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Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

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The Anniston Museum of Natural History

on the date(s) of Friday, February 17, 1995

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Rick Wiedenmann

Interviewee's signature

Address 1931 Rocky Hollow

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Anniston AL 36207

Phone 238-6109

Denise Dawn Senk

Interviewer's signature

Date Feb. 17, 1995

Address 6750 JSU

Jacksonville, FL 32265

Phone (205) 782-6241

## INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Rick Wiedemann <sup>(MWF)</sup>

Address: 1931 Rocky Hollow, Anniston AL 36207

Phone number(s): 238-6109 WK 237-6766

Approximate age or date of birth: 4/29/64

Mother's Name: Mary Wiedemann

Father's Name: Robert Wiedemann

Places lived and when: Texas 1976-1994

Education: B.S. / M.S. Biology, B.A. Museum Studies - Baylor Univ.

Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

Business, political and social memberships (past and present) \_\_\_\_\_

Present occupation: Curator of Collections, Anniston Museum of Natural History

Former occupations: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Skills: \_\_\_\_\_

Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_

National Events in which interviewee has participated: \_\_\_\_\_

Local Events in which interviewee has participated: \_\_\_\_\_

National born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Country from which he/she emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_

Denise D. Senn  
Environmental History T-T 9:15 AM

Rick Wiedenmann, Curator of Collections  
Anniston Museum of Natural History  
800 Museum Drive  
Anniston. AL  
(205) 237-6766  
Tentative Interview Date: Friday Feb. 3

Subject of the Interview:  
Endangered and Extinct Birds

This topic is important to environmental history because only through understanding our past can we help preserve our wildlife in the future. Already I have visited the Anniston Museum of Natural History to examine their collection of endangered and extinct birds and have found their collection to be quite extensive. Rick Wiedenmann is a perfect source to explore this topic as he is trained in the area of birds and is the specialist of the collections at the museum, including the bird exhibit. (His nickname is the "birdman".) I also plan to research further about endangered and extinct birds at the library prior to the interview.

Denise D. Senn

Questions for Oral History Interview  
Interviewee: Rick Wiedenmann

1. Could you please tell me about your educational background?
2. What first piqued your interest to become specialized in the study of birds?
3. What type/types of training were required for your obtaining the position of Curator of Collections?
4. The exhibit on birds at the Museum is one of the oldest collections of mounted birds in the world. How did the collection come into being?
5. Mr. Werner is largely responsible for the collection of birds, what role did he play in designing the collection? And how did he go about collection the specimens?
6. There are 60 cased habitats authentically recreated by Mr. Werner. How did he create the dioramas?
7. There are several extinct and endangered birds on exhibit, tell me more about the birds and how they found themselves on the endangered and extinct lists?
8. What can be done now to help save the birds on the endangered list?
9. What do you think we can learn from our past to prevent this from happening to other birds and animals in the future?

Denise Senn

Environmental History  
Dr. Marshall  
Oral History, Taped Interview  
Rick Wiedenmann, Curator of Collections  
Anniston Museum of Natural History  
Friday, Feb. 17, 1995

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Denise D. Senn

Environmental History  
Dr. Marshall





## PRAYER FOR THE EARTH

Please bless and protect this sacred jewel,  
Our vulnerable planet so besieged.  
May the rivers and the oceans and the sky and  
the land  
All be repaired somehow, dear Lord.  
May the barbarism end, which threatens to  
destroy our priceless treasure.  
For surely the earth has been our home,  
The home of our parents unto all generations.  
For the sake of our children, Lord,  
Save this earth.  
Place in all minds a greater awe before her  
mysteries.  
Shield her and heal her wounds,  
Restore her to her former glory.  
Save her, Lord, from us.

