CHAPTER III

NATURAL HISTORY

FOR several reasons the flora and fauna of Colombia are of remarkable variety and interest The whole country is tropical, the south lying on the equator itself. As in Peru there is a series of climatic zones, ranging from sea-level to far above the line of perpetual snow. The boundaries of the country connect its natural history not only with the abundant products of its South American neighbours, but also in the north-west with those of Central America and the West Indies.

FLORA.—From the point of view of vegetation, Colombia may be divided into three zones—hot, temperate, and cold.

The *hot zone* includes the coasts, eastern plains and river-valleys, up to a height of about 3,500 ft. The wooded country produces abundant timber trees, dye-woods, and medicinal plants, which are particularised in the chapter on *Forest Products*. Large bamboo thickets are found (*guaduas*); but the most characteristic feature is the palm trees. It is stated that twenty-five species are found in a district of ten square leagues in the territory of San Martin. In addition to their beauty many of these trees have valuable economic products; the coco-nut palm, the Tagua or Vegetable Ivory, the Royal Palm, and the Wax-palm may be instanced.

The cultivated crops include the cacao, sugar-cane,

tobacco, maize, indigo, cotton, and vanilla; and the fruits the banana, orange, lemon, pineapple, mango, papaya, alligator-pear, water-melon, strawberry, and sapodilla. The botanical collector finds numerous plants, such as orchids, of very considerable value for export to European and other horticulturists, *Cattleya* and *odontoglossum crispum* may be mentioned.

The *temperate zone* includes the land from about 3,500 to 8,500 ft. above sea-level Much of the flora above mentioned is also found in this zone, but a gradual difference is perceptible. The palms are replaced generally by tree-ferns, though the Wax-palm is found throughout the temperate zone. Dates and *Wamannias* appear, and also the Cinchona, from which Peruvian or Jesuits' bark is obtained. Orchids and other epiphytes, moss, and lichen grow on the tree trunks. Coffee is added to the list of crops The *Maguey* or American Agave is one of the most useful plants of this zone, the Indians using stem, leaves, fruit and fibre for different purposes; it furnishes food, drink, tow, and fibre for making sacks and ropes.

The cultivation of maize continues and that of wheat begins.

In the *cold zone* maize is still found, though smaller than in the temperate. Potatoes and all the vegetable and cereal crops of Europe grow abundantly, and the gardens produce all the usual flowers and fruits. The wax-palm is still found in the forests, together with walnuts and pines, but trees cease to grow at about 10,000 ft. The paramos however produce the flowering and resinous shrubs called "frailejons" (including

Espeletia and *Culcitium*) and grasses similar to the "ichu" grass of Peru. About 13,000 ft. all vegetation, but lichens and alpine plants ceases, and bare rock leads up to perpetual snow

FAUNA.—The Fauna may be classified as (*a*) imported, (*b*) indigenous. Many domesticated animals have been introduced from Europe, *e.g.*, the horse, mule, donkey, ox, etc. These have become acclimatised and adapted to their new environment. The indigenous animals represent practically all the *genera* characteristic of South America. The carnivora include the puma (cougar) and jaguar: two kinds of bears, a black variety in the lowlands, and one with white face in the eastern Cordillera; and the skunk, valuable for its fur, an animal which is now being fast exterminated. The Pachydermata are represented by the tapir and two other species. The tapir, inhabiting the paramos, is of shy, nocturnal habit; its hide is valued for making saddles and harness, and its flesh is palatable. The Edentata include two varieties of armadillo, and two ant-eaters (the ant-bear and the scaly ant-eater). The sloth is found in the forests; the skin is used for covering saddles. The opossum, the cave rat, and the *yapok* or water rat, with valuable fur, belong to the Marsupials. The Capybary is the largest of the rodents, 4 ft. long by 2 ft. high; it has no tail, and is largely aquatic in habit; the flesh is palatable. Ruminants are represented by the common deer, the Peruvian white deer, and other species; rodents by the Capybary, and many species of hare, rabbit, and rat; Quadrumana by both large and small monkeys, of which seventeen species

have been distinguished ; Cheiroptera by many varieties of bats and vampires.

Birds are found in great variety, from the Condor, the white and royal eagles, and other birds of prey to smaller varieties distinguished for their brilliant plumage or remarkable powers of song. Few of these, however, are peculiar to Colombia, and the species are so numerous that it would be impossible to catalogue them. One may mention the parrots, the toucan, the rosy heron of the lower Magdalena, the *cerraja* (a brilliant Trochilus or humming-bird, believed to be peculiar to the country), the *sauci*, with a song like that of the canary, and the *campanero*, whose bell-like note can be heard for a distance of half-a-mile.

Among the reptiles are the great Caymans, many species of tortoise, lizards, and snakes (the boa-constrictor, found especially in the south-east ; venomous snakes, such as the *talla*, particularly characteristic of the Chocó, but not found above 6,000 ft. above sea-level). Frogs and toads grow to a great size.

The sea and rivers are stocked with abundant supplies of fish food. Among characteristic products are the manatee or sea-cow, which grows to a length of 6 to 8 ft ; turtles on the Atlantic coast ; and pearls, found in Buenaventura Bay.

Finally, the tropical insect life is overwhelming—locusts, beetles, ants, butterflies and moths, mosquitoes, grasshoppers, lice, fleas, etc ; in many districts they amount to a veritable plague.