

## Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive, Chicago 5

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### THE BULLETIN

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Members are requested to inform the Museum promptly of changes of address.

## CONSERVATION OF HABITATS

One of the accepted aims of a natural history museum is the dissemination of knowledge of animal and plant life. The important role of the "habitat group" in museum exhibition is demonstrated by its wide use and popularity. Such combinations of terrain with characteristic plants and animals approximate most closely the natural habitats in nature, which fall into notably distinct types. A habitat group may convey information regarding vegetation, type of topography, and climatic area as well as food, family, and other relationships between animals and plants and their surrounding environment. The visitor sees objects in their natural settings, often representing scenes thousands of miles away. And he has an opportunity to study and enjoy these scenes at his leisure. Habitat groups thus introduce the visitor to the synthetic sciences of ecology and biogeography.

Many of the habitat groups on exhibition in Chicago Natural History Museum are replicas of actual scenes still in existence in actual places. Among those in the Department of Botany (in which animals are the "accessories") are the tidal pools of the North Atlantic Coast, inhabited by sea anemones and star-fish, surrounded by green, red, and brown seaweeds; the South African desert scene, with its portrait of one of the most extraordinary of plants, the Welwitschia; and the Illinois woodland scene with

our familiar wild flowers in their spring glory. The alpine zone of the Rocky Mountains and the giant water lily, the *Victoria regia* of the tropical swamps of South America, are idealized scenes typical of regions.

### GOVERNMENTAL CONSERVATION

Intensive agriculture, grazing, various commercial interests, together with power dams and irrigation projects, are constantly reducing the areas occupied by many native species by destruction of their natural habitats. Thanks to national parks, national and state forests, game refuges, forest preserves, wild life sanctuaries, and wilderness areas, the United States and many other countries have had the foresight to preserve some typical areas of habitats that might otherwise have been wholly destroyed. But despite these efforts, many natural areas are gone forever, and relatively few remain untouched.

The governments of some tropical countries, in the Americas, in Africa, and in the East Indies, have had the wisdom to set aside natural areas as national parks or forest preserves, foreseeing that the spreading influence of man would have the same effect as in countries with a temperate climate. Destruction of such habitats with the increase in human population and with the impact of civilization in lumbering and road building threatens such beautiful birds as the cock-of-the-rock, rare orchids, and thousands of other animal and plant species.

In the United States, real-estate developments for cottage sites are threatening many localities where the showy lady slipper, one of the most beautiful of North American wild orchids, is still found. As it often grows in similar habitats with other beautiful wild flowers, such as the fringed gentian, all of them disappear together. Not only the plants growing in these places but the birds, insects, salamanders, and other animals found there are also affected. At the moment, the ivory-billed woodpecker is believed to be near extinction, already the fate of the heath hen and the passenger pigeon. Its last stronghold is found in virgin woods, where it still finds its characteristic food (insects living within the wood of large trees growing in virgin forests). The dwindling acreage occupied by virgin forest has forced this bird to its last retreat in the Singer tract in Louisiana. Even here it may already be extinct or doomed.

### 'TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE'

One may say, "Well, then, let us propagate such rare species and save them from extinction." Such efforts may have real success, as was the case with the American bison. Unfortunately, in the case of both animals and plants, it has often been a case of "too little and too late" to save a particular species. The only way to prevent extinction of many types of both plants and animals may be to save an extensive area of their

"natural habitat." Then again, transplanting wild flowers to man-made habitats or wild animals to confinement where they are grown or bred under artificial conditions does not give one the same satisfaction as seeing them in their natural habitats. Nor, at best, does it always prevent extinction.

In the United States, with the increase in population and the destruction of many habitats through dams, drainage, real-estate developments, and varied commercial and private enterprises, combined with large-scale state and national projects, our natural habitats are more than ever in need of protection and conservation. The problem of saving certain plant or animal species turns out to be the problem of saving the habitat itself. For if all natural habitats are destroyed and supplanted by man-made cornfields, overgrazed deserts, lawns, building sites, sidewalks, and other phenomena of civilization, the last opportunity to study and enjoy our native animals and plants in their natural settings disappears. Conservation of natural habitats in sufficient areas to preserve their wild plants and animals and in sufficiently numerous areas to be accessible to all is the only means by which we can safeguard for posterity our priceless heritage of natural beauty.

—JULIAN A. STEYERMARK

*Associate Curator of the Herbarium  
and Museum Representative, Conservation  
Council of Chicago*

### THIS MONTH'S COVER

To Americans in every walk of life the turkey has long symbolized the Thanksgiving season and all that it implies. Early colonists along the eastern seaboard as well as the Pilgrim fathers in New England held it in highest esteem as an important, if wary, source of food. Today, centuries later, the wild turkey has disappeared from most of its original range. Although now replaced on the Thanksgiving table by the domesticated descendant of a Mexican variety, the wild turkey lives on in American tradition and folklore of this season. The wild turkey, examples of which appear in a Museum habitat group in Hall 20, part of which is pictured on this month's BULLETIN cover, was last known in the Chicago area about 1878. It still occurs locally as a game bird in isolated areas along the middle and southern parts of the eastern seaboard, the Gulf Coast, and in the Southwest. The Museum group represents the birds in a Louisiana scene.





Steyermark, Julian A. 1948. "Conservation of Habitats." *Bulletin* 19(11), 2-2.

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