Creatures Of Habitat

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Introduction

*How well do you know your neighbors?*

From seep-watered hanging gardens in redrock canyons to flying squirrels on wooded plateaus, the Intermountain West is a celebration of unique plants, animals, and places. With contrasting geographical regions—Rocky Mountains, Great Basin, Colorado Plateau—we’re blessed with a natural heritage that includes some of the world’s rarest and most fascinating plants and animals.

This is no exaggeration. Approximately one in ten of Utah’s native plant species grow nowhere else in the world. Another example: black-footed ferrets, recently reintroduced into eastern Utah, are considered the rarest mammal on earth. The talents of the native plants and animals with whom we share these landscapes are remarkable as well. A brine shrimp-powered shorebird named Wilson’s phalarope flies nonstop from the Great Salt Lake to Argentina each year on an equivalent energy expenditure of the fat grams in three Snickers bars. The hardy moss campion plant flowers on rocky Wasatch peaks hammered by Arctic-caliber weather.

By enduring things we can’t bear, by going places we can’t fit, and by seeing things we can’t see, native plants and animals link us to a world beyond our direct experience. Yet, we know so little about them. Like most Americans, an ordinary citizen in the Intermountain West can instantly recognize a hundred international corporate logos but can name fewer than a dozen native plants. This is a result of our increasingly urban lifestyles. In 1940, nine of ten Utahns lived in rural areas, such as ranches, farms, and small towns that are near natural landscapes; today, nine of ten Utahns live in urban areas.

This disconnect with the natural world works against us as citizens who are heirs to an irreplaceable natural legacy. We wonder, “Why not build a highway through this swamp land? Why not dam this river?” If we continue with this same lack of understanding, much of our inherited natural wealth—many of these native plants and animals—will continue to dwindle in number and disappear.
After all, the extinction of native species is not caused by overhunting in today’s Intermountain West; it’s driven by habitat destruction. As open spaces such as ranches, farms, and native landscapes are converted to highways, strip malls, subdivisions, mountain cabins, and ski runs for the convenience of our growing urban population, native plants and animals in their path are destroyed or driven out. Often we laypeople think displaced wildlife simply move elsewhere when a new subdivision is built. Not so, biologists tell us. Any other suitable habitat for them is already occupied by animals defending that territory for themselves. Instead, displaced animals usually die without successfully reproducing and rearing young; it’s a death sentence for their lineage.

Death by habitat loss is simple to understand when you take a fish out of water. It’s more complicated—but just as certain—when we deprive an avocet of its Great Salt Lake marsh during the migratory season or a Burke’s mustard wildflower of its specialized niche on Mt. Allen or a cougar of the large territory it needs to roam. Then, losing one native species of plant or animal in an area changes the habitat, and this has a cascading effect; when one species dies out, so may five or six others that depended upon it. Our native landscapes are a complex weave of plant and animal interactions. We don’t get to choose to keep what we believe are the most beneficial species and let others go. A rare native bee you don’t especially care about may be the only thing that can pollinate a brilliant wildflower you’d really like to keep.

It’s a big problem—literally. Big, valuable spaces coveted by humans are occupied by unique native plants and animals that need these landscapes left in a natural condition in order to survive over the long haul. Our historical momentum and cultural drift is to consider native landscapes as either expendable or inexhaustible. The wastefulness of this perspective is stunning, like burning one-of-a-kind books. In the same way libraries preserve our cultural heritage in manuscripts, so do these natural landscapes safeguard our biological legacy of native species.

In one sense, it is a simple problem. We humans can choose which landscapes to use, native plants and animals cannot. So the question is, will we choose to preserve these remaining natural spaces and allow our wealth of native wildlife to continue? I believe that if we know what needs to be done to conserve native wildlife and habitat—and why—we’re likely to do it.

It’s your natural heritage, so read on.
Burrowing owl.
Canyonlands National Park, Mexican spotted owl habitat.