the same time not only the scenery of the wilderness, but the wild creatures of the Park are scrupulously preserved as they are here, the only change being that these same wild creatures have been so carefully protected as to show literally astounding tameness.” As Burroughs and Pitcher sat behind him on the platform, Roosevelt expounded on buffalo breeding, forest protection, and water conservation. “I like the country,” Roosevelt said. “But above all I like the men and women.”

In the coming days, with an almost palpable sense of alarm, he would warn against the raw scars of old ore pits and the toxic hazards of abandoned mines. This region, he insisted, must never cave in to the pressures of industry and exploitation.

A Cosmic Chasm

Roosevelt’s arrival at the Grand Canyon on the morning of May 6 kicked off one of the great days in the annals of environmental history. Clearly the canyon had been born of some cataclysm, some seismic or meteoric occurrence, without eyewitness or reliable record.

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A large contingent of Rough Riders were there with him to gasp and gaze at the striking landform. For years Roosevelt had considered the Grand Canyon *the* natural wonder in America. Now, beholding it for the first time, he felt his instincts validated. Knowing that his train was heading off for Barstow that evening, he insisted that he spend afternoon's end watching the sun set from the Grand Canyon's north rim—the warm sky ablaze with ragged bands of orange, pink, and violet—where he leaned over the ledge to more fully soak in the drama. In Roosevelt's *A Book-Lover's Holidays in the Open* he declared the vista "the most wonderful scenery in the world... To all else that is strange and beautiful in nature the canyon stands as Karnak and Baalbec, seen by moonlight, stand to all other ruined temples and palaces of the bygone ages."

What disturbed Roosevelt, however, was that the Arizona territory was *debating* whether to leave the canyon virtually untrammled (allowing only a few horse trails and hotels, at most) or to open it for mining companies in search of zinc, copper, asbestos, and the like. The case for preservation, to Roosevelt, was so obvious that the very concept of debate was almost criminal. This incomparable chasm was the exclusive property of the U.S. government, to be caretaken for future generations—a birthright like the Declaration of Independence or the Bill of Rights.

He determined that very day to go through the proper motions of getting Congress to designate the Grand Canyon a national park, ensuring that not an inch of the land—not Middle Granite Gorge, the Redwall cliffs of Horseshoe Mesa, Kaibab Plateau, or Marble Canyon—would ever be violated by a developer's drill. If the legislators refused, an executive order would overturn them. He hoped his presidential visit would launch a widespread grassroots movement to preserve it all—every damned acre for 1,904 square miles—in perpetuity.

"Hurrah for Yosemite!, Mr. Muir"

Roosevelt's success in saving the canyon as a national monument, which he would finesse following his victory in the 1904 election, is considered by many the crowning achievement of his seven and a half years in office. If he had done nothing else as president, his advocacy on behalf of its preservation would put him in the top ranks of U.S. presidents. If Carlyle was correct in his theory that history is forged by the lives of great men, then Roosevelt earned his place in the American pantheon for simply refusing to let commercial interests desecrate this natural shrine.

And yet Roosevelt, before his western jaunt was through, had one more environmental masterstroke ahead of him.

Shortly after midnight on May 14, Roosevelt headed off for Yosemite Valley. In his delegation was the Scottish-born naturalist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club. A tall, poised, and kindly man, Muir had a kinetic quality, a paradoxical erudition, both bold and humble, which the president immediately admired. Muir, for his part, respected Roosevelt's campaigns against dishonest California copper syndicates, against real-estate speculators, against lumber companies; they shared, in effect, a common enemies list.

Enjoying the scenic mountain ramparts en route to Yosemite, Roosevelt ordered the carriage driver to head straight for the Big Tree section—Mariposa Grove, home to some of the oldest redwoods in California. In particular he wanted to see the tree known as Grizzly Giant. Soon after arriving, the president and Muir wandered off into the Sierras on a bright, perfectly clear day. Walking with Muir around the huge circumference of the redwoods, craning his neck to try to spy the top branches 250 feet above him, Roosevelt was in his element.

