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HUNTING IN MINNESOTA IN THE SEVENTIES*

Under the heading "Observe Game Laws," a recent publication of the Ten Thousand Lakes Association contains the following:

Minnesota is particularly fortunate in its wild life resources, birds, animals and fishes, and with your cooperation we hope to maintain these attractions for posterity. . . . Our state and its wild life furnish many an interesting subject for the camera enthusiast, in stills and motion pictures and there is no closed season for the camera hunter.

It is interesting to note the difference in emphasis between this and the following paragraph from a pamphlet published by the state in 1869, written to attract tourists and prospective settlers to Minnesota:

In the spring and fall these lakes are all covered with ducks and other water fowl, affording rare amusement for the sportsman. . . . Sometimes wild pigeons, which often breed in our woods, may be shot in great numbers in June. . . . The first of August in Minnesota is what the first of September is in England, when the game law permits the shooting of prairie chickens, pheasants, grouse, &c., which abound everywhere.¹

In the recent publication the idea of conservation is uppermost. The tourist is invited to enjoy the wild life of Minnesota with a camera instead of a gun. The earlier

* A paper read on June 15, 1935, at the Willmar session of the thirteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

¹ Ten Thousand Lakes Greater Minnesota Association, *The Minnesota Book*, 9 (St. Paul, 1931); Girart Hewitt, *Minnesota: Its Advantages to Settlers*, 37 (St. Paul, 1869).

publication was in effect an invitation to the hunter to come and take what he could get. This difference in emphasis suggests the change that has taken place in wild life conditions in Minnesota in the last sixty-five years. The growth of population, the spread of settlement far and wide over the state, and the penetration of once remote wilds by railroads and highways have resulted in an appalling diminution of game. It is no longer necessary to invite the hunter to Minnesota; he comes in legion, without invitation, to join the hordes of Minnesota hunters who throng the highways leading from every town and village from the beginning to the close of the season.

Even as long ago as the eighteen seventies, there were those among the older generation of sportsmen who were lamenting the decline in the abundance of game. The buffalo, the elk, and the antelope, that once roamed the Minnesota prairies in herds, were gone; and some of the smaller animals and game birds were decreasing in number. Charles Hallock, a famous sportsman of the day and the editor of *Forest and Stream*, on a visit to Minnesota in 1877, wrote:

What a place for game was the "land of the Dakotahs" . . . twenty years ago. . . . On the grand old meadows around Fort Snelling, and within hail of the sentry, that old frontiersman, Gen. H. H. Sibley . . . shot woodcock by the bagfull. . . . Norman Kittson and H. M. Rice, his contemporaries . . . and a score of gentlemen a few years younger . . . could tell us of the ponderous strings of snipe and ducks they once brought in from the sloughs on the river bottoms, the ruffed grouse from the ridges, and the deer from the adjacent timber and open prairie. They would smoke up a twenty-five pound canister of "Vanity Fair" tobacco before their yarn was fully spun. It is somewhat different now in these days, when the locomotives of half a dozen railway lines rumble out continually, and all the country round about is daily walked over and beaten up by the resident gunners of a city that has become metropolitan.²

But to the sportsman of today, Minnesota in the seventies was a hunter's paradise. Most of the game species that we have now were far more abundant then, and there

² *Forest and Stream*, 9: 419, 456 (January 3, 17, 1878).

were some that have since become extinct, or very rare. Moose, now greatly diminished in number, were comparatively common in the denser forests of the north, and now and then one wandered as far south as the vicinity of the Twin Cities. Caribou were fairly numerous in the counties along the northern border in the seventies; now there are in Minnesota only between thirty and forty of these animals, living in the bogs north and east of Upper Red Lake.



SHOOTING SANDHILL CRANES

[From *Scribner's Monthly*, 18:828 (October, 1879).]