-Marianne Williamson



Denise D. Senn  
Environmental Hy.  
Dr. Marshall

Extinct and Endangered Wildlife  
Specification: Birds

In 1973 an important piece of legislation that was long needed was passed, The Endangered Species Act (of 1973.) It was created to establish a means of protecting plants and animals that were heading to extinction. Under this act any of the organisms on public land are protected. And due to the fact habitat loss is the main reason most animals become extinct, the animal as well as the habitat are protected under the act.1

*These cases are challenges to habitat part!*

While loss of habitat is a key factor in loss of precious wildlife, many other factors come into play. The hunting of animals and birds for sport has always been popular, at times merely for the challenge and the dead carcass is left to rot. At other times the pelts, tusks, or feathers are in demand for the styles of the time and these animals are victims of a passing fad. The case of the African Black Rhinoceros is perhaps the most unusual in terms of why it is being killed in such large numbers. Termed Africa's most endangered species, many cultures in the far east believe that if its tusk is ground up into a fine dust that it helps to make the user more virile and sexually attractive. Some experts believe that this will unfortunately be the next

animal included on the extinct list.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the animals that people seem to think of when the phrase endangered wildlife is used usually is a vary narrow list. Naturally, large animals such as the African Elephant are thought of, also the Leopard, Cheetah, Zebra, and the Nile Crocodile. But few people seem to remember that several species of birds are on the endangered list as well, and their protection has proven to be more difficult to ensure. Many of these birds are hunted into their low numbers, some because of pure sport and some simply because they are believed to be nuisance birds.

One bird killed by farmers because it was believed to be a nuisance was the Carolina Parakeet due to it's destruction of fruit and garden crops. These birds also were unlucky to have been so beautiful and vibrantly colored. Once people saw these birds, the ~~in~~ fashion was to have a parakeet on your mantle as a type of status symbol. Killing these birds was an easy task to do too. An entire flock could be killed within a matter of minutes by one hunter because they do not leave or flee if one of the birds from the flock is taken down. Rather they would circle up above the fallen bird and scream making themselves the perfect target for the hunter below. Unfortunately, this bird was hunted practically to extinction before it was even noticed that their numbers were becoming so low. And by that time it was too late, as the Carolina Parakeet is now extinct and can only be seen in the few collections fortunate enough to have them. *stuffed ones?*

Another bird hunted to extinction is the Passenger Pigeons. Oddly enough in the early 1800s this was one of the most abundant

species of birds in the world, and in 1810 one flock was estimated to contain 2 billion plus birds. There were even reports of flocks of this species blackening the sky due to the massive numbers, and trees would even break from the weight of the numbers who would flock together. But the Passenger Pigeon was not a bird that was well adapted to deal with people, and made it easy to kill them by their actions. For example a flock of 500 could be shot at by a hunter, usually for the sport but at times for the meat. Being startled by the gunfire they would naturally fly off, but would consistently return to the same spot only minutes later. The last Passenger Pigeon died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914.

Some extinct birds have an interesting history in that other sub-species that are virtually the same bird are still doing well today. The Heath Hen was hunted as a game species much like the Greater Prairie Chicken in the West. However, the Heath Hen was an extremely popular game bird that brought an unusually high price on the market. While there were attempts made to save this bird, the Heath Hen is now extinct with the last one being spotted in the 1930s in Martha's Vineyard. (Although hunting was the main reason for the loss of this bird, it also suffered from excessive in-breeding and disease.) Amazingly enough, sanctioned hunting seasons are still held for the Prairie Chicken.<sup>3</sup>

While it took until 1973 for the Endangered Species Act to be passed, 1912 was a landmark year for environmental laws. Experts and dedicated organizations were beginning to realize that several species of birds would migrate back and forth between Canada and the United States, which led them to believe that the birds really

belonged to both countries. It was at this time that the Migratory Bird Act was introduced, and even though it was not actually enacted into law until 1960, it contains the year of introduction. Any birds that migrate between these two countries are protected, later including Mexico so that all of North America would be protected.

The Migratory Bird Act of 1912 originally started with only protecting the game birds that migrated, but later included all birds because of the importance of their safety. However, those birds that are imports from Europe are the exceptions to the rule. (Such as the house sparrows and Starlings.) While these birds are protected by the act, there are regulations set aside to allow the hunting in each state. Some of these regulations include specified seasons, specified numbers that are allowed to be killed at any one time, and set times acceptable for hunting (sun up to sun down.)<sup>4</sup> There are, of course exceptions to every rule. Nuisance birds can be handled at any time if the person with a complaint legitimizes it in writing and then is allowed to obtain a permit. There is also a detailed process that allows institutions to form collections of these birds either for a live exhibit or for a stuffed exhibit, but there are several pieces of criteria that must be met before this can be accomplished.

