

Ulysses S. Grant

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site
7400 Grant Road
St. Louis, MO 63123



Wildlife at White Haven



Introduction

The trees, plants, and animals of today's White Haven are much different from what Julia Dent and her family found here. When the Dents moved out to the farm on the Gravois, this was a wild country and St. Louis was a young frontier town. In the early 19th century, black bear, American Bison, gray wolves, mountain lion, beaver, river otter, and even elk still roamed the Missouri and Mississippi River valleys. Julia and her family may have been here in time to see some of these creatures on their farm.

Observer of Nature

Julia Dent observed and enjoyed nature, spending much time outdoors. This appreciation was developed early in her life, and she credited her good health to all of the time spent outdoors. As a young girl playing with four older brothers, Julia became an agile tree climber, and the children collected bird's nests. She was also an angler: "We would wander by the brookside, catch minnows with pin-hooks"; and a bird watcher: "In the trees above were small houses for the swallows and martins. . ." Julia may have even seen the now extinct Carolina Parakeet or Passenger Pigeon. In her memoirs, Julia boasted of the flower gardens at White Haven saying they were "the admiration of the county." The Dents had a gardener, "Old Sturdee," and Julia may have helped him tend the blooms.



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Courtship

Julia's nature loving personality is possibly what attracted Ulysses to her in the first place. After meeting they became fast friends, spending much time together outdoors. Julia was an expert equestrian, which immediately impressed Grant and they would take long rides together in the forests. "Julia had intimate knowledge of the countryside," Ishbel Ross wrote in *The General's Wife*:

She had ridden through its groves and over its gentle undulations for years. She knew where

the tall ferns and the trailing vines were thickest; where streams flashed like silver on their way to the Mississippi; where the rarest plants and most uncommon flowers might be found. It was fashionable at this time for girls to botanize, and Julia, in her practical way, took a magnifying glass and needles with her to analyze the flowers on their trips.

She would also pick flowers for Ulysses to carry back to his post and later, when he was stationed in Mexico, she enclosed flower blooms with her letters to him.

White Haven's Forests

It wasn't only plants and birds that Julia and Ulysses observed. Only 300 acres of the 850-acre farm were under cultivation. In describing White Haven in her memoirs, Julia wrote that the farm also included acres of woodland where a variety of wildlife could be found.

I must not fail to tell of the wealth of our forests in game...It was no unusual sight to see from two to five wild deer bounding across the fields near our house. Foxes were also numerous, to the consternation of the farmer's wives, and...the gentlemen all enjoyed the spirit of hunting them down.

Local Wildlife



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Julia described other local wildlife as well, including rabbits, squirrels, wild turkeys and geese, ducks, white and blue cranes, pheasants, grouse (called prairie chickens), quail, woodcock, plover, and wild doves. Ulysses, however, was not much of a hunter. In *Captain Sam Grant*, Lloyd Lewis writes of Grant's hunting experience while stationed at the Corpus Christi camp:

Only once did he go hunting with the other officers. His friend Calvin Benjamin, arriving with the Fourth Artillery, persuaded him to go after turkeys, but as Grant afterward told it, he himself had stood admiring the big birds as they flew from a pecan tree just over his head, without ever thinking to take his shotgun off his shoulder until they had flown away.

Return to White Haven

Perhaps their love of nature and the outdoors is what drew Julia and Ulysses Grant back to the farm on the Gravois throughout their lives. The clean, fresh air and breathtaking scenery of the wild Missouri countryside was the perfect

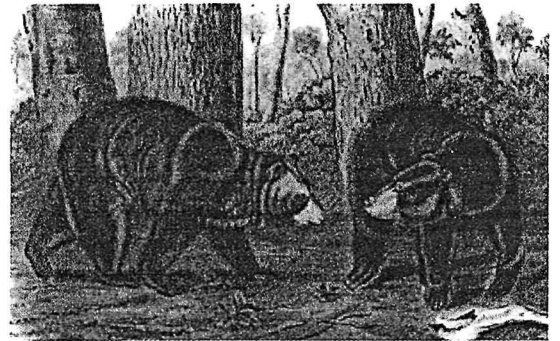
setting for Ulysses and Julia. Certainly they reminisced about the lazy afternoons spent on the banks of the Gravois Creek and long horseback rides in sunny wildflower-filled meadows.

Changing Scenery

The bison, bear, beaver, otter, elk, and wolf disappeared from this area by the mid-19th century, but many of the critters mentioned by Julia have learned to adapt to the changes the Gravois Creek valley has seen in the past two centuries. The necessities are still here today. Water flows from Prairie Spring Creek, located in the wooded area of the 9.5 acre park or, when the seasonal stream dries, there is still water in Gravois Creek.

The diversity of plants and animals in the area establishes a food chain that can support urban wildlife. Wild strawberries in the lawn used to be eaten by young Julia, but are now eaten by Cottontail rabbits. Cottontail rabbits are the primary prey of foxes. Animals need protection from the weather, but most importantly, from each

other. Their cover may include tree litter, tree canopies, shrubs, or grasses. Wild animals need living space. If all of the other necessities are there and they still have room to live and reproduce, they are able to survive even in urban areas.



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White Haven Today

Julia and Ulysses Grant spent their leisure time much the same way we do today. Grant's Trail, which runs along Grant Road and Gravois Creek just outside the park, is popular with bike riders and walkers that enjoy the scenery and sunshine. Of course the scenery has changed a bit, but the Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site is still a great place to watch birds and find other urban wildlife. The park provides habitat for a surprisingly wide diversity of plants and

animals, including over 50 species of trees, over 60 species of migratory and resident birds, and over 20 different species of mammals, including bats and coyotes. Detailed lists of these critters are available in the Visitor Center. The variety of wildlife living in this historic park makes it a great place to experience nature as well as history. White Haven continues to provide a peaceful retreat from the hustle and bustle of life for visitors today, just as it did for Julia and Ulysses Grant years ago.

Further Reading

Grant, Julia Dent. *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant (Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant)*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1988.

Lewis, Lloyd. *Captain Sam Grant*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1950.

Ross, Ishbel. *The General's Wife: The Life of Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant*. Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1959.
