



IRA NOEL GABRIELSON, 1889–1977

(From a photograph taken in 1965)

IN MEMORIAM: IRA NOEL GABRIELSON

HENRY M. REEVES¹ AND DAVID B. MARSHALL²

¹Route 1, Box 252-143, Amity, Oregon 97101 USA, and
²4265 S.W. Chesapeake Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97201 USA

Fondly known to countless Americans as "Mr. Conservation" and to innumerable friends and colleagues as "Dr. Gabe" or simply "Gabe," Ira N. Gabrielson ranks among the most notable American conservationists of the past century. Ira Gabrielson was born on 27 September 1889 in rural Sioux Rapids, Iowa, the elder son of sturdy Scandinavian parentage. Despite his leadership role during the conservation move-

ment of the mid-20th century, Gabe preferred to be remembered simply as a "biologist." This preference was expressed in one obituary (Allen 1978) and even more clearly in the first sentence of his unpublished memoirs (a copy of which was used freely in preparing this memorial).

In 1908, Gabe entered Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, where his bird photo-

graphs caught the attention of Dr. T. C. Stephens, then editor of the *Wilson Bulletin*. Quoting from Gabe's memoirs, "When I learned [through Dr. Stephens] there were actually jobs where people were paid for studying birds and mammals, I knew exactly what I wanted to do." This decision terminated his father's financial support, as he had intended that Gabe study law, but Gabe graduated with his class of 1912 with a B.A. degree in biology. On 7 August 1912, Gabe married his childhood sweetheart, Clara Speer. Together they raised four daughters. Clara was his faithful and supportive companion for 65 years.

Beginning in 1912, Gabe taught biology, mathematics, and agriculture at Marshalltown, Iowa, all the time hoping to find employment in his chosen field. Just when he was accepted for a graduate fellowship at the University of Iowa, a position materialized with the Bureau of Biological Survey. His university advisors urged him to accept the job under W. L. McAtee at the bird food habits laboratory in Washington, D.C. His associates there included E. R. Kalmbach and A. Wetmore. Beginning in the fall of 1915 until the spring of 1946, Gabe devoted his seemingly endless energies to increasing responsibilities in the Bureau and its successor. From examining bird crops and stomachs and conducting a starling study with Kalmbach, he went into rodent control. From 1918 to 1930 he was "rodent control leader for the state of Oregon." With a reorganization in 1931, he took charge of rodent- and predator-control programs in California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington. Wildlife-refuge and law-enforcement responsibilities were added in 1933. During 1934 the Survey's dynamic new Chief, "Ding" Darling, repeatedly called Gabe to Washington for special assignments, and finally transferred him there in 1935. Darling resigned that fall, and Gabe was selected to replace him. In 1940 the Survey and the Bureau of Fisheries were combined into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Gabe became the Service's first director, a post he held until 1946. Gabe then became President, Wildlife Management Institute, a position held until 1970 when he assumed chairmanship of WMI's Board.

Gabe was continually on the move throughout his career, traveling across the continent, to Alaska, and overseas. Circuits of sportsmen's club conventions, scientific society meetings,

and other gatherings were combined with inspections of field stations, where he always made it a point to observe wildlife personally and to meet with employees and colleagues. When others became exhausted or were delayed, Gabe simply resorted to bird-watching. These travels, observations, discussions, and acquaintances, and a keen perception of people and issues, endowed Gabe with encyclopedic knowledge that was easily recalled from his extraordinary memory. His straightforward manner, sense of fairness, remarkable communication skills, knowledge, and perception caught the attention of the press, politicians, statesmen, nobility, and other leaders. All sought him out. He expressed his opinions, including negative ones, with sufficient humor that people listened. This rare mix of talents enabled Gabe to exert great influence at a critical time in American history, when evolving wildlife management practices and policies were being merged into our society and government.

Among his many accomplishments, Gabe was particularly proud of the expanding National Wildlife Refuge system, establishment of the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration and Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit programs, creation of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Refuge, and organization of an impartial, highly successful wildlife law enforcement team. He assisted in planning the first North American Wildlife Conference, called by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936; Gabe formally opened most of these conferences over the next three decades.