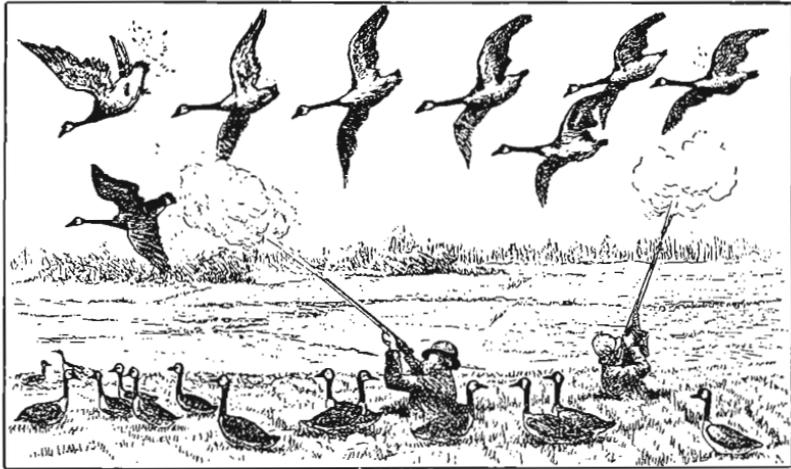
The white-tailed deer, which is still plentiful in the pine forests, and the black bear flourished in large numbers in the woods and groves in the southern part of the state. The smaller animals—beaver, red fox, mink, and others—were far more numerous and more widely distributed. Ducks, geese, and snipe were everywhere plentiful, and were slaughtered by the thousands both in the spring and the fall. The tragic story of the utter destruction of the passenger pigeon, which still came in the seventies in immense, compact flocks that darkened the skies, is well known. The

sandhill crane, which bred throughout the state, was hunted as a game bird and placed on sale in the markets of the larger cities. Plover, partridges, and prairie chickens were all abundant in the seventies, though the quail was probably not much more numerous than at present, and the ring-necked pheasant had not yet been introduced in the state. There are many references to pheasants and quail in Minnesota in the literature of the seventies, but this was due to the fact that many people called partridges "pheasants" or "quail."

In accounts written by travelers in the state, in the files of *Forest and Stream* and other periodicals, and in newspapers of the time, one may find ample testimony to the abundance of game in Minnesota sixty years ago. A visitor to the state in 1871 wrote: "In season whole cars full of game are shipped to other states; and the families that live here find it much cheaper to have pheasant, prairie chicken, wild duck, or venison on the table than to buy meat at the butcher shop." A member of a party that hunted in Otter Tail County in 1875 wrote that at Deer Creek the "prairie and stubble fields, seemingly as far as eye could reach, were literally alive with sharp-tailed grouse, hundreds and hundreds of them, some on the move, others standing perfectly still, watching us"; and at Parker's Prairie, a few miles farther south, grouse "were in myriads. . . . We shot grouse on the uplands, ducks and geese on the ponds, ruffed grouse in the thickets, more than we could use, more than we could give away." Another reported that in 1874 on the Red River flats ducks could "be found by the *million*. The shallow ponds, the streams, the larger lakes," he wrote, "are *alive* with them. It is no uncommon thing to see a thousand at once from the car window. . . . At times prairie chickens . . . are almost as abundant."³

³ Jacob Hodnefield, ed., "A Danish Visitor of the Seventies," *ante*, 10:312; *Forest and Stream*, 2:161; 4:145, 146 (April 23, 1874; April 15, 1875).

The Minnesota Valley was widely famed as a hunting country. A party hunting there in 1877 found the river bottom seven miles below Fort Ridgely "filled with partridges," and the neighboring prairies "alive with . . . chickens . . . running in immense flocks, some containing as many as two hundred birds." The same year a member of another party



SHOOTING WILD GEESE

[From *Scribner's Monthly*, 18:338 (October, 1879).]

reported that in the Big Woods along the line of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, now the Great Northern, deer and ruffed grouse were very plentiful, and that prairie chickens were found in large numbers between Darwin and Hermann. Duck and geese shooting, he wrote, was excellent in the neighborhood of Willmar.⁴

