

Creatures of Habitat

The Changing Nature of Wildlife and Wild Places in Utah and the Intermountain West

by Mark Gerard Hengesbaugh
Utah State University Press, 2001
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BEHOLD: human-attacking pikas, owls that build nests from cow dung, and “a brine shrimp-powered shorebird named Wilson’s phalarope that flies nonstop from the Great Salt Lake to Argentina on an equivalent energy expenditure of the fat grams in three Snickers bars.” From desert tortoises in the Mojave Desert to spotted owls on forested plateaus, Utah and the Intermountain West are home to some of the world’s rarest and most intriguing plants and animals. *Creatures of Habitat* shares numerous anecdotes of the talents, traits, and trials of these unique but often little known creatures. Written by freelancer Mark Gerard Hengesbaugh, it rings with an intimate knowledge of Utah’s ecosystems that one would expect from a wildlife biologist.

Not only does Hengesbaugh revel in Nature’s oddities, he also has a knack for presenting complex ecological theory in a simple and understandable style. Here, island biogeography, genetic diversity, keystone species, and sympatric speciation are easy to digest. Hengesbaugh articulately explains how small groups of animals on the outer limits of their species’ range can contribute to the evolution and genetic health

of their entire species: “far from being a sideshow, these small sub-populations that adapt and reproduce despite the intense conditions on the edge of their habitat range represent a robust genetic mix for the species as a whole.”

Creatures of Habitat provides intrigue for a wilderness novice, hunter, recreationist, or seasoned biologist. The selective forces that resulted in an owl’s ability to swivel its head three-quarters around in either direction are explained. And I never knew that Gila monsters are active only two weeks out of the year, or that prairie dogs have different kinds of warning calls—one for predators approaching by air, another for those approaching by ground. In short, the book celebrates the unexpected wonder of Utah’s landscape and wildlife.

But be prepared for a varied ride. The book wades through grim examples of predator and “pest” persecution, wetlands destruction, weed infestation, ski area expansion, the harnessing of natural waterways, and the march of strip malls, golf courses, and subdivisions across the Intermountain West (but I was shocked to see no mention of livestock overgrazing). Hengesbaugh clearly restates the often-made connection between these problems and society’s “disconnect” with the natural world. This “disconnect works against us as citizens who are heirs to an irreplaceable natural legacy.”

Still, the message is one of guarded optimism. Hengesbaugh believes that “if we know what needs to be done to conserve natural wildlife and habitat—

and why—we’re likely to do it.” In revealing many of the marvelous but subtle connections that are inherent in one remarkable corner of Nature, *Creatures of Habitat* helps to drive home the “why.” An inconspicuous species of bee may prevent a rare plant from going extinct; one species, such as a prairie dog, can provide food and shelter for dozens of others; eradication of wolves can cause elk to boom and over-consume their food base. In a world of ecological connections and wounds, it may occur to us that *humans* are inextricably connected to Nature as well; and that, like the cougar, squawfish, and Burke’s mustard, we are all creatures of habitat. ☪

Reviewed by **Allison Jones**, a conservation biologist with the Wild Utah Project.