While with WMI, Gabe directed evaluation studies of many state and provincial conservation agencies, helped found the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, and in 1961 assisted in organizing the World Wildlife Fund (U.S.). He served for many years as its president. He was also a trustee of the World Wildlife Fund (International) and of the North American Wildlife Foundation. For many years he was chairman of the A.O.U.'s Committee on Bird Protection, and prepared its annual reports for *The Auk*. He was elected an A.O.U. Fellow in 1938.

Gabe's enormously broad and diverse interests and knowledge are reflected in nearly 500 technical and popular publications that appeared over six decades in more than 120 jour-

nals, reports, and magazines. His expertise included administration of conservation agencies and programs, alpine botany (Gabrielson 1932), big-game management, conservation legislation, cropland conservation, fish and fisheries (Gabrielson and LaMonte 1951), forestry, gardening, hiking, law enforcement, marine mammals, nature protection, oil pollution, outdoor recreation, pesticides, predator and rodent control, professionalism and ethics, range management, salmon management, sportsmen's responsibilities, state-federal relationships, waterfowl management, wilderness, and wildlife management in national parks. Gabe's wildlife philosophies are reflected in three major books written in the comparatively early years of the current conservation era: "Wildlife Conservation" (1941), "Wildlife Refuges" (1943), and "Wildlife Management" (1951). Gabe's most rewarding speciality was ornithology. His early contributions, beginning in 1911, chiefly noted species behavior, food habits, occurrence, and distribution. His major ornithological contributions were "Birds of Oregon" (Gabrielson and Jewett 1940) and "The Birds of Alaska" (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959). Both remain standard references. Also, he coauthored the popular "Birds: A Guide to the Most Familiar American Birds" (Zim and Gabrielson 1949). Gabe was an inveterate collector. His nearly 9,000 bird specimens, once housed at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, are now at the National Fish and Wildlife Laboratory, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

The amazing productivity of this man went far beyond professional duties. Although it is impossible to determine where Gabe's work ended and play began, his hobbies included hunting, fishing, gardening, and cutting firewood with what he called the "armstrong saw." Unknown to many associates is the fact that he supplemented his meager depression-era salary by commercially growing rock-garden plants and writing articles for popular gardening and sporting magazines, often under pseudonyms.

Ira Gabrielson's memoirs, based on diaries, are largely filled with accounts of meetings and field trips, but frequently mention books and manuscripts being returned for proofing or in published form. One must conclude that most of his writing was done at night, often during trips. His memoirs also reveal a strong devotion to family, friends, and coworkers. He was

never too busy to attend to a sick family member or the problems of an employee. Gabe anguished over occasionally having to remove people for poor performance. Other friendships were sometimes shattered when he insisted that game-law violations be impartially prosecuted. But his requirements for high standards earned an unusual degree of respect for the new wildlife profession.

Many awards were bestowed upon Dr. Gabrielson during his long public life. Academic recognition included honorary degrees from Oregon State College (D.Sc.) in 1936, Morning-side College (LL.D.) in 1941, Middlebury College (D.Sc.) in 1959, and Colby College (D.Sc.) in 1960. Other awards were the Interior Department's Distinguished Service Medal (1948) and Conservation Service Award (1964), the National Audubon Society's Audubon Medal (1949), The Wildlife Society's Aldo Leopold Memorial Award Medal (1953), the American Forestry Association's Distinguished Service Award (1962), the Friends of the Land's Hugh H. Bennett Medal (1958), and the Commander of the Netherlands Order of the Golden Ark (1972). His memberships included the American Ornithologists' Union, the Cooper Ornithological Society, the Wilson Ornithological Society, the Society of Systematic Zoology, the Ecological Society of America, the Washington Academy of Sciences, the National Audubon Society, the Boone and Crockett Club, the Pacific Northwest Bird and Mammal Society, the Izaak Walton League, the Washington Biologists' Field Club, and the Cosmos Club. On 11 October 1969, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service named its new building to house the Migratory Bird Population Station the Ira N. Gabrielson Laboratory, breaking a tradition to so honor only its deceased leaders.

Dr. Gabrielson died at age 87 on 7 September 1977 in Washington, D.C. of heart complications. His papers are deposited in the Denver Conservation Library, Denver, Colorado, and many of his awards are displayed in Gabrielson Laboratory. The Wildlife Management Institute has assembled and transcribed his memoirs covering 1912-1970.

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