

lucky, they may each get ten skeins from their investment, which would be a really good deal, since Gibbs's yarn generally sells in the \$24 to \$45 range. On the other hand, if disaster hits, the investors may receive nothing for that shearing.

Most interesting in Gibbs's story is how she got the "free" land. She moved to Martha's Vineyard because her fiancé got a job there, working in the affordable housing field. At the time, she owned only a few animals and didn't know how she would pasture them on an island where only the richest people can afford to buy a house, let alone pasture. But it turned out that organizations on the island had for decades been buying up farmland to keep as open space. The Martha's Vineyard Land Bank had acres upon acres of fields that were growing over. Gibbs offered her flock as one way to keep brush from overwhelming one five-acre field. The deal was clinched when both parties agreed on a fee of twenty-two dollars a year.

That worked so well that she began talking to Suzan Bellicampi about her problems at Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary, a three-hundred-acre Massachusetts Audubon property beside a saltwater pond. The land had gone unfarmed for decades, resulting in fields inundated with Oriental bittersweet, a vigorously growing vine that smothers native vegetation. The sanctuary's bittersweet had begun to look like Audrey II in *Little Shop of Horrors*. The open fields, which had once attracted grassland birds, were disappearing.

Time to bring on the sheep and goats—animals famous for mowing down everything in sight in a matter of hours. Bellicampi thought the sheep might be environmentally superior to using herbicides. After a summer of experimenting, she couldn't be happier. And the price for the land—free—was exactly suitable to Gibbs, who loves the symbiosis. "Suzan sees invasive species she wants to get rid

of," Gibbs says. "I see enough food for my animals to eat for the rest of their lives."

When Gibbs sums up her new world, several thoughts come to mind. Her television colleagues can't believe she has chosen such a life. But she is happy. Farming suits her Type A personality perfectly: There is always something to do. A lamb may be ill. The goats need to be deloused. Shearing time may be just around the corner. And feeding time is inevitable. Every morning. Early. And again, every evening.

So Many Species, So Little Time

BY JOHN MOIR

The numbers are daunting. By the time you wake up tomorrow, somewhere on the planet several dozen species will have gone extinct. A year from now, an estimated thirty thousand species will be history. And if this extinction crisis continues unabated, by the end of this century half of Earth's life-forms will have vanished forever.

"Because of human overpopulation and overconsumption, the current extinction rate is at least a thousand times above normal," says Edward O. Wilson, the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning biologist who has devoted his life to preserving Earth's biodiversity. He believes that this unparalleled loss of species, known as the Sixth Extinction, is one of our century's most pressing issues, affecting the most fundamental aspects of our lives, from medicine to food to the stability of our ecosystems.

With this in mind, Wilson is spearheading a sweeping new project that could be the most important of his career: the Encyclopedia of Life. This unprecedented digital endeavor aims to develop a webpage for every known species on Earth. The EOL (www.eol.org) is so vast in scope and scale that it rivals the Human Genome Project. Wilson sees a special urgency in this undertaking. Up to 90 percent of life on Earth—millions of species—remain unidentified by science. The EOL will help scientists preserve biodiversity by identify-



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"Serious thinking on the deeper connection between the environment and social and political issues."

ing and classifying life on Earth before it is too late. The program's fundamental premise is that if we don't know what we have, we won't know what we're losing.

Wilson has been pushing for this comprehensive cataloging of the Earth's biosphere for more than fifteen years. Backed by an international consortium of leading scientific institutions and \$12.5 million from the Sloan and MacArthur foundations, the EOL utilizes a universal access,

"wiki-style" environment with entries written by top specialists from many scientific disciplines. In 2008, the EOL's first webpages were launched, offering an early public view of Wilson's long-range dream.

While the occasional report of a previously unknown bird or mammal may grab headlines, such findings can leave the mistaken impression that new life-forms are rarely discovered. In reality, every year scientists identify thousands of nameless and difficult-to-organize species. According to the International Institute of Species Exploration, 16,969 new species were found in 2007 alone. Most of these are tiny flora and fauna, including species from the little-known world of microbes that comprise half or more of Earth's biomass. Wilson is especially intrigued with "extremophiles," microorganisms that can survive in hostile environments, including outer space.

Wilson believes that researchers, spurred by the EOL, may eventually discover alien life-forms living on Earth that have drifted in from other planets.

Aside from what we know about a few well-studied groups such as birds and mammals, the information we have about most species is limited to little more than their scientific name and perhaps a dusty type specimen. Disorganization abounds. Many "subspecies" are no doubt full species in their own right, and scientists working in different times and locations have given the same species different monikers. The EOL will help to organize this tangled taxonomy.

But the EOL also is something more. Its pages will tell the saga of 4 billion years of evolution. Perhaps future generations will view this electronic encyclopedia as a sacred text, the chronicle of our frayed and fragile biosphere.

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Adapted from Indian Camp Ranch's website.