One major success story that has resulted from both the Migratory Bird Act and the Endangered Species act is the rise in numbers of the Whooping Crane. In the late 1930s this bird was down to 25 Cranes known to exist in the wild. This was a cause of great concern and ~~it~~ was believed that there was virtually no hope

in raising the numbers of the bird. There was very little known at this time about the exact migration pattern of these birds, but it was known that they winter in the same place every year along the Texas Coast. (Later it was discovered that they migrate from what is now Wood Buffalo National park in Canada and fly 2000 miles to Texas for the winter.) In the 1940s this land was bought to create the wildlife refuge that exists there today in a last ditch effort to save these birds. While the land was set aside by activist groups, it took researchers until the mid 1950s to actually discover their nesting spots. Once this was discovered, the researchers kept monitored weekly counts of the birds to keep track of them.<sup>5</sup>

But merely keeping track of the Cranes was not going to be enough to keep them from becoming extinct. As the options became more and more slim, the decision to transplant eggs, while radical at the time, was the decided course of action. Whooping Cranes almost always lay two eggs at a time, but only one of those eggs will survive. The egg that hatches first eats all of the food that the mother has collected, so that upon the hatching of the second egg, the bird starves to death. So researchers went to nesting spots in Canada and would remove one of the eggs. It was then taken to the Texas River Wildlife Refuge and there they were raised in captivity to ensure that they would live. (Researchers feared that natural disasters such as hurricanes would threaten the progress of the program so they decided to raise the hatchlings by hand in the initial stages.) This greatly increased the Crane population and prompted the transplant program to grow.

With the knowledge that Sandhill Cranes had the same patterns as Whooping Cranes in raising their young, (with the exception of Sandhill Cranes ensuring the life of all their eggs), they were chosen to also help increase numbers in the Whooping Crane population. A Whooping Crane egg was placed in the nest of the Sandhill Cranes, and in turn they were cared and provided for. Currently this program has led to 20-30 Whooping Cranes being successfully raised to adulthood that now migrate from Utah to New Mexico with the Sandhill Cranes. Not only has this helped numbers to grow, but it also works as a type of insurance plan. Whooping Cranes in Texas have had to face several obstacles including natural disasters and oil spills. They also are all concentrated in one spot, so that one disaster can potentially destroy the entire flock. *nest*

Now that the Whooping Cranes are being protected though, and have increased in such great numbers, it is doubtful that they will go extinct, although their safety is an ongoing process. The largest threat to them when they were at their low was the loss of habitat. Whooping Cranes need swampy areas to nest, and at one time did so in Iowa and Minnesota. But farmers do not like swampy areas, and were filling them in to plow and to turn into more crop land. This resulted in a devastating loss of habitat, and it is as simple as the fact that if you don't have a place to live, then you cannot survive. Now that the problem has been addressed, and they are carefully being monitored, they have a much better future.

Another bird that has benefited from the concern of activists, and the existence of legislation is the California Condors. In the



mid 1980s there were only 6 of these birds in the wild. The only option that experts felt available because of the dangerously low number was to catch all of the birds and pursue captive breeding. The main reason for the low number was actually lead poisoning. These California Condors would find and eat a dead deer, also eating the lead in the carcass from the buckshot that slowly killed the animal. Lead completely ruins the digestive system of the Condors and it causes them to slowly starve to death. (All condors in the 1970s and 1980s found dead had their deaths directly traced the amounts of lead found in their bodies.) By breeding these birds in zoos and controlled environments they have been fairly successful in increasing the numbers, although it is only a slight increase. The only problem that has been run into is in trying to keep genetic diversity.

*Is a condor  
a condor if it is not in the wild?*

A program is now being developed to reintroduce some of these California Condors back into the wild. Practice with the South American Condors has proven to be beneficial in working out all of the kinks. One of the first nests set up was located too close to a high voltage power line and some of the birds have collided with it. But researchers are learning from their mistakes, and plan releases into very controlled environments for the California Condors soon. Plans include radios to track movements when they die and <sup>determine</sup> which one died.

Only one percent of the old growth forests from 200 years ago is still present on earth, causing a threat to quite a bit of wildlife. For example, Spotted Owls are one of the many birds that depend on these forests. Sole numbers of the spotted owl are high,

but because their habitat is so threatened, they too appear on the endangered species list. It is crucial to their survival that their habitat remain intact, and because the forests are endangered, the spotted owl is as well.

