The Roosevelt Wild Life Station:

REVITALIZING A FORGOTTEN CONSERVATION LEGACY

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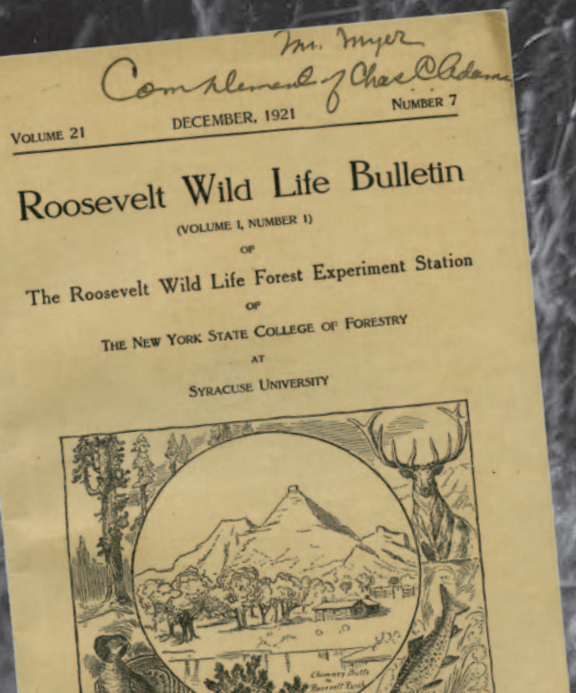
Among the galaxy of great men, Theodore Roosevelt stands particularly tall. When asked about his top accomplishments as president of the United States, Roosevelt listed his efforts in conservation among the top four. Gifford Pinchot wrote that "No other president has ever been, and doubtless no other ever will be, as practically familiar both with the forest and the range as was President Roosevelt." Pinchot was indeed prescient: the impact of no other U.S. president's conservation agenda approaches that of Roosevelt's.

Roosevelt's first love was the natural world, and, staying true to that love, he never swayed from supporting "the proper or highest use of nature's bounty for the best welfare of the people." The conservation ethic Roosevelt embodied was unmistakably and deeply rooted in the natural riches of New York state. Born in New York City, Roosevelt's penchant as a naturalist and conservationist was nurtured by his father through a shared love of collecting and preserving specimens and observing animals in the 'natural classroom' of the Adirondack Mountains. His heart remained in New York even after leaving for Harvard College. In fact, Roosevelt's first published paper was on the summer birds of the Adirondacks in Franklin County, New York, which he wrote with Henry Minot while an undergraduate at Harvard. The work was originally published as a pamphlet in 1877 and later reprinted in *Roosevelt Wild Life Bulletin in* 1923. After Roosevelt's ambitions turned political, he served first in the New York State Assembly and later as Governor of New York state before ascending to the 'Hill' where he became widely lauded as the "conservation president." Roosevelt is rightfully honored in many venues nationwide as well as in New York state, including at the American Museum of Natural History. Less well-known is that his conservation legacy remains celebrated in upstate New York today in the form of the Roosevelt Wild Life Station (RWLS).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OF

The Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station

OF

THE NEW YORK STATE COLLEGE OF FORESTRY

AT

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

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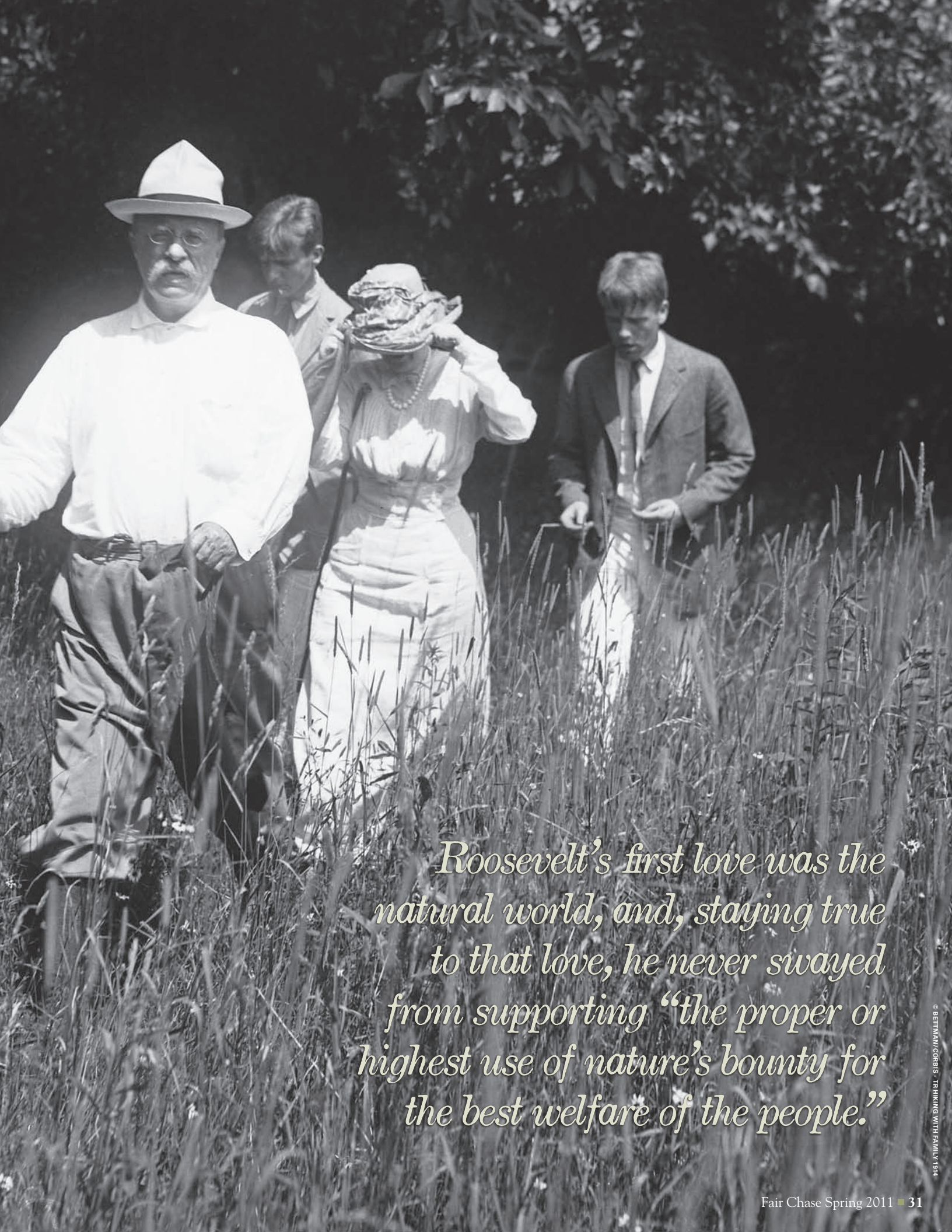

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The Roosevelt Wild Life Station

TOP: A field party of the Roosevelt Wild Life Station at camp on Mount Marcy, working in cooperation with other scientists. ABOVE: The New York State College of Forestry, Syracuse, containing the offices and laboratories of the Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station.

Images from the *Roosevelt Wild Life Bulletin*, Volume 21, Number 7, December 1921

The RWLS was established as a memorial in 1919 at what then was known as the College of Forestry at Syracuse—predecessor to today's State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF). A proposal for the Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station and a related Wild Life Collection was initiated in 1916 and brought to Theodore Roosevelt. He personally approved of the plans and advocated support for the station from the Boone and Crockett Club, stating afterward, "… it was a real pleasure to bring the matter before the Club and get Dr. Morris to take it up." Dr. Morris, in turn, indicated that "The Club took much interest in the matter… in favor of which Mr. Roosevelt spoke very strongly at the meeting." A more formal proposal was solicited by and presented to the Boone and Crockett Club by Professor Charles C. Adams (first director of the RWLS) in January 1917. In his proposal, Professor Adams outlined the need for the station, stemming from a fundamental lack of inquiry into "the activities of the living animal and its relation to the real world in which it lives;" the concept of wildlife and game as a forest "resource" alongside wood and other forest "products," worthy of management—a concept that was only just then emerging; and a lack of focus among larger universities on the life history needs of game animals. Adams' proposal detailed field camps with support for naturalists to study big game and fur-bearing species throughout North America, and urged the establishment of fellowships and scholarships to support a "rising generation of trained men" capable of carrying out scientific inquiry into the needs of wild life [sic].

The special committee appointed to consider the proposal issued a resolution dated April 25, 1917 stating, "… this committee heartily approves this plan and believes the results of such an investigation would be of vast scientific interest and probably of great economic value," signed by Lewis R. Morris and Kermit Roosevelt.