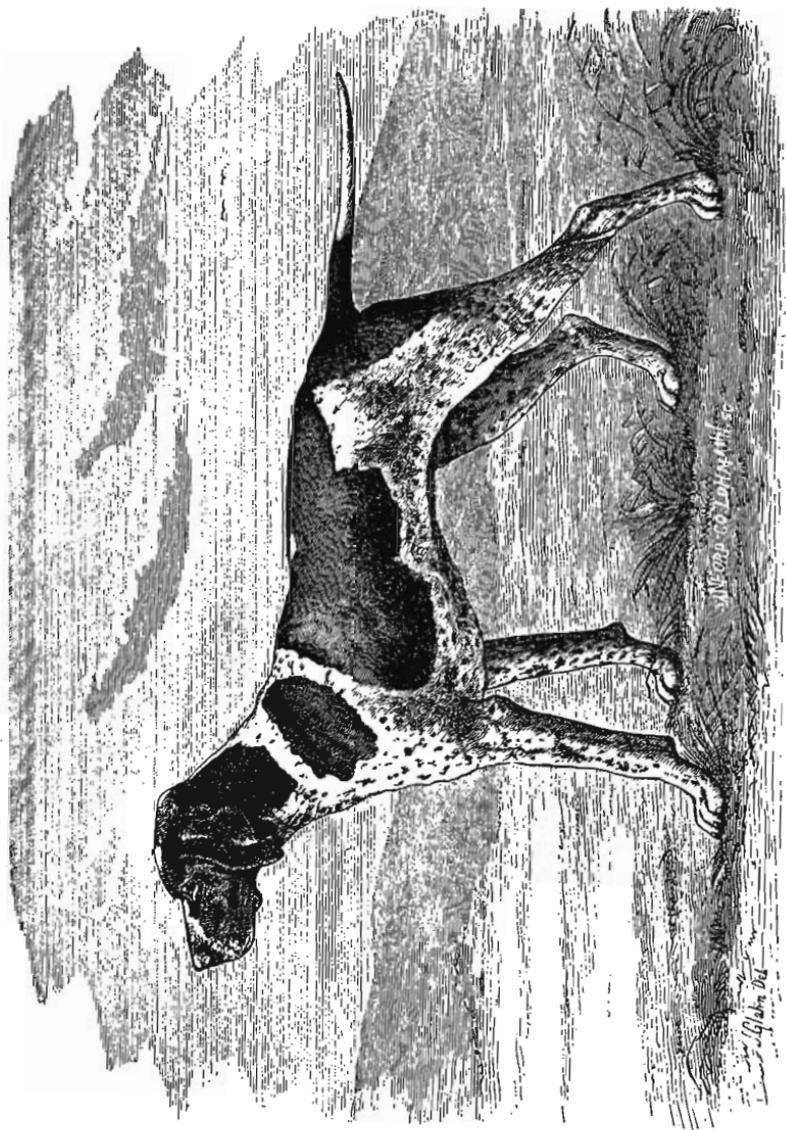
For several years in the seventies the state was afflicted with a plague of grasshoppers, and there was much discussion in the newspapers about the possible connection between their increase and the wholesale destruction of prairie chickens, for grasshoppers are a favorite food with these

⁴ *Forest and Stream*, 9:195, 468 (October 11, 1877; January 24, 1878).

birds. In 1877 Kandiyohi, among other counties, suffered severely from the ravages of the hoppers, which left the grain fields in such condition that the farmers made no attempt to gather a harvest. To these fields game birds resorted in immense numbers, and "fairly reveled in their bounty." News of this spread, of course, and the region was overrun with hunters.⁵

