

# Wild Animals I Have Known Short Guide

## Wild Animals I Have Known by Ernest Thompson Seton

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## Overview

Most of Ernest Thompson Seton's books offer readers a unique perspective on the nature and habits of wild animals. *Wild Animals I Have Known* gives detailed descriptions of the lives of several animals by a skilled writer who has an artist's eye for precise detail. As a scrupulously scientific writer, Seton depicts the animals and their surroundings with precision; as a romantic naturalist, he focuses on the drama and beauty of nature. Informative, lively, and moving, *Wild Animals I Have Known* enables readers to learn about life in the wilderness of New Mexico and Canada.

## About the Author

Born Ernest Thompson in South Shields, County Durham, England, on August 14, 1860, the author of *Wild Animals I Have Known* adapted the ancestral family name of Seton in 1901.

After backing Prince Charles in the unsuccessful Stuart Rebellion of 1745, Seton's Scottish ancestors had fled south to England, where they became shipbuilders and shipowners. When the author's father, Joseph Logan Thompson, lost his merchant ships, the family immigrated to Canada in 1866. They lived for a brief period in Lindsay, Ontario, a small town surrounded by forests and an ideal site for a boy who had become fascinated with wildlife.

They left the woods in 1870, but Seton had already learned many of the skills in woodcraft that would make him an acknowledged expert in the field. Seton discovered his artistic talent and began sketching birds and animals while a student in the Toronto public schools.

He studied at the Toronto School of Art from 1877 to 1879 and at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in London in 1881.

In 1882 he joined his brother Arthur, who was homesteading near Carberry, Manitoba, in south-central Canada.

There he found in abundance the animals that fascinated him: wolves, grizzlies, moose, and buffalo. Seton traveled to New York City in 1883 in an effort to sell his sketches to publishers and artists. Some of his first sales were to Sacket, Williams & Betzig, lithographic publishers. Seton also won a contract to produce one thousand sketches for Century Publications' new twelve-volume dictionary, and he began selling nature stories to such magazines as *St. Nicholas*.

After a return to Toronto in April 1884, Seton again joined his brother in Manitoba. He shuttled between Carberry, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Paris for several years, studying and producing art. His *Birds of Manitoba* was submitted to the Smithsonian Institution at the end of 1890, and in 1892 one of his paintings, "The Sleeping Wolf," was accepted and later hung for exhibition at the Grand Salon of Painting in Paris. Seton also continued to write, and in 1898 his first book of stories, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, was published. It quickly became a best seller and is now regarded as a classic.

In 1902 Seton founded the Woodcraft Indians, the first outdoor organization for boys. Later incorporated as the Woodcraft League, this organization was the forerunner of the Boy Scouts of America. Seton was chairman of the committee that established the Scouts in 1910, and he was soon installed as chief scout, a post he held for five years.

In 1911 he was largely responsible for the publication of the first Boy Scout's Handbook.

In 1896 Seton married Grace Gallatin, a strong advocate of women's rights and an author of popular travel books. They had one child, Ann, who in the 1940s and 1950s became a best-selling writer of historical romances. In 1930 the Setons were divorced and Seton moved to New Mexico. He married Julia Buttrees, his former secretary, in 1935.

Seton died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on October 23, 1946.

## Setting

This book has several settings. Northern New Mexico is the background for "Lobo: The King of Currumpaw" and also for "The Pacing Mustang." Most of the stories have western Canada, Ontario, or Manitoba as their locale. One story—"Wully: The Story of a Yaller Dog"—is set in northern England. This tale opens in the Cheviot district of Northumberland and moves south into Derbyshire. All the stories take place during the 1880s or 1890s.



## Social Sensitivity

Ernest Thompson Seton was an advocate of animal rights long before this issue became a popular cause. As Redruff struggles in the snare, for instance, Seton comments: Have the wild things no moral or legal rights? What right has man to inflict such long and fearful agony on a fellow-creature, simply because that creature does not speak his language?

Seton hunted and trapped for many years, and was highly skilled at both pursuits. He came to maturity when the buffalo herds of the West were being slaughtered and other game animals were becoming rare. After a moose hunt in 1884, he looked down on the animal's corpse and in remorse vowed "that so long as they are threatened with extermination, I will never again lift my rifle against any of America's big game."

Seton was very much a conservationist in 1898 when *Wild Animals I Have Known* was published, and the book reflects this attitude. One of Seton's lesser-known works is *Natural History of the Ten Commandments*, an argument that animals deserve protection in the Christian scheme of morality. Thus, although *Wild Animals I Have Known* depicts violence and death in the animal world, Seton handles his depictions of these incidents with grave sensitivity.

## Literary Qualities

Animal stories have delighted readers since antiquity, but the characters featured in them have often behaved like people dressed as animals. Aesop's fables, for example, were written to teach humans about morality, and the medieval "Beast Epic" satirized the society of the day. In Seton's stories, animal characters are allowed to be themselves. Seton believes animals lead lives as interesting as those led by most humans, and he carefully selects details to highlight the interesting features of his subjects' lives. For the most part, too, he avoids the cuteness that characterizes many animal tales, although he does use expressions such as "thimblefuls of down" and "sweet little 'peep, peep'" to describe baby animals. Seton conveys his love for all natural things in *Wild Animals I Have Known*, despite the fact that he sometimes casts animals in the role of villain for dramatic effect. The horned owl in "Silverspot," for example, is called a "murderer," and the foxes in "Redruff" are "vicious killers."

