

GEORGE SHIRAS IN THE HEART OF THE DARK NIGHT

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A conservationist and keen observer of the animal world, George Shiras III was a pioneer in the field of wildlife photography. His astonishing flash photographs revealed for the first time the mysterious world of the forest at night. For more than 60 consecutive years he probed the forested shores of the same wilderness lake in upper Michigan in search of images unlike any ever seen before.

TEXT BY GEOFFREY C. WARD

These days, everyone's a wildlife photographer, or thinks they are. Last autumn, driving in a jeep through Ranthambhore in hopes of spotting one of the tigers that have made that National Park the world's best-known spot for encountering the great cats in the wild, we came around a bend and braked to a stop. The road ahead was blocked by a big roofless carter. Twenty tourists from Tokyo were aboard, all wearing floppy white hats and identical masks against the dust, listening attentively to a khaki-clad guide. When he pointed into the forest where a single langur monkey sat on a branch, scratching himself, all twenty passengers rose from their seats as one, raised their iPads above their heads and pressed the button. Then they sat down again as the carter moved off toward another tree in which a suitably photogenic owlet was already known to be dozing. There has always been a world of difference between the wildlife snapshots we casual tourists take to preserve memories and impress our friends and the infinitely patient, painstaking work of those who devote their lives to capturing worlds into which the rest of us can venture only tentatively.

Consider the important but largely forgotten work of George Shiras III. Born in Pennsylvania in 1859, the son of an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, he was a lawyer and also a sometime Republican politician. He'd also been an enthusiastic hunter since boyhood and began trying to photograph animals in 1899, simply as a way to enjoy the forests around Lake Superior in the off-season. He was a "camera hunter," he liked to say.

His first attempts were fruitless; the cameras available to him were too slow and cumbersome. But in 1899, he combined a brand-new invention, the "Schmid Detective"—the first commercially manufactured handheld camera, with a variation on the ancient Ojibwa hunting technique called "jacklighting" and captured night images unlike any ever seen before. While a companion silently paddled his canoe, Shiras crouched in the bow behind a kerosene lamp with a parabolic reflector, scanning the shoreline for the tell-tale glint of a transfixed animal's eyes. Once his target was sighted, he set off an explosion of magnesium powder that lit up the scene

