

## DAKOTA IMAGES

Elliott Coues spent much of his career as an army surgeon, but he left his greatest mark in the field of ornithology. The author or editor of more than six hundred publications, Coues also applied his scientific knowledge to history, editing the writings of explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and Zebulon Pike.

Elliott Coues was born in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 9 September 1842 to Samuel Elliott Coues and Charlotte Haven Ladd Coues. In 1854, the family moved to Washington, D.C., where Samuel Coues had won an appointment with the United States Patent Office through his friend, President Franklin Pierce.

Elliott Coues matriculated at Columbian College (now George Washington University) at the age of fifteen. His expertise in ornithology caught the attention of officials at the Smithsonian Institution, and shortly before his eighteenth birthday he was commissioned to conduct a study of the birds of Labrador. By the age of twenty-one, Coues had earned bachelor's and master's degrees and completed medical school.

Upon accepting a commission as an assistant surgeon in the army in 1864, Coues went west and spent much of the next seventeen years studying first-hand the animal and plant life that Lewis and Clark and other explorers had described. He was posted to Fort Randall, Dakota Territory, in 1872, the same year his classic reference work, *Key to North American Birds*, appeared. The assignment was followed with appointments as naturalist for the United States Northern Boundary Commission and Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories.

Resigning from the army in 1881, Coues devoted himself to scientific and historical studies. As a lexicographer, he contributed more than forty thousand terms in the fields of biology, zoology, and anatomy, and as a taxonomist, he described many species new to science. He also applied his studies as a field naturalist to producing a revised edition of the report of the Lewis and Clark Expedition edited by Nicholas Biddle in 1814. Coues consulted the original expedition journals in producing his 1893 work, which elaborated upon the information the Corps of Discovery had garnered in the areas of geography, ethnology, and natural history.

Coues died in Baltimore, Maryland, on Christmas Day 1899 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

—Brad Tennant



Elliott Coues

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