

James Bee: Naturalist

Peaks, rivers and fields beckon local naturalist

By RON JENSEN
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James Bee, a retired Kansas University professor of biological sciences and former assistant curator of mammals at KU's Museum of Natural History, says he doesn't like to talk about himself. He is more comfortable discussing his collection of Indian artifacts or his system for filing the many old animal bones he finds along the Kansas River or showing off his mineral display.

While these discussions are impressive and informative, it is the stories of his own experiences that tell most of the tale.

"Practically all of my life I have been observing nature out of doors," he said, admitting to an "indefatigable dedication" to nature.

"I've had a chance to investigate nature all the way from the Arctic to the tropics of Guatemala," he said in a recent interview. "So I have a pretty good basis of appraising any situation."

IN FACT, he has been to Libya, Egypt, Morocco, India, El Salvador, the Virgin Islands (where he used a yacht owned by the Rockefeller family to survey what is now the St. John National Park), China, Burma and on and on.

He has visited all of the provinces in Canada, from Labrador to British Columbia, all of the states, except Hawaii, and has done considerable work in Utah and Mexico.

In 1951 and 1952, Bee spent his summers exploring uncharted regions of northern Alaska.

One of the fringe benefits of being the first person in an area is being able to name unnamed peaks and mountains. A range of mountains in that isolated part of the globe is now called Mary Range, after Bee's daughter. He has named a glacier for his son.

"I have a mountain named for my wife," he said.

While exploring the area with a fellow professor, he encountered grizzly bears receiving their first glimpse of white men.

"They were very curious. They were unafraid. You could walk up to them," he recalled.

AT THE base of one peak he wanted to climb, Bee casually walked through an area where nine of the large beasts were going about the business of searching for prairie dogs and other animals. They paid Bee little attention.

"The had no interest except for being a little curious," he said. "It was such a privilege to observe this stuff uninterrupted and uninterfered with by man."

The same thing was true of the wolves, he said, who would come within 25-feet of the men while they explored, but never bothered them.

Bee also relates a close call he had while exploring a cave in Guatemala.

"I remember once I went into a bat cave. I took one of the local guides with me," he said. "It was supposed to be the longest cave in the world."

After Bee and the guide had traveled several hundred yards into the cave, they entered a large room that had six exits. Bee had forethought enough to sprinkle some oatmeal from his bag at the opening at which they entered the room.

SURE ENOUGH, when the two men returned to the room from their explorations, Bee's guide guessed wrong when trying to find the correct path out of the cave. The oatmeal marker saved them.

"If we had taken the wrong route, we'd have still been there," he said.

That the former professor's life has been a dedication to nature isn't surprising. He points to his early days as a boy in Provo, Utah, when asked how his interest began.

Within walking distance of his back door were snow-capped mountains beckoning to a young boy to come explore them. Bee happily obliged and his interest was nurtured.

One practice he began as a 14-year-old and continues to this day is his daily journals recounting his observations while going "one-on-one" with nature.

"These are all well-documented and organized observations," he said.

The journals are bound in black covers and written in Bee's hand with an ink that will not fade with the years. They include meticulous detailed accounts, including such information as the type of shrubbery, the lay of the land, the types of birds seen in the trees, the temperature and weather conditions, animal tracks and "practically anything that occurs in nature."

He said his journals will be of great value in 50 years or 100 years and he wants the caretakers of these volumes to have every bit of information at their disposal.

"No one can predict how important some little statement might be," he said.

His journals include a detailed account of