Together, Roosevelt and Muir were going to explore the park for three days and three nights. Waving away 30 cavalrymen with a "God bless you," Roosevelt made it clear that he wanted to be alone with Muir.

Leaving Mariposa Grove, the party headed to Empire Meadows on horseback. When disembarking, Roosevelt asked for his valise—he didn't like being separated from his personal belongings. Upon being told that the Yosemite Park Commission had taken his baggage to a banquet some distance away, the president grew enraged. "Get it!" he shouted. According to Muir, those two words, barked with an authoritarian air, were like bullets fired.

The Colonel and the Sage of the Sierras mounted horses and trotted off into the vast sequoia forest to stare up in awe. One evening Muir built a campfire of fern and cedar boughs at Glacier Point, the most famous such respite in the annals of the early conservation movement. Sitting around the campfire, they listened to the logs pop and crackle. In short order, the president began telling his big-game-hunting yarns. But Muir, who always spoke directly and from the heart, was singularly unimpressed. "Mr. Roosevelt," Muir asked, "when are you going to get beyond the boyishness of killing things?... Are you not getting far enough along to leave that off?" After a moment's pause Roosevelt, in a softer voice than usual, replied, "Muir, I guess you are right."

At one juncture, Muir became animated. "Watch this," he said. Grabbing a flaming branch from the fire, he lit a dead pine tree which was set off on its own and protected on a ledge. With a roar, the flame shot like a bonfire up the dead branches. Suddenly, Muir did a Scottish jig around the pine torch. Roosevelt, leaping to his feet, hopped around the flaming tree as well, shouting "Hurrah!" over and over, into the night sky. "That's a candle," Roosevelt told Muir, that "took 500 years to make. Hurrah for Yosemite!, Mr. Muir."

"The first night was clear," Roosevelt would recall, "and we lay in the open, on beds of soft fir boughs, among the huge, cinnamon-colored trunks of the sequoias. It was like lying in a great solemn cathedral, far vaster and more beautiful than any built by hand of man. Just at nightfall I heard, among other birds, thrushes which I think were Rocky Mountain hermits—the appropriate choir for such a place of worship."

Routinely, Roosevelt and Muir decided to forgo the day's official itinerary to ride through the melting snow cover and study birds, trees, and squirrels. There is, in fact, a marvelous photograph of the two men standing on a ledge at Glacier Point, a respectable 3,200 feet above the valley, with Yosemite Falls at their backs. On close inspection, patches of snow are noticeable on the thawed ground. Over the decades this buddy shot has become one of the iconic images promoting America's national parks.

In point of fact, the two men had conspired only moments before to ensure Yosemite's future. According to University of Kansas historian Donald Worster, Roosevelt and Muir had "just agreed that ownership of the much-abused valley below should revert to the federal government and become part of Yosemite Park.... Politically they [had] forged a formidable alliance on behalf of nature."

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Roosevelt's success in saving the canyon as a national monument, which he would finalize following his victory in the 1904 election, is considered by many the crowning achievement of his seven and a half years in office. If he had ditching die as president, his advocacy on behalf of its preservation would put him in the top ranks of U.S. presidents. If Carlyle was correct in his theory that history is forged by the lives of great men, then Roosevelt earned his place in the American pantheon for simply refusing to let commercial interests desecrate this natural shrine.

And yet Roosevelt, before his western jaunt was through, had one more environmental masterstroke ahead of him.

