



## Conserving the Spectacular Variety of Life

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The fox squirrel is among Florida's many unique wildlife species that Audubon members are striving to conserve through habitat improvement projects.

We hear a lot about *biodiversity* these days. Broadly defined, biodiversity refers to the spectacular variety of life forms on our planet. It includes the range of ecosystems, from deserts to tropical rainforests; the different species of organisms in those ecosystems; and even the different combinations of genes found in the same species from location to location. But the simplest way to think about biodiversity is just to consider how many different kinds of plants and animals are in our environment. And, unfortunately, there are a lot fewer now than there were a hundred years ago.

The number of species on Earth is constantly changing. Over millions of years, natural forces cause some species to die out and new ones to be formed. Every now and then, the planet suffers a major catastrophe that wipes out a large number of species. That appears to have happened several times in the 4 billion-year history of life on the planet—most recently about 65 million years ago when a large comet or small asteroid hit the Earth and the resulting climatic change wiped out the dinosaurs.

### Accelerating Extinction

Today, scientists estimate that species are dying off even faster than they did after that asteroid plunged our planet into darkness 65 million years ago. The difference is that this time, there is no natural disaster to blame. Indeed, the cause of the current wave of extinctions appears to be the rapid increase in the human population.

Just 100 years ago, between one and two billion people populated the planet. Today, that number has grown to more than 6 billion. This exponential increase has had a major impact on the surface and functioning of this planet.

The primary impact has been the conversion of natural habitats to human uses. We've not only reduced the amount of natural area for plants and animals, we've also changed large open spaces into smaller isolated fragments. Just sit by the window on your next plane trip to see what this looks like!

For more information on biodiversity conservation, check out these fact sheets:

- Understanding Biodiversity
- Surveying the Diversity of North America
- The Corridor Connection
- Working within Your Ecological Region

## Taking a landscape approach to conservation

Audubon International works side by side with property owners who want to manage their properties to benefit the natural world. One of our primary goals is to protect biological diversity so that people, wildlife, and the natural ecosystems on which we all depend are healthy and thriving long into the future. Our motto – *helping people help the environment* – reflects our belief that people can minimize the negative impact of human resource use and development through proper stewardship.

One way to approach biodiversity conservation is to pay attention to the *landscape*. This means not only looking at individual properties, but also taking a big picture perspective to see how various landscapes fit together.

Because more than 70% of the United States is privately owned—we all need to be involved for conservation efforts to be truly successful. Audubon International encourages all property owners to maximize the amount of natural area left on their property. By setting aside portions of natural habitat, and landscaping with native plant species, we will help conserve the unique biodiversity of our local ecosystem. Likewise, it is important to retain habitat corridors between properties in order to combine smaller habitat fragments on individual properties into larger, regional green spaces.

Audubon International believes that people can make a difference. Through the small actions of the many of us who appreciate the spectacular variety of life on earth, the result can be the sustainable preservation of our rich natural heritage.

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