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Introduction

In order to appreciate our lives, we have to appreciate where we live. I researched this book to increase my own appreciation of Louisiana, and now I wish to share what I have learned with you. Whether you are a resident, or a short-term visitor, you will enjoy this book. It introduces our landscape and the creatures that live here. Whether you have spent your life here, or traveled a thousand miles just to visit, you still need a friendly guide to our wild places and wild species. On any day in Louisiana, we could come across a graceful white egret feeding in a marsh, watch an alligator cruise down a bayou, observe a baldcypress silhouetted against the sunset, meet a lizard climbing up our front door, discover a wild orchid in flower, or watch a turtle sunning itself on a fallen tree. Too often we ignore these simple sources of pleasure. Louisiana has many stories to tell. Frequently, the story of Louisiana is recounted as if it were only about people: early explorers, the Acadian expulsion, slavery, the Louisiana Purchase, the Battle of New Orleans, the Civil War, Mardi Gras, and some colorful stories about New Orleans, most likely exaggerated. In reality, humans are only one of tens of thousands of species that live here. I find many of them more interesting than people. Certainly, each has its own story. Here, I introduce you to some of them, and where possible, let them speak for themselves.

Concern for protecting our natural environment is growing. Once we understand our landscape, the actions we need to take to protect it become obvious. Too often, we ignore threats to our natural environment (and our own economic well-being) until they reach our own backyard, when a subdivision or factory or clear-cut is proposed right next to our home. By then, it is too late to act. We need to see the bigger picture. Here are over twenty maps, thirty photographs, and thirty illustrations that tell the big story of the state. I enjoyed finding them and look forward to sharing them with you. Some appear here for the first time. Others were dug out of dusty old books and reproduced after a century in obscurity. Some old photos came from libraries far away. And a couple of these pictures hang on the walls of my home today.

Water, earth, and fire are Louisiana's three special ingredients (you could call Tabasco sauce the fourth, but that is another story, although it does show up here when we visit the egrets on Avery Island). Thus the book begins with water—with the creation of Louisiana by the Mississippi River. Mark Twain too wrote about how the river builds the coast and creates wet places and dry places. The wet places we call wetlands, and here you are likely to find baldcypress and water tupelo trees, or one of four different kinds of marsh. The dry places that remain, the uplands, are often

covered by forests with pine and oak. The lowlands flood. The uplands burn. As I tell my students, if you live in Louisiana, there are only two possibilities: either your land will eventually flood, or it will eventually burn. Most of our native plants and animals are therefore dependent on either flooding or fire or, in some cases, both. Many of the books about Louisiana will tell you about cypress swamps and flooding, but I want to tell you about the rest of the state as well—about our pine forests and pine savannas and prairies and beech-magnolia forests. There is more to Louisiana than swamp. So after you enjoy your swamp tour, plan on seeing more.

I also want to make some introductions. I would like you to meet my neighbors and friends. Among these companions are fish such as the bowfin and sturgeon, birds including the brown pelican and ivory-billed woodpecker, and mammals such as the armadillo and opossum. And not just animals—my neighbors include plants. Magnolias, palmettos, carnivorous plants, and wild orchids are among those you will become acquainted with.

Of course, you cannot write about Louisiana without saying something about humans and their activities. Our effects have not always been positive. Some wildlife species painted by Audubon have disappeared forever, including the ivory-billed woodpecker, Carolina parakeet, and passenger pigeon. Other species now at risk of the same fate include the Bachman's warbler, gopher tortoise, red wolf, and Florida panther. Another group of species including the brown pelican, bald eagle, and American alligator came close to extinction but are now a common sight again. That is good news to celebrate. Finally, I will share with you a few of my favorite places, including the Atchafalaya Swamp and Kisatchie National Forest. So get some walking boots, and perhaps a camera or binoculars, and prepare to set off to discover Louisiana's natural beauty.