

A Wildlife Biologist

on the Louisiana Coast

by Erik Johnson
as told to Carollyne Hutter

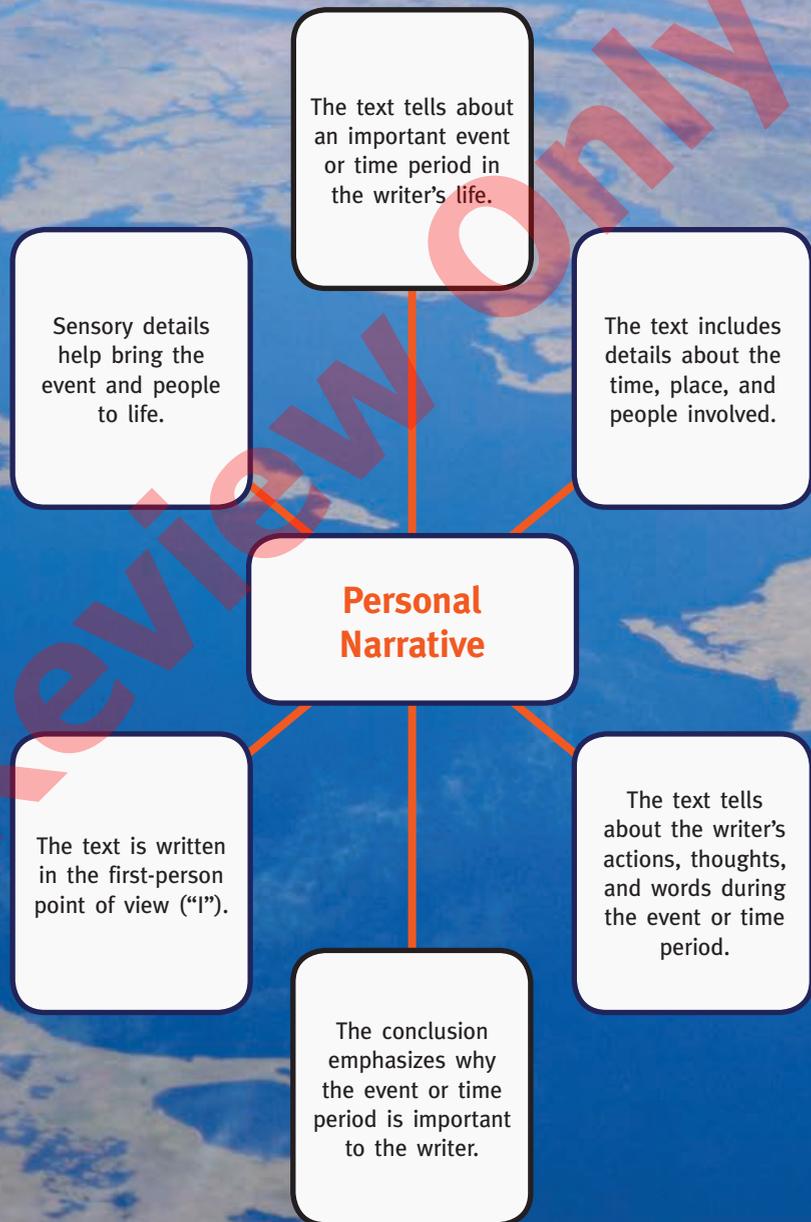


**What do wildlife
biologists do to
protect land and
animals?**

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Personal Narrative

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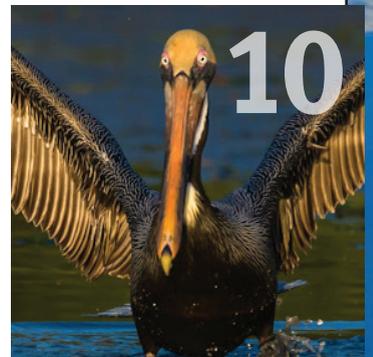
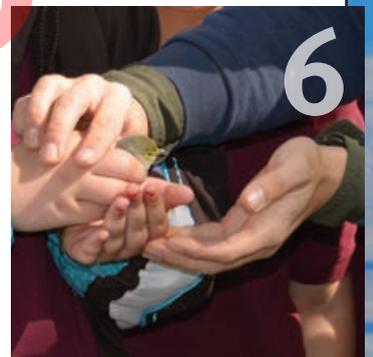
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Many Birds



▲ Here I am at work in the wetlands of Louisiana.

The Louisiana **landscape** includes long stretches of beach along the Gulf Coast. Farther inland are regions of abundant forest and farmland.

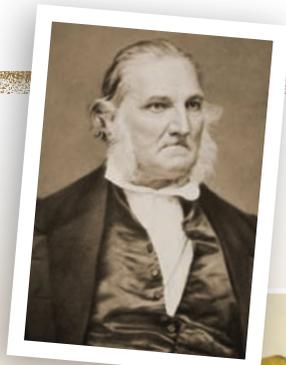
The Mississippi River Delta and coastal Louisiana support millions of birds. I think we can tell if our lands are healthy from studying birds. Audubon believes that locations where birds are healthy are places where people will thrive as well. In my experience in Louisiana, this has proven true.

