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WILDLIFE PORTRAIT SERIES NO. I

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

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AVOCET

The avocet is a large, long-legged shorebird with a slender upturned bill. The striking white and black pattern of its feathers, along with the unusual bill, make it easy to identify. During the breeding season, when the head and neck are pinkish tan in color, a flock of these beautiful birds in flight is a sight that hangs long in memory. In winter plumage, the head and neck become pale gray in color.

Avocets are usually found along beaches, mud flats, shallow lakes, lagoons and prairie ponds, where they feed in shallow water with a swing-of-a-scythe motion of head and bill to capture small aquatic life. The avocet nest is a simple depression in the ground, usually on a dry mud flat.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

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BIGHORN SHEEP

Bighorns are keen-eyed, sure-footed, big-game animals living in the rugged mountains of western North America, from British Columbia to Mexico. Today they occupy only a remnant of their former range in the United States.

The massive, curling horns of the ram make it a hunter's trophy and the search for this animal in the high Sierras is a real challenge to sportsmen. The ewes have smaller horns that lack the curl of the rams. Large areas have been set aside as refuges for the species, although some are opened for carefully controlled hunting in season.

In autumn, rams sometimes fight in a spectacular way. They face each other, charge at full speed, and slam together head on. The crashing sound made as their horns meet can be heard a long way off; but battles are rarely fatal.

During the winter period of heavy snows, bighorns move to lower levels, returning to the higher ranges when springtime comes. Elusive and agile, they are difficult to see in their almost inaccessible habitat.

Photographer: Joseph Mazzoni
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

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BISON

The animal known in our country as a "buffalo" is really a bison, characterized by a massive shaggy head and small hindquarters. The bull, which has a hump on its back, usually weighs around 2000 pounds and up, the cow about half of that.

Once an estimated 50 to 100 million bison roamed the continent, but the species was almost annihilated before measures were taken to insure its survival.

Today, herds of these huge, imposing creatures are protected on such areas as the National Bison Range in Montana, Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, and Custer State Park in South Dakota. There are about 12,000 bison in Canada, most of them living in the vast Wood Buffalo Park, where western plains bison and northern wood bison are now almost completely mixed.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

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BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

The black-footed ferret is probably the rarest of all the wild mammals in the United States. Its numbers declined as the population of its main food item, the prairie dog, was reduced. The prairie dog burrow, with its many-branched underground runways, is also home for the weasel-like ferret. Here it feeds upon the prairie dog and occasionally other rodents, besides finding protection from its own enemies. It is mostly nocturnal; because of this trait and the blackfoot's present day scarcity, it is seldom observed by man. Biological field studies by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and the Fish and Game Department of South Dakota are being made of the few ferrets that remain, mostly in South Dakota, in the hope that man's better knowledge of their habits can be used to prolong their existence as a wild species.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

CHACHALACA

The chachalaca is not a Spanish dance but a chicken-like bird of the tropical woodlands and jungles. Its Spanish name describes the rattling, raucous cackle of the bird's call. Long-legged and long-tailed, it feeds on fruits, seeds and insects.

This interesting bird occurs in the United States in only two places: the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, where it enjoys the few patches of brushland left to it, such as on the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, and an island known as Blackbeard, also part of a wildlife refuge located off the coast of Georgia, where it was released some years ago.

Generally chachalacas are secretive and difficult to observe as they climb through the dense thickets of their habitat. Although they feed readily on the ground, they take to the trees instantly when alarmed. Their two to three large white eggs are laid in tree nests.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

PINTAIL

Pintail ducks are streamlined and swift-flying, a favorite with wildfowlers. The male in breeding plumage is a "dandy" of North American waterfowl with his snowy breast, white throat and neck stripes, and long pointed tail, which long ago suggested its name. He sits high when on water with his tail angled upward. The female is a less attractive mottled brown, with a slender neck and somewhat pointed tail.

The species is abundant; for example, each fall more than a million gather at the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge in California. Pintails are great travelers, some crossing the open Pacific to Hawaii. In 1942, a flock of pintails turned up on Palmyra Island, more than a thousand miles south of Hawaii. One bird had been banded 82 days earlier in Utah. They are widely distributed across the United States in winter and great numbers of them gather on the lower Gulf Coast of Texas and in Mexico.

Original Photo by Rex Gary Schmidt
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

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PRONGHORN

This pronghorn is standing among purple sage, a characteristic plant of its habitat at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. The pronghorn has been clocked at 60 miles per hour and is considered the fastest of American mammals. As it runs away, large rump patches of long white hair are puffed out and can be seen for miles. Once very abundant, pronghorns were reduced in numbers to a point near extinction by over-shooting. Now, given adequate protection by our National and State governments, this western species has made a substantial increase in population.

Unlike bucks of the deer family, which shed their antlers each year, the pronghorns shed only the sheaths surrounding the horns and grow new ones annually. Both sexes have horns; those of the males are much larger. A single prong growing forward from each horn suggested the animal's name.

Original Photo by David B. Marshall
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

SANDHILL CRANE

The stately sandhill crane, all gray except for its red cap, is cousin to the big white and extremely rare whooping crane. More than 80,000 sandhills have been estimated as users of Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge in west Texas. Thousands more spend the winter at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Roswell, New Mexico.

In late winter and early spring one may witness the unusual sight of the cranes flapping their wings, cavorting and leaping in courtship dances. Their gutteral, trumpet-like call can be heard for great distances and, once heard, is not easily forgotten because of its wild sound. Cranes are ever alert and when in a group one or more are watching for enemies while the others have their heads down feeding. The flight is an alternation of flapping and gliding.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

TRUMPETER SWAN

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The trumpeter swan is largest of all North American waterfowl. At maturity it stands 3 to 3½ feet tall, weighs 20 to 30 pounds, and has a wingspread of 7 to 8 feet. The species was nearly lost forever during the 19th century, chiefly because of its value to feather merchants. For a time it was considered extinct but, in 1919, a breeding pair was discovered in a remote area in southwestern Montana. The Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge was established there to protect the big white birds and their nesting habitat.

From fewer than 100 trumpeters counted in 1935, the population has increased until today there are more than 4000 of them in the United States, including over 2800 counted in Alaska alone. Additional trumpeters are in Canada.

Transplants of swans from Red Rock Lakes Refuge were made to Oregon, Washington, South Dakota and Wyoming, where flocks have been started. Certain zoological parks were given pairs of trumpeters on loan and several such pairs have produced young to add to the growing trumpeter swan population. The species is now considered "saved" and has been withdrawn from the list of rare and threatened birds.

Original Photo by Luther C. Goldman
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife

WHITE IBIS—SNOWY EGRET

The white ibis is the most common of its family in the United States. The birds live in large roosts in the low country of South Carolina, in the Everglades and Tampa Bay region of Florida, and around the Gulf Coast. They can be seen frequently on National Wildlife Refuges in these areas.

The plumage is pure white except for shiny, black wing tips, while the down-curved bill, legs, and bare flesh around the eyes are bright red. White ibises build bulky nests of twigs and leaves six to ten feet up in low trees or bushes, usually over water. Both parents take turns incubating the three to four eggs, greenish white with brown specks. Their food includes frogs, small fish and snails.

The snowy egret, identified by its straight black bill and black legs, frequently nests in ibis colonies.

Original Photo by Donald Pfitzer
Bureau of Sport Fisheries & Wildlife