

# 'WHY I FELL IN LOVE WITH MEXICO' TOLD BY EXPLORER

BY CLIFFORD H. POPE

CURATOR OF AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

ALTHOUGH zoologists learned during the 19th century and the early 20th much about the reptiles and amphibians of Mexico, it was not until the last two decades that they could boast a superior knowledge

My wife and I went to Mexico last June with a plan to investigate the relationships of one species to another under natural conditions, with salamanders as a focal point of interest.

Before relating our experiences I might as well make one confession: I am prejudiced in favor of Mexico and its inhabitants, and

We made our first real headquarters at Jalapa, capital of the state of Veracruz and historic site on one of the two highways connecting Mexico City with the Gulf port of Veracruz. Jalapa, with an altitude of 4,681 feet, was an important stop on the northern stagecoach road, for here the traveler could spend the night in cool mountain air after sweltering in the tropical plains below. This elevated location makes Jalapa as interesting to the biologist as to the traveler because the surrounding country supports a rich flora and fauna. By going a few miles up one road you get into the temperate zone, and by going as far down another you reach the tropics.

A glance at a relief map will show that Jalapa lies near the base of the Cofre de Perote, one of Mexico's highest mountains. The Cofre's top, 14,048 feet above the level of the sea and only fifty airline miles from it, is elevated enough to wear a white cap occasionally in the summer. The famous lofty peaks of our own western states are scarcely higher than this little-known mountain. Forty-five miles to the south, joined to the Cofre by a continuous range of mountains without highways, towers snow-capped Orizaba, unsurpassed in grace and beauty among North American peaks, and higher than any south of the Alaskan boundary. Its altitude is a mere 18,696 feet.



TEMPORARY HEADQUARTERS FOR SALAMANDER HUNTER

Cofre de Perote in the state of Veracruz, as seen from patio occupied by Curator Pope while collecting specimens of the area's amphibians. A turkey gobbler struts in the foreground. The Cofre, one of Mexico's highest mountains, attains an altitude of 14,048 feet; this photograph was taken at about 4,600 feet above sea-level.

of this subject. This recent advancement has been due largely to the work of two indefatigable explorers, Edward H. Taylor and Hobart M. Smith, who, during the '30s and '40s, collected about 50,000 specimens while making seventeen expeditions to Mexico. For example, well over half of the species of salamanders of this country have been described by these workers since the late '30s.

This bit of Mexican zoological history is interesting because it is typical of that of many other parts of the world: a gradual accumulation of knowledge for decades followed by a sudden increase due to some special stimulus in the form of a large expedition, or the efforts of a few men especially interested, as are Smith and Taylor. It should be recalled in this connection that all true zoological exploration is extremely recent. From the point of view of modern science, the animals and plants of the world were almost totally unknown a century and a half ago.

Now that the work of Smith and Taylor has brought our knowledge of Mexican herpetology to such a level, the stage is set for the specialist in classification, ecology, speciation, or any related branch of study, to step in and concentrate on a particular field.

shall continue to be so until something happens to induce me to change my mind. So far our experiences have been overwhelmingly of the pleasant kind. During three and a half months of work, and travel over 8,500 miles in seventeen states and Distrito Federal, we have met with courtesy and consideration from hundreds of persons whom we encountered without introduction, and the times we have been treated discourteously can be counted on the fingers of one hand. And we did not travel as tourists with money sticking from all pockets, but as workers who often did things without apparent reason. For example, we went through innumerable fields turning stones and other objects, and yet no farmer objected to such unusual behavior. We had many a pleasant conversation with land-owners who surely puzzled over our actions. I have often thought what kind of a welcome a foreigner would receive in our country if he did what we have done, and it is not a pleasant thought. I was warned that we would be molested or robbed but we were not. Our obviously loaded Chevrolet "carryall" has been left over night in city streets or for hours in towns, villages, and remote places in the country.

## A DOG APPEASED

Since the problem of a place to live is always the first to be solved, we set about finding an abode. Camping is not advantageous in such a rainy, heavily populated area, and living in hotels is even less appealing. After some difficulty we found a room to rent in a home on the outskirts of Jalapa. The room was located between a large garden and larger patio or barnyard in which lived a horse and innumerable domestic fowl of many kinds, and several dogs. One dog at tacked strangers at sight; so entering the patio where we parked our car was often venturesome. The problem of this ferocious bitch was solved by a little raw meat and our table scraps. We were soon on the most friendly terms. The charming owner of our abode saw to it that we had everything needed before turning us over to the affectionate care of her many servants. The house, garden, and patio occupied perhaps three acres, and their care called for much labor.

It was not hard to get an early start in the morning because long before daylight a series of noises began: ringing of church bells, barking of dogs, crowing of roosters, and, finally, blowing of bugles and beating of drums by the local soldiery, who marched along the street in front of the house at 5 A.M. every day. I must admit that toward the end of our sojourn even this pandemonium sometimes failed to wake me. Then often



there was excitement during the daylight hours as when three-year-old Guadalupe, smallest member of the household, decided to teach the biggest of the dogs some manners. He bent over in front of the big dog to take a bone from it for one of the little dogs. The result was a long tooth gash on his head, a bloody white shirt, and howls that dwarfed all the barnyard noises. We were called upon to assist with first-aid treatment and it was not long before "Lupe" was happily sucking some candy. More exciting still was the pursuit about the patio of an alleged mad dog. The weapons used were, in order of effectiveness, a floor mop, a stick, stones, a pitchfork, a machete, and a large pistol. Only Lupe failed to join the attackers. The agility with which the dog evaded his pursuers cast some doubt on his madness. The event occurred during a typical mad-dog "scare."

