



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

American Conservation Hero Paul Kroegel (1864-1948)

CELEBRATING A
CENTURY
of CONSERVATION

Paul Kroegel was born January 9, 1864 in Chemnitz, Germany. By age seventeen he had moved to Florida, an area rich in bird life. Kroegel and his father settled in Sebastian, Florida where they made their home on an Ais Indian shell mound on the west bank of the Indian River. The Kroegel homestead was situated overlooking Pelican Island, the last rookery for brown pelicans on the east coast of Florida. Here, Kroegel took an interest in the pelicans. He also had ample opportunity to view the slaughter of numerous brown pelicans and other birds for their feathers, which were highly valued in the fashion industry.

In 1901, at the urging of conservationists, the State of Florida passed legislation to protect non-game birds. The Florida Audubon Society hired four wildlife wardens to enforce the new state law and protect the birds from market hunters. Kroegel was one of these wardens, protecting the Pelican Island area.

Kroegel did his best to dissuade hunters from the island and was given assistance in this by Frank Chapman, founder of Bird-Lore and a prominent figure in both the Audubon Society and the American Ornithologists' Union. Chapman helped convince President Theodore Roosevelt to sign an executive order on March 14, 1903 to the effect:

"It is hereby ordered that Pelican Island in Indian River. . . is hereby reserved and set apart for the use of the Department of Agriculture as a preserve and breeding ground for native birds."

It was the first unit of what eventually became the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Kroegel was commissioned as the first federal Warden of the Island and paid \$12 a year (raised to \$15 in 1909) to carry out his duties. Kroegel was forced to supplement his meager salary with boat building and farming. As such, Kroegel became our nation's first national wildlife refuge manager.

Paul Kroegel's primary duty was to warn off trespassers and vandals. Warden Kroegel defended his pelicans with a badge, a double-barreled shotgun, and a small boat. However, Kroegel could not control the birds nesting habits. After a brutal hurricane in 1910 many of the pelicans moved to a nearby island, although they returned a few years later. The pelicans again abandoned the island in the fall of 1923. Without pelicans to protect, Kroegel was terminated from federal service in 1926. He remained in the area long enough to see the pelicans return before he died in Sebastian, Florida in 1948.

photo: George Nelson