The original concept of the RWLS was supported by both Theodore Roosevelt and the Boone and Crockett Club. However, plans for the station were set aside at the onset of World War I in 1917 and not picked up again until the end of the war. After Roosevelt's death in 1919, the station became a memorial project adopted by both the New York state legislature and the Roosevelt family. Today the station has the unique distinction of being the only memorial bearing Theodore Roosevelt's name that was adapted from plans originally approved by Roosevelt while he was alive.

Roosevelt's own words inspired the mission of the station and its associated wildlife collection: "From now on, it is essential to recognize that the best scientific men must largely work in the great out-of-doors laboratory of nature. It is only such outdoors work which will give us the chance to interpret aright the laboratory observations … There must be ample research in the laboratory in order … to present those problems, not to speak of solving them, and there can be no laboratory study without the accumulation of masses of dry facts and specimens." With

guidance from the Honorary Advisory Board, which included members of the Roosevelt family, George Bird Grinnell, Gifford Pinchot, Viscount Bryce, Sir Harry H. Johnston, and other notables, Professor Adams translated Roosevelt's vision into a charge to "investigate the habits, life histories, methods of propagation and management of fish, birds, game, food and fur-bearing animals … primarily devoted to increasing our knowledge of forest wild life, by both outdoor and laboratory study which will develop new or improved methods of increasing the forest production of fish, fur and game animals and show their application to general forest management."

The law establishing the station read: "To establish and conduct an experimental station to be known as 'Roosevelt Wild Life Forest Experiment Station' in which there shall be maintained records of the results of the experiments and investigations made and research work accomplished; also a library of works, publications, papers and data having to do with wild life together with means for practical illustration and demonstration, which library shall, at all reasonable hours, be open to the public." During its first 30 years of existence, the RWLS supported research on birds, fish, game, fur-bearing animals, and forest management conducted throughout the U.S., with a particular focus on the Adirondack Mountains and Oneida Lake in New York state. The station produced regular research publications through the *Roosevelt Wild Life Bulletin* (1921-1950) and the *Roosevelt Wild Life Annals* (1926-1936), among which are the first published records of beavers inhabiting Yellowstone National Park and other seminal studies. The Franklin Moon library at SUNY ESF maintains these publications and other records including photographs and 10,000-plus negatives documenting these early research studies. The Roosevelt Wild Life Collection has grown to thousands of vertebrate specimens, providing invaluable resources for students studying species diversity and distribution. The collection is housed today in the Department of Environmental and Forest Biology and has a full-time curator who maintains both teaching and research specimens and also teaches a course on museum specimen preparation. Specimens are also prominently displayed through the college.

When the State University of New York system was created in 1948 and the College of Forestry was shunted under the SUNY umbrella, the line of state funding dedicated for the station and collection was terminated, which ended publishing of the *Roosevelt Wild Life Bulletin* and *Annals* and greatly reduced its research capacity. The station and collection have endured because of the dedicated faculty and staff committed to preserving Roosevelt's heritage. Intermittent research funding, modest private investment, and whatever internal support and elbow grease could be mustered kept the legacy alive—although at a diminished capacity from what was originally envisioned. But the college is entering an exciting period of growth that accompanies a new energy focused on the Roosevelt legacy. A new Gateway Building scheduled for completion this year will serve as ESF's "public face" and will showcase the collection. A new academic research building, slated for completion in 2014, will house the wildlife science and conservation biology program, expanding research capacities with state-of-the-art facilities and networking spaces. And within the past five years, four new fish and wildlife faculty have been hired despite severe programmatic cutbacks due to the austere conditions of the New York state economy. With this growth comes a remarkable opportunity to see Roosevelt's and Adams' vision for the station continue to grow into the 21st Century.

A modern vision for the Roosevelt Wild Life Station

Nearly 100 years after the founding of the RWLS, Roosevelt's persona and conservation ethic remain models—as appropriate

as ever—for students and wildlife professionals. Students enrolling in university wildlife programs today, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, increasingly have little experience or background with field work, natural history of organisms, wildlife-habitat relationships, and consumptive or non-consumptive uses of wildlife. Meanwhile, wildlife professionals yearn for opportunities to stay up to speed with the rapidly developing scientific information and evolving methods. However, we are spending less time outdoors, which erodes a direct connection to wildlife and its habitat that ultimately empowers us to advocate for it.