I am a wildlife **biologist** in the beautiful state of Louisiana in the United States. A wildlife biologist is a scientist who studies animals. I work with Audubon Louisiana, the state office of the National Audubon Society, an organization that has existed since 1896. Audubon works around the United States and the world to **conserve** birds and other wildlife.

John James Audubon

(1785–1851)

John James Audubon was a nature lover and artist. His interest in drawing birds began as a child in France. When he was eighteen, he moved to the United States and studied the birds there. He became more and more interested in drawing and describing all kinds of birds. Later, he published books of his work. The National Audubon Society is named in his honor.



Audubon painted many birds, including the Louisiana state bird, the brown pelican. ▼



▼ tri-color Louisiana heron



▲ The Mississippi River Delta is made up of millions of acres on the southeastern Louisiana coast.

My work is not only about saving birds. It's also about helping to preserve and protect other plant and animal life throughout the state of Louisiana.

This is an excellent career for someone who loves wildlife and being outdoors. I am able to take an active part in making sure we save and protect natural areas. I'm happy to be a part of the Audubon team. I love my work!

Early Life

Since I was a child, I have loved being outside. I grew up in the United States in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My favorite time of the year was summer, when my family went to the White Mountains in New Hampshire. We had a house on a pond there in the middle of a forest. Surrounded by nature, we saw all kinds of wildlife—even moose!



▲ I'm very young in the photo at left. I'm with my mom at the right.

My mother and aunt were avid bird-watchers. They introduced me to birds and nature. My parents gave me my first pair of binoculars at age eleven. I often took my binoculars outside and studied as many birds as I could find. I kept a list of the ones I saw. Usually, I found common birds, such as blue jays and black-capped chickadees.



blue jay



black-capped chickadee

Over time, I became more interested in birds and better at finding them. By the time I was in high school, I had developed a strong interest in birds, nature, and conservation.

In college, I studied the natural sciences, including plants and conservation. After college, I moved to Boston and got a job monitoring **endangered** bird **species** nesting on the beaches of the state of Massachusetts. The organization I worked for managed wildlife **reserves**.

My focus was saving the piping plover, a bird on the endangered species list. Every day I would go out and **survey** four miles of beach. I would set up protection efforts to make sure the nests were safe. I would explain to **visitors** why the protections were there. Before long I knew I **had** to find a way to make **this** my life's work.

This satisfying work changed everything! From this experience, I **knew** I wanted to devote my **life** to saving birds and protecting the lands where they live.



◀ in my younger days, setting up equipment to view birds



piping plover and chick

Life in Louisiana



Now, I work in Louisiana as the Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Louisiana. I manage a team of biologists and other scientists. Together we survey the birds, noting which birds we see and how many of them there are. We perform scientific research and studies. We work to protect the birds and to educate the public. We write plans on how to save and protect wildlife areas.

Then we work with local and state government leaders to write laws and develop policies to preserve nature.

My favorite part of the job is working at the beach with the birds. There are many birds that **migrate**, or move from one place to another in seasonal patterns. In winter, they live farther south in Latin America, and in summer, they return to North America.

▼ I enjoy teaching children about my work preserving wildlife.





black skimmer

clapper rail

reddish egret

▲ The Mississippi River empties into the Delta on the coast of Louisiana.

For migrating birds, my state provides a link between North American nesting grounds and wintering areas in Latin America. Birds that **flock**, such as ducks and geese, also spend their winters along the Louisiana coast.

Many specialized birds like clapper rails, reddish egrets, and black skimmers live year-round near water in coastal wetlands, beaches, and islands. Specialized birds may have beaks that help

them eat different kinds of food or long legs that help them stand in deeper water.

Louisiana has long **barrier islands**. These strips of land protect the mainland from ocean waves and storms. In between the barrier islands and the mainland are calm waters where fish, shrimp, crab, and oysters reproduce and raise their young. These fish-filled waters provide birds with ample food resources.

Birds in Danger

Much of my work is about protecting and saving nesting birds, including the Wilson's plover, least tern, and common nighthawk. These birds lay their eggs on the sand of beaches and rely on **camouflage** to protect their chicks from **predators**. Coyotes and other animals often try to eat the eggs.

To protect the birds, we must also identify and protect Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Audubon is part of an international network that helps protect IBAs like Louisiana's barrier islands. Saving these islands is critically important for both the people of the state and the wildlife that lives there.



▲ **Least tern eggs and flightless chicks depend on camouflage to hide from predators for about six to seven weeks.**

“Louisiana is in a race against time,” Louisiana governor John Bel Edwards said. “If we don't restore these barrier islands, then our future is in peril. That land is the first line of defense. What we cannot have is a situation where the Gulf of Mexico is lapping at [overflowing] the **levees** of New Orleans.”

So besides protecting the birds, we at Audubon Louisiana are working with many organizations and the state government to protect and save the important barrier islands.