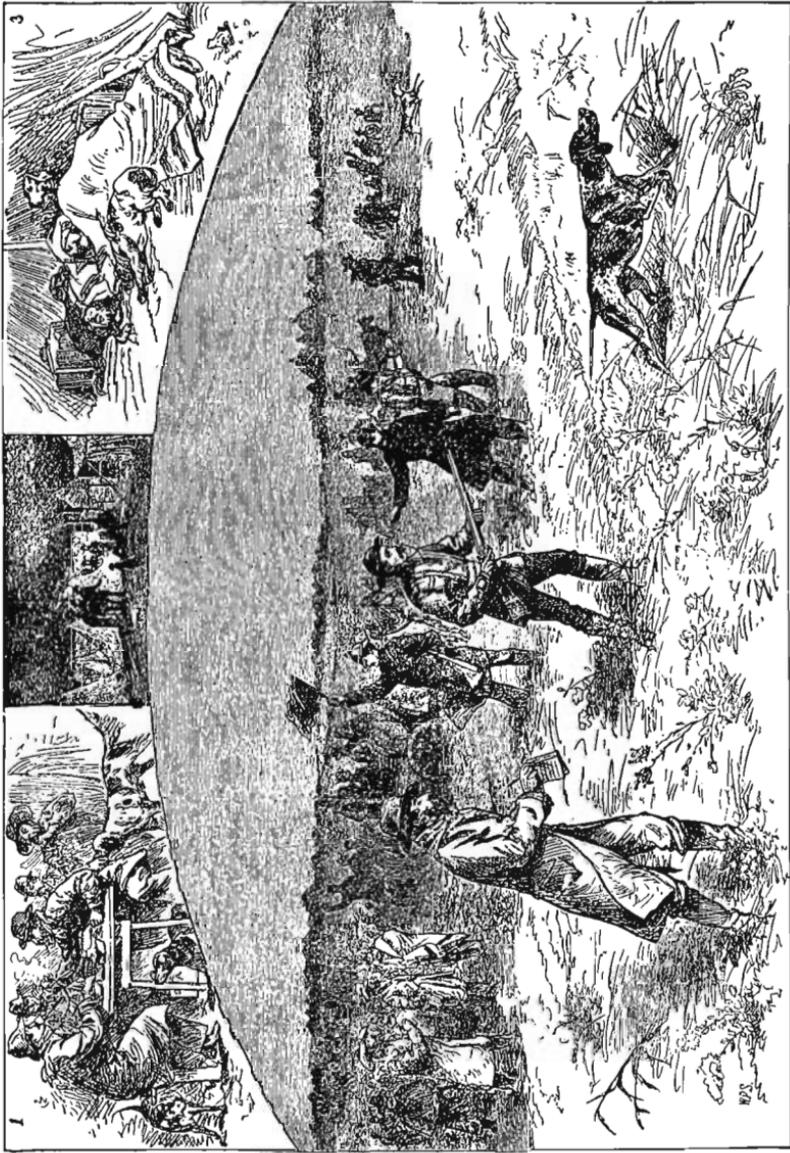
The usual bag taken by a hunter in the seventies in a single day was not overwhelmingly large, considering the abundance of game; but that is not surprising, for, instead of the rapid-firing, repeating shotgun of today, he used a slow, single-shot weapon—usually muzzle-loading. The toll of game taken during a year, however, was tremendous, for there was no limit to the number of birds or animals that might be shot, and the open season was long. Game laws were not stringent nor well enforced. Minnesota's first game law, which was passed in 1858, prohibited the shooting of deer and elk for seven months during the year, and of sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chickens, partridges, and quail for five months. In 1871 a general game law was passed which established closed seasons for woodcock, prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, quail, partridges, deer, and elk. It prohibited the killing of the upland game birds mentioned except by shooting them with a gun, and forbade the export of game for sale or traffic. From year to year during the decade the length of the open seasons varied to some extent, the tendency being toward shorter seasons. The legislature of 1875 provided for the first time a closed season for mink, muskrat, beaver, and otter. Aquatic fowl were not protected until 1877, when the season was closed from May to September; it was not until 1901 that the spring shooting of water fowl was prohibited. While the game laws of this period carried penalties for their infringe-

⁵ Charles A. Zimmerman, "Field Sports in Minnesota," in *Scribner's Monthly*, 18: 826 (October, 1879); *Forest and Stream*, 4: 132 (April 8, 1875).



S. B. DILLEY'S RANGER

[From *Forest and Stream*, 6:1 (February 10, 1876).]



MINNESOTA FIELD TRIALS, 1878

[From *Forest and Stream*, 11:183 (October 3, 1878).]

ment, they failed to provide adequate machinery for their enforcement. There were no game wardens, and prosecutions could be made only on complaint before a justice of the peace.⁶

