

Clinton Hart Merriam

*Honorary Member
President*

C. Hart Merriam was a founding member and the first president of the ASM. His selection as the founding president of the new society was a logical choice, given the preeminence he had attained in the field of mammalogy by age 64 when he assumed the presidency. His career spanned the formative period of the science of mammalogy. He was born on 5 December 1855 at Locust Grove, New York, and at age 16 joined the Hayden Survey of the American West. Throughout a long and extremely productive career that ended with his death in 1942, he helped shape the modern science of mammalogy. His parents lived in comfortable circumstances, in a "rural mansion surrounded by ample acres and shadowed by the Adirondack Mountains." His early schooling appears to have been routine, and it is likely that he was much influenced by his natural surroundings. In his teens he began to collect birds and eggs and early came under the influence of Spencer Fullerton Baird, the second Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. At age 17, he was sent to a day preparatory school, Pingry Military, in Elizabeth, New Jersey. After 2 years, he enrolled at Yale University to study medicine. However, his interest in natural history continued unabated, and he had already accumulated a significant series of publications when he enrolled at age 24 in medical school at Columbia University. While still a medical student, he was involved in organizing the Linnaean Society of New York and chosen its first president, having previously been involved in the organization of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. Graduating from medical school in 1879, he returned home to Locust Grove to practice, but continued to pursue his natural history avocation; at this time his increasing interest in mammals became evident. Through the early 1880s, most of his publications were devoted to mammals, and this early phase culminated with publication of *Mammals of the Adirondacks* in 1884. Nevertheless, his interest in birds had not flagged, and he was also active in the formation of the American Ornithologists' Union, becoming the first secretary of that organization.

By 1885 Merriam was ready to give up his medical practice and accepted the position of ornithologist in the Division of Entomology of the Department of Agriculture. His position soon became a division and in 1888 was expanded to include mammalogy, at the same time separating itself from entomology. This new scientific bureau of the government provided the vehicle for his principal life work; Merriam's name is synonymous with the Bureau of Biological Survey, and with the "life zone" concept he pioneered. He inaugurated the *North American Fauna* series and in the first four numbers (1889–1890) described 71 new species and several new genera of mammals. He developed an ambitious program of field collecting throughout North America, aided by people such as Vernon Bailey, A. K. Fischer, T. S. Palmer, and the incomparable duo of Nelson and Goldman. Equally important was the recent invention of a cheap portable "mouse trap," the Cyclone.

The avidity with which Merriam named new species ultimately led him to write a

revision of the brown and grizzly bears of North America in which he described a total of 84 species, including one of separate generic rank. However, from about 1900, at the age of 55, he began to devote most of his time to the ethnology of California Indians, having become the beneficiary of the Harriman Trust. His work on bears was thus published when he no longer was devoting himself primarily to mammalogy. Paradoxically, the nearly universal rejection of his systematic concept was balanced by his reputation, which resulted in his systematic arrangement nevertheless being employed even after his death.

Among his many honors was election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1902. He married Elizabeth Gosnell in 1886 and they had two daughters. His name has been given to the highest research award presented by American Society of Mammalogists, *C. Hart Merriam Award*.

Important obituaries:

Grinnell, H. W. 1943. Bibliography of Clinton Hart Merriam. *Journal of Mammalogy*, 24:436–457.

Osgood, W. H. 1943. Clinton Hart Merriam—1855–1942. *Journal of Mammalogy*, 24:421-436.

Osgood, W. H. 1944. Biographical memoir of Clinton Hart Merriam, 1855–1942. *Biographical Memoirs, National Academy of sciences of the United States of America*, 24:1–57.

Talbot, Z. M., and M. W. Talbot. 1942. Obituary—C. Hart Merriam. *Science*, 95:545–546.