Seton sets his stories against the vividly described background of the American Southwest, the Canadian provinces, or the English countryside.

He uses local dialects and characters to make his narratives more colorful, and effectively captures the speech of subjects ranging from cowhands to crows.





## Themes and Characters

In all of his work Seton displays the poetic ability to imagine himself as another, non-human creature. In his prefatory "Notes to the Reader" in *Wild Animals I Have Known*, he explains, "Man has nothing that animals have not at least a vestige of, the animals have nothing that man does not in some degree share."

"Lobo: The King of Currumpaw," the first story in the book, is Seton's most famous animal biography. Lobo, a wolf, is a notorious predator that for five years has claimed the lives of cows and sheep almost nightly. The ranchers of northern New Mexico hire Seton to do what all other hunters have failed to do: trap and kill the beast. Lobo eludes all traps and baits, until Seton takes advantage of a force stronger than the wolf's cunning: his love of his mate.

Seton kills Blanca, the white wolf, and using one of her paws, spreads her scent over an area of carefully laid traps.

In the past Lobo has quickly detected such traps and sprung them. This time, following his mate's scent, he walks into them and is captured. As Seton depicts him, Lobo is a king who does not cease being royal, even in captivity. After one angry howl when he sees his enemies approaching the spot where he lies helpless, Lobo never speaks again.

Chained in a field where it is hoped that he may lure others in his pack to their destruction, he does not call for their help. Next morning he has died. He refuses to live as a prisoner, and wills his own death. He has been a relentless destroyer, and has died heroically.

Silverspot, the hero of the second story, is the wisest member of a flock of crows that rests on Frank's Castle, a mountain near Toronto. This old chief teaches young crows the art of survival in a dangerous world. Silverspot, however, meets a tragic end in a confrontation with the crows' main enemy, the great homed owl. In telling Silverspot's story, Seton provides a brief dictionary of the sounds crows make when they communicate with one another.

Wild animal mothers are a favorite subject in Seton's stories. "Raggylug: The Story of a Cottontail Rabbit," describes the heroism of Molly Raggylug's mother, who lures the fox away from her concealed little ones. In *The Springfield Fox*, "Vix, a mother fox, carefully trains her cubs for their future lives as predators. When they are killed by a hunter, her grief is as intense as that of any human mother. "Redruff: The Story of the Don Valley Partridge" depicts a mother partridge and her brood struggling to survive against predators both animal and human.

Redruff's mother outwits and outmaneuvers a fox to defend her chicks.



As he does in several other stories, Seton shows in "Redruff" how the animals communicate with one another.

Dogs are the subjects of two of Seton's stories. The first of these illustrates the unbreakable bond between a dog and his master. Seton raises Bingo himself, but the author's travels force him to find a new home for his pet. Years later, however, Bingo comes to Seton's rescue when Seton is caught in a trap and surrounded by wolves. When Bingo eats poisoned meat, he drags himself back to Seton's cabin, seeking help from his former master. Wully, the Yaller Dog, is also loyal to his owner, but begins slipping out nights to kill sheep on neighboring farms. Dorley, his master, has kill him after Wully is caught with the blood of his victims on his coat.

Next to Lobo, Seton's favorite character is the beautiful black horse in "The Pacing Mustang." This mustang exemplifies the determination of a wild creature to remain free; he paces like a racehorse rather than gallops, and for years all attempts to capture him fail.

Like Lobo, he lives in northern New Mexico in the 1890s. Caught by an old wrangler called Turkeytrack, he is roped, branded, and herded to a corral when, in a final burst of strength, he escapes and leaps over a cliff, landing "a lifeless wreck—but free."

Seton maintains that animals can on occasion display some of the qualities most prized in humans : loyalty, courage, and resourcefulness. He wants his readers to recognize something of themselves in these wild creatures. His book makes the case that animals should be free to live their lives in their natural habitats without human interference.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Seton became famous for his wolf stories. Why do you think he was so fascinated with these animals? Do you find "Lobo: The King of Currumpaw" a convincing portrait of a great predator?
2. Is Seton a better writer when he describes small animals or when he describes larger ones? Is it more difficult to identify with rabbits than with wolves?
3. Does Seton prove his point when he stresses the intelligence of crows? What makes Silverspot a leader of his flock?
4. Are the people who appear in Seton's stories as well drawn as his animals?
5. Both Lobo and the Pacing Mustang are featured in stories with the old West as a background. Are these typical western stories?
6. Seton is the narrator in all of these stories and is a character in some of them. How does he present himself?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Seton's *Wild Animals I Have Known* to Sterling North's *Rascal: A Memoir of a Better Era*. How does the narrative presence differ in each? Which offers a more realistic depiction of nature?
2. Seton the artist may not be as well known as he deserves to be. Examine his paintings and his illustrations. Does his art reflect the same themes found in his writing?
3. Research the critical response to Seton's animal stories and write your own book review of *Wild Animals I Have Known*.
4. Read *Never Cry Wolf* by Farley Mowat and compare the depiction of the wolf family in that book to Seton's depiction of Lobo.
5. Write a short story about an animal you have known.

## For Further Reference

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