Dogs were as important to the hunter of sixty years ago as they are to the sportsman of today. Accounts of hunting expeditions of the time are full of references to dogs and their work in the field. A contributor to *Forest and Stream* wrote that the formation of a sportmen's club at Brainerd had resulted in more attention to the raising of good dogs. "Curs," he said, "are at a discount. Good dogs cost no more to keep, and . . . gentlemen are glad to see well bred dogs multiplied." The kennels of S. B. Dilley of Lake City, who bred pointers, were noted throughout the country. Dilley's pointer Royal Fan won first prize in her class in the New York bench show of 1877; and his dog Ranger was a champion. There was a bench show for dogs at the state fair in 1878, which, with the field trials held at Sauk Center the following week, attracted much attention among sportsmen throughout the country. The judges' decisions at the field trials were the subject of many columns of controversy in the *American Field* and in *Forest and Stream*; but the most interesting aspect of the event was the indifferent, not to say disdainful, attitude of Minnesota hunters toward the whole affair. The following comment appeared in *Forest and Stream*:⁷

The old hunters of Minnesota . . . are rather inclined to look upon these field trials as popinjay affairs, which may do very well for the East, but are of no account on these "perairies," and so, after the first half day satisfied their curiosity, they began to branch off in all directions with their "out-fits," (and some of them are certainly most completely "heeled,") and bring back wagon loads of ducks and

⁶ *General Laws*, 1858, p. 40; 1871, p. 79-83; 1875, p. 159; 1877, p. 91; 1901, p. 37.

⁷ *Forest and Stream*, 2: 161; 6: 1, 4; 8: 183, 231; 11: 132-134 (April 23, 1874; February 10, 1876; April 26, May 17, 1877; September 19, 1878); Zimmerman, in *Scribner's Monthly*, 18: 826 (October, 1879).

chickens. . . . Mr. Beaupre, the President of the [Minnesota Kennel] Club, bestows some considerable attention to the trials by virtue of his office . . . but he frequently drops out with . . . one of the crowd, and goes off to the "slews" and ridges, and brings home a box load of trophies.

The hunter of the seventies had no fast and comfortable automobile to carry him over smooth highways to his favorite hunting grounds; nevertheless he managed exceedingly well. If he had only a day at his disposal, he drove his own or a hired horse and buggy—or more frequently a wagon, which held more equipment—to hunting grounds near by. If, however, he wanted more extended shooting, he traveled by railroad to the location of his choice. "On any route," wrote Hallock, "the sportsman has only to select his objective point, disembark, and locate himself at some inn or hospitable dwelling, where ordinary comforts are obtainable." The line of the Great Northern from the Twin Cities to Breckenridge, the Sioux City and St. Paul, now the Northwestern road, along the Minnesota River, and the Northern Pacific from Brainerd west were the favorite routes. At Brainerd trains rested over Sunday, and there, according to Hallock, "at Col. Weed's 'Head Quarters Hotel,'" could be seen "typical characters of all sorts . . . gentlemen-sportsmen with dogs, plethoric outfits, and a retinue of servants—'well-heeled,' as they say out there—going to the grouse country."⁸

Some of the wealthier sportsmen kept complete wagon outfits constantly in readiness, which, according to Hallock, they shipped "in a box car hither and yon at will." One enthusiastic St. Paul hunter, E. R. Warner, the superintendent of the American Express Company, according to the same writer, "ingeniously transformed an express wagon into a hunting cart, with sections for ice, provisions, and equipment; racks for guns, lockers for ammunition, and a canvas-covered kennel large enough for half a dozen dogs."

⁸ *Forest and Stream*, 9: 419, 437 (January 3, 10, 1878).

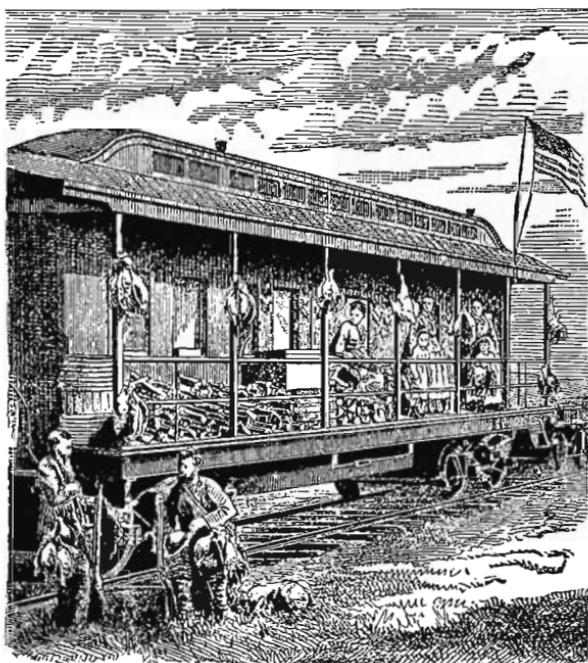
A canvas awning provided shade, and there were side curtains that could be buttoned on for protection against rain. The seats were fitted with easy springs, and the sides were low enough to permit easy mounting and dismounting—a great advantage on a hunt for upland game. All the railroad lines had special coaches, called “business cars,” fitted with bunks and cooking apparatus, which might be chartered by hunting parties and run over the lines to any point desired. Very often one or more hunters would charter a hand car and run it over the tracks to a likely spot.⁹

