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The Life of the Legendary Wildlife Conservationist

John Craighead liked to quote fellow legendary conservationist Aldo Leopold, who once said “we should think like a mountain.”

The philosophy of following nature’s cues and looking “at the fundamentals of things” guided Craighead’s pioneering work in American conservation, its wild rivers and seminal studies of grizzly bears.

“I have listened to the voice of the mountain for most of my life,” said Craighead upon receiving The Wildlife Society’s Aldo Leopold Memorial Award in 1998.

The mountains still talk, but they lost one of their most avid listeners when John Craighead died in his sleep at his home of more than 60 years in southwest Missoula.

Craighead turned 100 on Aug. 14 and had been ailing for years, though his children said it wasn’t until last year that he was unable to frequent the tepee in his yard in all seasons.

The breadth of Craighead’s experience and expertise in the natural world – with Frank and apart from him – is legendary. In 1998, the same year John received the Aldo Leopold Award, the twins were named among America’s top scientists of the 20th century by the Audubon Society.

“I don’t think his impact on the wildlife profession can be overestimated,” said Van Pletscher, who retired in 2013 as director of the University of Montana’s wildlife biology program that Craighead helped establish as one of the best in the nation.

John and Frank Craighead, identical twins, were born on Aug. 14, 1916, in Washington, D.C. They spent the young years of remarkable lives roaming the banks of the Potomac River, investigating nests and honing their love and instincts for nature. Intrigued by falconry and birds, they attended Penn State University.

Their father was an inspiration. After retiring as an entomologist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and even as his sons were fitting the first radio collars on grizzlies in Yellowstone in



Above- The Craighead Brothers were the featured banquet speakers at the 1992 NAFA Meet in Lamar Colorado chaired by Jim Frazier (center).

the early 1960s, Frank Sr. was launching a second career, this one in the development-threatened Everglades of south Florida. On the wall of John’s Missoula home is a plaque presented to his father in 1976 dedicated to the “Scholar of the Everglades.”

The twins were 19 when they co-wrote “Adventures With Birds of Prey” for National Geographic. It was the start of a long association with the magazine.

The U.S. Navy tapped their outdoors prowess for the war effort. Serving as First Lieutenants, the Craigheads developed a survival school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during World War II that provided physical conditioning and outdoors confidence to Navy pilots in the expedited training program. In 1943 they wrote a survival guide called “How to Survive on Land and Sea,” and as the war wound down they taught survival tactics to agents of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA.

The Craigheads remain best known for their groundbreaking 12-year study of grizzly bears beginning in 1959 in what they, and then everybody else, came to call the Greater Yellowstone

The Grizzly Bears of Yellowstone

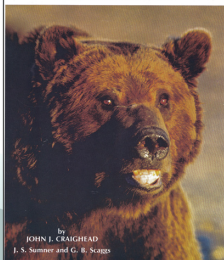
THEIR ECOLOGY IN THE YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM, 1959-1994



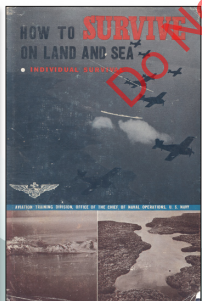
John J. Craighead, Jay S. Sumner, and John A. Mitchell
CRAIGHEAD WILDLIFE-WILDLANDS INSTITUTE

John, along with his brother Frank, wrote several raptor books as well as a survival guide for the US Navy during WWII that is still in use. John also authored several books that reflected a 12 year study of grizzly bears.

A DEFINITIVE SYSTEM FOR ANALYSIS OF GRIZZLY BEAR HABITAT AND OTHER WILDERNESS RESOURCES



By JOHN J. CRAIGHEAD
J. S. Sumner and G. R. Scorer



“I have listened to the voice of the mountain for most of my life.”

-John Craighead

{ -Referring to a favorite quote by Aldo Leopold, legendary conservationist who once said, “we should think like a mountain.” }

Ecosystem. Their science was brought into the living rooms of millions by a series of National Geographic television specials.

But the bear study only scratched the surface of the remarkably diverse achievements of the former star wrestlers, both of them Penn State and Michigan grads who were described in a Washington Post story as “dashing, handsome, intrepid, scientifically minded and athletically built.”

Advocates for land and water conservation, the wording of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968 was taken almost verbatim from the Craigheads' writing. **Thirty years later John received the 1998 Aldo Leopold Award, the highest honor bestowed by the Wildlife Society.** That same year the National Audubon Society named the Craighead brothers among the top 100 conservationists of the 20th century.

Both Craigheads received doctorate degrees from the University of Michigan in 1949. John moved into the academic world in the early 1950s when he accepted a position with UM, where he led the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit for 25 years. He and Margaret raised three conservation and science-minded children in Missoula.

John and Frank Craighead wrote much of the text for the National

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act that was passed by Congress in 1968, even as they conducted a 12-year study of grizzly bears in Yellowstone. The study is credited with helping save the bears from extinction.

Craighead was pushing 90 in 2005 when UM endowed the John J. Craighead Chair in Wildlife Biology.

“I’m just so happy we got that done while John was alive,” said Pletscher.

The private dollars raised and placed in an endowment allows the school to attract people that “you might not be able to attract,” Pletscher said. “A name like John Craighead attracts people because everyone knows that name, knows that legacy and knows what John meant to wildlife and conservation in general.”

Frank Craighead died of Parkinson's disease in 2001. He lived much of his life in Moose, Wyoming, where he and John built identical log cabins and started their families some 70 years ago, and where Haynam, 69, lives today.

Son Derek, 65, lives in nearby Kelly. He's executive director and senior scientist for Craighead Beringia South, a wildlife research and education institute at which his nephew, Trapper Haynam, is a research biologist.

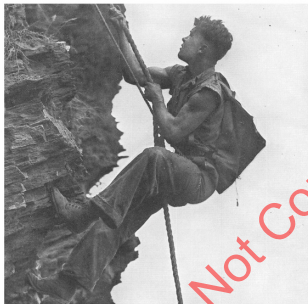
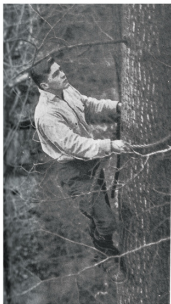
Son Johnny Craighead is former president of the Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Institute that his father founded in Missoula in 1958. Besides looking after his homebound parents, he's responsible for archiving his father's research and personal work as acting program director of the John J. Craighead Archive and Publication Program.

All three Craighead children went to Missoula schools and to the University of Montana. Theirs were childhoods unimaginable to most.

“Looking back it was the most idyllic life a kid could ever dream of.” Derek said last week as he smoothed a blanket on his father's lap near the tepee ring.

“Even as a little grade-school kid he'd pull me out of school and go up to Flathead Lake. We'd spend a couple of days on a motorboat netting the Canada geese and banding them and putting dye in the eggs. Then we'd go up and count the young geese when they hatched.”

The Craigheads were towering figures in American conservation. Also, it is difficult to describe the effect of the brothers without also mentioning their sister, Jean Craighead George, whose children's books have done at least as much to instill a conservation ethic in America's youth.



Far Left-John climbs a tree to access a Red-shouldered Hawk's nest

Left-John drops down a jagged cliff to access a nest with four young duck hawks.



Right-John with two young Golden Eagles. Photo courtesy of *The National Geographic*.