

## THE MAGELLANIC EXPEDITION

BY WILFRED H. OSGOOD

CHIEF CURATOR, DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

(Editor's Note:—Dr. Osgood, as briefly noted in the May FIELD MUSEUM NEWS, returned a few weeks ago from South America where he was leader of the Magellanic Expedition, sponsored by Mr. Stanley Field, President of the Museum.)

The Magellanic Expedition covered a wide field in southern South America. Although the expedition devoted itself especially to the region about the Straits of Magellan, it was able also to make important collections in southern Peru, in central Chile, and in east-central Argentina.

Besides the writer, the party included Mr. Karl P. Schmidt, Curator of Reptiles, Mr. Colin C. Sanborn, Curator of Mammals, and Mr. John M. Schmidt, field assistant. By dividing this personnel from time to time it was possible to reach localities representing a considerable variety of conditions. Collections of the fauna, numbering thousands of specimens, were obtained, and these open wide vistas of research.

### "TOP OF THE WORLD" MAMMALS

In August and September work was carried on in southern Peru in the region south and west of Lake Titicaca, where a very distinct highland fauna was found allied only to that of a limited neighboring area in Bolivia, and quite distinct from that of other parts of the Andes. In this region mammalian life ranges to the unusual altitude of 18,000 feet, perhaps higher than anywhere else in the world.

In November, Mr. Karl Schmidt returned to Chicago, and the other members of the party proceeded to south central Chile, going first to the Sierra Nahuelbuta and its interesting forest of araucarias or "monkey puzzle" trees. From here, brief trips were made to Laguna Maule in the main range of the Andes, and to Lake Todos Santos and Mount Osorno in that part of Chile famous for its beautiful scenery and sometimes called the "Switzerland of South America." Although this region is frequented by tourists at certain seasons, much of it is wild and practically unexplored, and the expedition obtained here in a few weeks' time examples of some of the rarest and most interesting small mammals of South America.

### SOUTHERNMOST LAND'S-END CITY

Early in December, the party sailed from Puerto Montt southward through inland passages along the uninhabited western coast of Chile to the important port of Punta Arenas, southernmost continental city in the world, situated on the north side of the Straits of Magellan, practically at the very tip of the southern continent. This city, with a population of 30,000, is far removed from other parts of South America and is the metropolis of a little world of its own, in a region devoted almost

exclusively to large-scale sheep raising. Although the population is mainly Chilean and the government that of a Chilean province, with Spanish as the universal language, there is a large foreign element including English, Scotch, Jugo-Slav, and Scandinavian.

With Punta Arenas as headquarters, the expedition made a series of short excursions in various directions both on the mainland and on some of the islands near-by, first and foremost of which was the large and famous island of Tierra del Fuego, "Land of Fire" of the early navigators. This island, with an area of some 20,000 square miles, is about the size of Nova Scotia. Although it is literally almost at "the bottom of the world," it is not so bleak and inhospitable as generally supposed, especially during its summer months of December, January, and February. Except for its extreme southern and western coasts and a few mountain peaks behind them, Tierra del Fuego is beautiful grassland, rolling or level, and now practically all under fence and private ownership. There are no small farms, however, and the large ones have their management and personnel concentrated in particular localities which are now connected by telephone lines and motor roads. The sheep, which are numbered by hundreds of thousands, are able to range in the open through the winter, with some supervision, of course, but it is evident that the winter climate cannot be exceedingly severe. Temperatures below  $-10^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit are rare.

### VISITED BY DARWIN A CENTURY AGO

It is just 106 years ago that Charles Darwin, during the famous voyage of the *Beagle*, visited Tierra del Fuego and neighboring coasts, making general zoological and botanical collections. Since he was working from a ship which entered the region through the stormy Cape Horn Islands lying immediately south of Tierra del Fuego, he was confined mostly to the coast, and his accounts of conditions, as well as those of other early travelers in the region, give an undue impression of desolation. The sailor rounding Cape Horn against gales of wind and seeing only snowy peaks in the near view can have little idea of the lovely woodland park-like glades and the lake-dotted grassland that lies beyond. Unfortunately, the sheep ranching and general exploitation of the country have had the usual and inevitable result of greatly reducing or even exterminating the native wild life. The mere presence of the sheep has been sufficient to eliminate certain burrowing rodents which could not stand the trampling of thousands of sharp hoofs. Larger animals have succumbed to man either in his efforts to protect the sheep or to profit himself in other ways. The few fur-bearing animals, such as foxes and skunks, have suffered especially from the wandering sheep herder

who, in the winter months, finds himself unemployed and turns to trapping even after animals have become so scarce that this otherwise would have no attraction as a vocation.

### PATAGONIAN GIANTS NEARLY EXTINCT

The aborigines also are practically gone. The famous giants encountered by early Spanish and English explorers are now so few that they may be called extinct. There were three principal tribes, the Tehuelche of the Patagonian mainland, the Ona of northern Tierra del Fuego, and the Alacaluf of the southern and western coasts. All are reduced to such small numbers that any hope of their preservation is out of the question. On Tierra del Fuego the expedition encountered only two full-blooded Onas, both advanced in years, speaking Spanish, and now employed in the sheep business.

The expedition was successful in obtaining examples of various animals discovered by Darwin and other early travelers and heretofore unrepresented in American museums. Several species of small mammals previously unknown were discovered and many others were taken which add greatly to knowledge of distribution and contribute to studies of the origin of the South American fauna. This region will no longer be a blank on our maps so far as mammalian life is concerned. Previous expeditions from Field Museum and other institutions had studied the fossils, the birds, and the archaeology, but this was the first to make an exhaustive study of the living mammals.

### THE TURTLES OF NORTH AMERICA

are described and handsomely figured by new photographs in *The Turtles of the United States and Canada*, by Clifford H. Pope, one of this country's foremost herpetologists, who is joining the staff of Field Museum on June 1.

"A much needed account of the rich and varied turtle fauna of the North American continent," says Mr. Karl P. Schmidt, Curator of Amphibians and Reptiles at Field Museum. "It will be especially valued by amateur naturalists, in whose interest technical language has been avoided, but it fills an equal need of the serious student, since it assembles a literature scattered through hundreds of scientific papers. Both groups will be stimulated by its excellent suggestions for field observation, in which the new work forms a companion volume for *Snakes Alive* by the same author."

On sale at THE BOOK SHOP of FIELD MUSEUM—\$3.75.



Osgood, Wilfred Hudson. 1940. "The Magellanic Expedition." *Field Museum news* 11(6), 7-7.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25715>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/364768>

**Holding Institution**

Field Museum of Natural History Library

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.