Shortly after midnight on May 14, Roosevelt headed off for Yosemite Valley. In his delegation was the Scottish-born naturalist John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club. A tall, poised, and kindly man, Muir had a kinetic quality, a paradoxical exuberance, both bold and humble, which the president immediately admired. Muir, for his part, respected Roosevelt's campaigns against dishonest California copper syndicates, against real-estate speculators, against lumber companies; they shared, in effect, a common enemies list. Enjoying the scenic mountain ramparts on route to Yosemite, Roosevelt ordered the carriage driver to head straight for the Big Tree section—Mariposa Grove, home to some of the oldest redwoods in California. In particular he wanted to see the tree known as Grizzly Giant. Soon after arriving, the president and Muir wandered off into the Sierras on a bright, perfectly clear day. Walking with Muir around the huge circumference of the redwoods, craning his neck to try to spy the top branches 250 feet above him, Roosevelt was in his element.

Together, Roosevelt and Muir were going to explore the park for

three days and three nights. Waving away 30 cavalymen with a "God bless you," Roosevelt made it clear that he wanted to be alone with Muir.

Leaving Mariposa Grove, the party headed to Empire Meadows on horseback. When disembarking, Roosevelt asked for his valise—he didn't like being separated from his personal belongings. Upon being told that the Yosemite Park Commission had taken his baggage to a banquet some distance away, the president grew enraged. "Get it!" he shouted. According to Muir, those two words, barked with an authoritarian air, were like bullets fired.

The Colonel and the Sage of the Sierras mounted horses and trotted off into the vast sequoia forest to stare up in awe. One evening Muir built a campfire of fern and cedar boughs at Glacier Point, the most famous such respite in the annals of the early conservation movement. Sitting around the campfire, they listened to the logs pop and crackle. In short order, the president began telling his log-games-busting yarns. But Muir, who always spoke directly and from the heart, was singularly unimpressed. "Mr. Roosevelt," Muir asked, "when are you going to get beyond the boyishness of killing things?... Are you not getting far enough along to leave that off?" After a moment's pause Roosevelt, in a softer voice than usual, replied, "Muir, I guess you are right."

At one juncture, Muir became animated. "Watch this," he said. Grabbing a flaming branch from the fire, he lit a dead pine tree

which was set off on its own and protected on a ledge. With a roar, the flame shot like a bonfire up the dead branches. Suddenly, Muir did a Scottish jig around the pine torch, Roosevelt, leaping to his feet, hopped around the flaming tree as well, shouting "Hurrah!" over and over, into the night sky. "That's a candle," Roosevelt told Muir, that "took 500 years to make. Hurrah for Yosemite, Mr. Muir!"

"The first night was clear," Roosevelt would recall, "and we lay in the open, on beds of soft fir boughs, among the huge, cinnamon-colored trunks of the sequoias. It was like lying in a great solemn cathedral, far vaster and more beautiful than any built by hand of man. Just at nightfall I heard, among other birds, thrushes which I think were Rocky Mountain hermits—the appropriate choir for such a place of worship."

Routinely, Roosevelt and Muir decided to forgo the day's official itinerary to ride through the melting snow cover and study birds, trees, and squirrels. There is, in fact, a marvelous photograph of the two men standing on a ledge at Glacier Point, a respectable 3,200 feet above the valley, with Yosemite Falls at their backs. On close inspection, patches of snow are noticeable on the thawed ground. Over the decades this buddy shot has become one of the iconic images promoting America's national parks.

In point of fact, the two men had conspired only moments before to ensure Yosemite's future. According to University of

ROOSEVELT'S RESERVE

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For three days the men explored the park with two packers and three mules. Roosevelt wore jodhpurs with puttees, a thick sweater, a Stetson, and a soiled bandanna around his neck; Muir, an oversize coat and loose-fitting trousers, —H— looking much like a spruced-up hobo. While both men later boasted that they had been *alone* in the Sierras, in fact, U.S. Army climber Jacher Alder and trail guides Charlie Leidig and Archie Leonard had almost always been in attendance.