With headquarters from which to operate we next established stations in the surrounding country. These were within some twenty miles of Jalapa, and could be reached for a day's work at a time. One of the stations was a hacienda that included a stretch of open pasture with small streams and wet, grassy spots; two were in barrancas or canyons down which roared mountain streams. These barrancas were at such different altitudes that they supported different faunas. Even the patio itself, with its partly overgrown lower slope, and innumerable boards, stones and debris lying about, had its herpetological fauna, and a large colony of salamanders inhabited the hill opposite ours, bare and open as it was. First one station was visited for a day and then another. In this way we were able to observe the stations at different times of day and under various weather conditions.

#### FRIENDLY 'MUCHACHOS'

Our most successful work was done in two adjacent barrancas about 3,000 feet higher than Jalapa and fifteen miles distant by road. On our first visit we found the ruins of an old church in a pasture near the canyon's mouth, and among the ruins and nearby stone walls and rocks we discovered a large population of lizards and snakes. The inevitable "muchacho" or boy was there in his picturesque costume watching his cows and of course he soon became interested in helping us. Mexican farm boys always show up and are one of the characteristics of the country districts. I could write a whole essay on them. They seem to spring up from nowhere, and making friends with them is not hard, especially when a little candy is handy. As a rule they answer all questions respectfully with either a "Si" or a "No" until convinced that you want a full answer. I recall one who stood by while we ate lunch, and when asked whether he wanted this or that invariably replied, "Como no," which is to say, "How not." Each morsel, after being carefully examined as to consistency, was, if

dry and firm, carefully deposited in one of many pockets; if soft or sticky it was eaten at once. The boy reminded me of a huge, friendly chipmunk.

The local people of all ages take a great interest in what goes on and can be most helpful. A goatherd whom we met farther up one of the two barrancas saw us catching salamanders and responded to our offer to buy any by promptly disappearing. Two hours later he returned with seven specimens wrapped in a large leaf. In the meantime we had caught some of the same species under the bark of a pine log. The goatherd assured us that his had been caught in a tree, and offered to take me to his collecting site. Sure enough he had found his series by climbing a tree, throwing down the bromeliads or air-plants growing some twenty feet above the ground, and searching through them. Thus we were shown for this species a "habitat niche" new to us.

We worked six days in these canyons during which time many notes on habits were recorded and 450 specimens assembled. We



'MUCHACHO' AND TURTLE

This Mexican lad shows with delight a specimen found near his home at Miguel Hidalgo, Tamaulipas.

felt that we had secured representatives of all the species but of course we had not done this in such a short time. The villagers had helped and it was always interesting to compare our catch with theirs. They had the advantage of superior knowledge of local conditions, whereas we knew the scientific aspects of the work. It usually turned out that their collections supplemented ours remarkably well.

After leaving Jalapa we continued our circuit of the Cofre de Perote-Orizaba range until we reached the region just south of it, where we found an even richer fauna. We were able to visit briefly many famous collecting sites in the region of Córdoba.

The principal groups of mammals of the world from the monotremes (egg-laying mammals) and marsupials (pouched mammals) of Australia to the highest types (monkeys and man-like apes) are systematically arranged in Hall 15.

## Books

(All books reviewed in the BULLETIN are available in The Book Shop of the Museum. Mail orders accompanied by remittance including an allowance for postage are promptly filled.)

**FOREST ENTOMOLOGY.** By Samuel A. Graham. Third Edition. McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, 1952. xii+351 pages. 85 figures. Price \$6.

*Forest Entomology* is a somewhat technical textbook and will not have the reader appeal of some of the more general works that have been reviewed here. Nevertheless, it is worthy of note because of the interest it will have to BULLETIN readers who are interested in the conservation of natural resources. To them the book will be a valuable reference, as are others of the "American Forestry Series."

Many changes have occurred in the field of forest entomology since the last edition (1929) of this text. Whereas the control of forest insects previously was largely a matter of good silvicultural practices—and these still are very important—the development of some of the modern insecticides and insecticide dispersal equipment have made the direct chemical control measures much more practical than before. The techniques of survey and appraisal have likewise been greatly improved, with the result that potential outbreak areas now are much more likely to be recognized in advance and taken in hand before serious insect outbreaks can occur.

Although this valuable book is specifically one of a series on North American forestry, it would seem to the reviewer that even brief references to the problems of forest entomology in other parts of the world would help broaden the viewpoint of the reader and, particularly, of the student.

RUPERT L. WENZEL  
Curator of Insects

## BOYS AND GIRLS OF 4-H TO VISIT THE MUSEUM

In accordance with a custom established many years ago, more than 1,200 boys and girls of the 4-H Clubs, national farm-youth organization, are scheduled to visit the Museum on December 2. The Raymond Foundation will assign its staff lecturers to assist the young people in finding exhibits.

Nearly every state in the Union and all the provinces of Canada will be represented by groups of delegates. Rural boys and girls, selected for excellence of achievement in their local communities, are sent to Chicago each year for the National Congress of 4-H Clubs at the time of the annual International Livestock Exposition.





Pope, Clifford H. 1952. "Why I Fell in Love With Mexico' Told by Explorer." *Bulletin* 23(12), 6–7.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25410>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/370918>

**Holding Institution**

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.