It remained for a party from the East to show Minnesota sportsmen how to hunt in the grand manner. In the fall of 1875 a group of hunters from Worcester, Massachusetts, including Jerome Marble and C. C. Houghton, arrived in Brainerd to hunt upland game birds. The Northern Pacific Railroad furnished them with a car fitted with berths, tables, and cooking apparatus, and in it they traveled over the line of the road to the Red River Valley. Their car was placed on sidings and they hunted leisurely along the way. So pleased were they with the country and its opportunities for hunting that in 1876 and again in 1877 Marble and Houghton returned to Brainerd to shoot “ducks, geese, chickens, and plover.” They chartered two cars, one of them “divided into kitchen, dining-room, and drawing-room, with the usual palace car berths,” and the other “devoted to the four hunting dogs, a supply store and game depot, and a sleeping room for one of the party.” The two sportsmen were accompanied by their wives and daughters and two English army officers.

It would seem that hunting under such conditions would have satisfied the most fastidious of sportsmen; but evidently Jerome Marble felt that there was room for improvement. In 1878 he returned to Minnesota with a party of twelve. This time he came in a private car, the “City of

⁹ *Forest and Stream*, 9: 419, 456; 11: 37 (January 3, 17, August 15, 1878).

Worcester," which had been constructed under his supervision "with special attention to the wants of those who may go for a month or two on the plains in a hunting expedition." The car remained in St. Paul for a day, and according to the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, "It was the centre of an



A HUNTING CAR ON THE ST. PAUL, MINNEAPOLIS AND MANITOBA RAILROAD

[From the *American Traveller's Journal*, 2:4 (August, 1881).]

unusual degree of interest." This "palatial home on wheels," as it was described at the time, might well be the "centre of an unusual degree of interest" even in these more sophisticated times. The exterior was finished in "lake color," and "ornamented with gold leaf and silver mouldings." The steps leading to the platform were mahogany, with brass treads. On the platform was a large

refrigerator, a coal box, and a water tank, and under the car were four lockers for ice, tools, vegetables, and miscellaneous stores. The interior was finished in black walnut, rosewood, and mahogany, and ornamented with gold leaf and silver plate. The furniture was upholstered in crimson plush, the curtains were "of rich silk damask" in green and brown, and the carpet was velvet brussels. There was a reading room furnished with a sofa which might be transformed into two beds, and a "grand drawing-room and dining room," furnished with six permanent seats, a dining table, a "Needham musical cabinet," portable tables "for cards or sewing," twelve double berths, silver-plated oil lamps, and two French plate-glass mirrors with embossed borders. A large closet, washrooms with tanks equipped with "double-action pumps of the latest pattern" for drinking and washing water, a butler's pantry with a china closet and shelves, and a kitchen with a large range and a water tank and pump completed the equipment.

After a visit to the state fair, which that year offered, among other attractions, an address by President Rutherford B. Hayes, an exhibition by the world-famous marksman, Captain A. H. Bogardus, a fox hunt by English gentlemen from Martin County, and the bench show for dogs already mentioned, the party spent a day fishing on Lake Minnetonka, and then set out, in all their splendor and magnificence, for the wilds of western Minnesota and Dakota.¹⁰

MARY WHEELHOUSE BERTHEL

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

¹⁰ *Forest and Stream*, 5: 106; 9: 230; 11: 37, 139 (September 23, 1875; October 25, 1877; August 15, September 19, 1878); *Pioneer Press*, September 7, 1878.



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