University programs must evolve to deliver to society more of the "smart, savvy, and field worthy" professionals that Roosevelt so exemplified. This is particularly true in the northeastern United States with its urbanizing landscapes and attendant issues such as trapping bans, severe land ownership fragmentation, wildlife-homeowner conflicts, contaminants, hunting access on private lands, and strongly divergent approaches to valuing wildlife. Add to these issues rapidly expanding populations of large mammals such as black bears and moose—species that engage broad public attention and engender strongly polarized public stances—especially as fields grow fallow and forests return. Not to mention the ever-dwindling support to state agencies that must scale back their programs to stay operational. Who among us is capable of operating effectively in this rapidly changing wildlife conservation context? Assuring that science remains the backbone of management action and that competent professionals will indeed remain to extend Roosevelt's conservation legacy is the spirit driving the reinvigoration of the RWLS at SUNY ESF.

By way of background, SUNY ESF is a Carnegie doctoral research university with highly focused research and service programs. Its 99-year history is rich with research and education related to understanding ecosystems and applying that understanding to managing land, resources, and the natural environment. The central campus is small—hosting some 2,000 undergraduates, 500 graduate students, and 120 faculty—but benefits greatly from large university resources via Syracuse University, which is literally "across the street." Somewhat surprisingly, ESF is also reputedly the largest college campus on Earth, with nearly 25,000 acres of properties that serve multiple functions including long-term research projects and training in field courses. ESF also hosts what is presently the largest combined wildlife science and conservation biology program in the northeastern United States. ESF is a member of the National Association of University Fisheries and Wildlife Programs and, importantly, its wildlife curriculum is rooted in the professional certification program of The Wildlife Society and anchored by the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

Together, wildlife science and conservation biology are the largest and fastest growing academic foci of the institution, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels as well as in terms of extramural research support. ESF has clung strongly to its roots in field biology and on-the-ground conservation and management. As such, ESF offers a host of field-biology courses that are not often available elsewhere, including a three-week undergraduate "immersion" course at its Cranberry Lake Biological Station in the Adirondack Park. It is particularly notable that SUNY ESF draws students from throughout the United States and internationally, but especially from New York state, whose 20 million residents (13 million in and near New York City) comprise concentrated urban areas as well as one of the largest rural populations of any state in the nation, scattered throughout small villages in the agriculture-dominated regions of central and western New York and the forestry-dominated regions of northern New York. Moreover, upstate New York is home to the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, a center of traditional ecological knowledge, whose leadership in contemporary environmental stewardship is internationally recognized. There are very few educational institutions in the United States situated so close to both urban centers and major wilderness areas that can draw from such cultural and intellectual diversity.

More than ever, today's students need direct experiences with wildlife, habitat, and the stakeholder community to enable them to gain an appreciation for the multi-faceted demands of their chosen profession, provide them with the skills required to tackle real-world applications, and prepare them for the lifelong and self-directed learning they will need to engage in as professionals. In order for scientists to work closely with managers to better understand their problems and help identify efficient solutions, they need access to resources to stimulate and sustain scientifically-based management. Conservation professionals need the opportunity to augment their past training with skills in collaboration, transparency in decision-making, emerging technologies, and systems-based approaches that are so critical to management of wildlife today. The entire wildlife profession must be involved in preparing wildlife professionals for the complex, interdisciplinary, and ecosystem-based jobs in wildlife conservation today, and university programs must adapt to the evolving needs of the profession.

A modern vision for the RWLS to meet these challenges requires a three-pronged approach. First, expand educational opportunities for emerging and continuing professionals by growing, upgrading, and better securing the Roosevelt Wild Life Collection, developing an "immersion experience" in wildlife conservation and management to embed a large cadre of students in urban, suburban, and wilderness wildlife conservation issues, and delivering technical workshops for graduate students and professionals on a range of topics through both in-house and distance-learning modules. Second, facilitate discovery and excellence in wildlife science by establishing an endowed research professorship to provide an annual funding stream for targeted research needs in wildlife conservation, creating a small grants program for "high-risk/high-reward" inquiry into conservation issues that carry forth Roosevelt's example of geographical exploration combined with scientific inquiry, and initiating a "Roosevelt Wild Life Stewardship Award" to recognize individuals whose actions linking science to management action are exemplary. Third, seek to more broadly engage the public in conservation by producing video, radio, and web-based resources on species' natural histories, research activities, and conservation/management actions focusing on regional fauna—making the RWLS the go-to source for conservation information in the northeastern United States.

Through a concerted effort on the part of the wildlife conservation community, these visions for a revitalized RWLS will bear fruit and, in so doing, ensure that this unique institution in upstate New York memorializing Roosevelt's magnificent contributions to wildlife conservation will flourish yet again. ■

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