The Red C<sup>ck</sup>ed Woodpecker, native to the Southeast United States also depend on old growth forests. They live in old trees that they can hammer out a hole in to make their nests. They count on large trees with heart rot so that the wood is soft enough for them to break through. Part of the problem is that the trees are not getting as big as they once did because before they have the chance to, they get cut down by the timber industry. These Woodpeckers can't survive without the big trees so forest service workers are now monitoring several areas and then thinning out some of the trees to allow the remaining trees to grow faster and help create a natural habitat.

As demonstrated, the protection of habitat in its natural state is crucial to the life for many of these animals. The Golden Cheek Warbellor in Texas is dependant on fire. Fire in relatively close intervals spawns the new growth that these birds need to survive. But the problem is that humans don't like fire. Humans cause other threats to these endangered birds. Ninety percent of all birds that have actually become extinct in the past 200 years have lived on oceanic islands. Many were flightless and unable to migrate, and once they were introduced to humans they had little chance for survival. Many of these birds had no predators, and as a species they had no need for fear. When they were first acquainted with people they made easy targets, and were threatened by rats,

cats, goats, and the people themselves. The idea of being dumb like a Dodo was arrived at because they just stood there as you walked up to it to club it over the head, never making the attempt to retreat or run.<sup>6</sup>

Several of these birds have gone extinct, and very few specimens remain that are viewable. But there were some people that saw the numbers of these birds lowering in number and could foresee that the time was soon that there would be none left to mount. William H. Werner was considered a pioneer in his field and created one of the oldest collections of mounted birds in the world, not to mention one of the largest. Over his lifetime, Werner collected over 500 specimens including 140 species. Over a period of 45 years he collected birds in all of the United States, Mexico, and the Bahamas. But his greatest contribution to this field was in being the first to create cased habitats. (Totaling 60 over his entire career.) His work was very different from that of other taxidermists, he would get mated pairs, the chicks, nest, eggs, and even the environment they lived in to create a natural habitat exhibit. His work was so unusual and so precise that he began in 1870 creating exhibits for various museums including the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and even the Smithsonian.

These authentic habitats are important today because they are our only link to what the habitat of these extinct birds were. By creating such authentic exhibits it has the effect of allowing us to look into the past if even for a brief moment. And looking into the past to see exactly what went wrong with allowing these animals to die out is pertinent, especially to us today.

Granted, there are laws on the books that protect wildlife. But these laws need to be taken seriously and enforced. Educating people as to what has happened in the past to these animals, and just how important they are to our ecosystem is the way to go about saving those on the endangered list. Habitats have been proven to be the number one destroyer of a species if that habitat is nonexistent. And yet companies are allowed to clear cut, and fires are put out when in fact mother nature should know best. Hopefully these laws, and the many more that are surfacing will catch the attention of more people, and more success stories like that of the Whooping Crane will be heard.

Well-written  
good info  
Use  
quotes  
from your  
person interviewed

Approved  
A course

## ENDNOTES

1The endangered Species Act establishes the procedures for identifying and protecting living organisms. While it is a federal act, it is difficult to enforce, yet has been fairly successful in it's goal.

2Rick Wiedenmann, interview by Denise Senn, 10 February 1995, Tape recording, Anniston Museum of Natural History.

3Another sub-species that is now almost extinct is the Attwater Prairie Chicken, due to a total loss of habitat. It's numbers are so low that it is now next to impossible for them to come back.

4Songbirds are specifically protected from any sort of hunting under this act, such as Blue Jays.

5Rick Wiedenmann, interview by Denise Senn, 10 February 1995, Tape recording, Anniston Museum of Natural History.

6Rick Wiedenmann, interview by Denise Senn, 10 February 1995, Tape recording, Anniston Museum of Natural History.

7This collection is now at home at the Anniston Museum of Natural History in Anniston Alabama.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Merchant, Carolyn. Major Problems in American Environmental History. Lexington Massachusetts:D.C.Heath and Company 1993.

Wiedenmann, Rick. Interviewed by Denise Senn, 10 February 1995. Anniston Museum of Natural History.