And even though Roosevelt and Muir bonded immediately (Muir would recall that Roosevelt overflowed with “hearty & manly” companionship, so much so that “I fairly fell in love with him”), there were clearly moments of tension. Leidig, for example, claimed that Roosevelt got annoyed when Muir wanted to stick a twig in one of the president’s buttonholes. The guide also noted that “some difficulty was encountered because both men wanted to do the talking.” Not to mention the fact that the president snored loudly, mimicked birds with maddening precision, and ate huge amounts of fried chicken and beefsteak. Roosevelt found, to his dismay, that the botanist-naturalist Muir was much more interested in the flora than the fauna. “The hermit-thrushes meant nothing to him,” Roosevelt wrote, “the trees and the flowers and the cliffs everything.” What’s more, Roosevelt later observed, he was surprised that Muir did not know his birds nearly as well as Burroughs did.

At one point a small snowstorm impeded their woodland tramping. To stay warm Roosevelt and Muir camped in a protected grove of silver firs on Glacier Point. They slept without tents to better enjoy the morning bird cries. “Just think of where I was last night!,” Roosevelt later enthused. “Up there amid the pine and silver firs in the Sierrian solitude, in a snowstorm, too, and without a tent. I passed one of the most pleasant nights of my life. It was so reviving to be so close to nature.”

On the third night Muir explained to Roosevelt that he had an ulterior motive: saving Mount Shasta, along the California-Oregon border, and enlarging Yosemite to include Mariposa Grove. Roosevelt, enlivened by the snowbound, hardship conditions, was all ears. As Roosevelt would write, he was enraptured by “the floor of the Yosemite, in the open valley, fronting the stupendous rocky mass of El Capitan, with the falls thundering in the distance on either hand.”

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Muir had been a wise, shrewd host. His desired effect had been to galvanize Roosevelt to save more of wild California from human encroachment. And immediately upon leaving Yosemite, the president fired off a telegram to Interior Secretary Hitchcock. “I should like to

have an extension of the forest reserves to include the California forests throughout the Mount Shasta region and its extensions. Will you not consult Pinchot about this and have the orders prepared?"

The Wilderness Crusader

Roosevelt would go on, during his presidency, to institute the first federal irrigation projects, national monuments, and conservation commissions. He established five new national parks, protecting such heirlooms as Oregon's iridescent-blue Crater Lake, South Dakota's subterranean wonder Wind Cave, and the Anasazi cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, in Colorado. He created Alaska's Tongass National Forest, in fact, quadrupled America's forest reserves and, recognizing the need to save the buffalo from extinction, made Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains Forest and Montana's Flathead Reservation big-game preserves. Single-handedly, he spared the Grand Canyon from destructive zinc-and copper-mining interests; the Florida Keys, Washington's Olympic Mountains, and Arizona's Petrified Forest from exploitation.

The bold scrawl of his signature would set aside some 230 million acres for posterity, almost the size of the Atlantic Coast states from Maine to Georgia—one out of every 10 acres in the United States, including Alaska. All told, Roosevelt's preserved acreage was nearly half the landmass Thomas Jefferson acquired from France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

It is now clear to environmentalists and historians who have looked back at the record that Roosevelt, from the beginning to the end of his presidency, in March 1909, did far more for the long-term protection of wilderness than all of his White House successors combined. By re-orienting and redirecting Washington's bureaucracy toward conservation, Roosevelt's crusade on behalf of the American landscape might arguably be viewed as one of the boldest and most enduring of all presidential directives, on par with Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I. It was Roosevelt—not Muir or Pinchot or Burroughs—who set the nation's environmental mechanisms in place and turned conservationism into a universalist endeavor.

In the end, like a boy sleeping under the stars, Roosevelt saw the big picture of nature's interconnectedness. "Surely our people do not understand even yet the rich heritage that is theirs," he would write in *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*— published midway through his presidency. "There can be nothing in the world more beautiful than the Yosemite, the groves of giant sequoias and redwoods, the Canyon of the Colorado, the Canyon of the Yellowstone, the Three Tetons; and our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their children's children forever, with their majestic beauty unmarred."