

A Century of Minnesota Wild Life¹

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IN FOLLOWING Minnesota's wild life through a century of settlement, many people doubtless imagine the story to be a depressing, calamitous picture of rapid and inevitable decline from a glorious primitive state of continual abundance down to a pitiful remnant that remains to remind us of the past. It must seem to these pessimists that the musty halls of a gloomy museum are undoubtedly the appropriate place to consider such a gloomy subject. Just as museum halls need not necessarily be musty and gloomy, however, we need not necessarily take quite such a pessimistic view of the wild-life picture.

First we might deflate somewhat the unrealistic picture many have of the Utopian state of continual abundance in which wild life existed in the "good old days." For instance, John Tanner, while traveling along the Canadian boundary a hundred and fifty years ago, observed a terrible epidemic that struck the beaver. "Some kind of distemper was prevailing among these animals, which destroyed them in vast numbers," he wrote. "I found them dead and dying in the water, on the ice, and on land; sometimes I found one that, having cut a tree half down, had died at its roots; sometimes one who had drawn a stick of timber half way to his lodge, was lying dead by his burthen. . . . Those in large rivers and running water suffered less; almost all of those that lived in ponds and stagnant water, died. Since that year the beaver have never been so plentiful in the country of the Red River and Hudson's Bay, as they used formerly to be."²

¹ This paper, which is based upon a lecture entitled "Our Wild Life through a Century of Settlement," will appear in two installments. The first, dealing with Minnesota mammals, appears herewith; the second, on birds, will be published in the September issue of this magazine. In its original form, this review of Minnesota's wild-life history was presented by Dr. Breckenridge on January 30 — the last of five public lectures arranged as a contribution to the Minnesota Territorial Centennial by the Minnesota Museum of Natural History on the university campus in Minneapolis. *Ed.*

² Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, 104 (New York, 1830). The writer wishes to acknowledge the extensive help derived

Again, William H. Keating, while exploring the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers in 1823, found that "Game seems to be disappearing very rapidly from the face of the country. Buffaloes, of the largest size, were formerly found here; a few were still to be seen in 1817, on the river that bears their name, and that discharges itself into the Mississippi below Lake Pepin; but since the establishment of the garrison at Fort St. Anthony they have all been destroyed or have removed further west. The party that travelled in the boats, saw abundance of pigeons, but, with the exception of these, no other kind of game. . . . The land party, although provided with an excellent hunter, killed but a few pigeons. . . . Game will be judged to be very scarce where two parties, travelling by land and by water, can kill but two or three dozen of birds upon a distance of upwards of two hundred miles." And, in referring to a trip from the Lake of the Woods to Lake Superior through the border lakes, in the course of the same expedition, Keating actually made the following almost unbelievable statement: "From Rainy Lake to Lake Superior we did not meet with a single quadruped. The only animals we saw were about thirty or forty birds, chiefly ducks."³ Many mammals and birds had cycles of abundance and scarcity. For instance, a number of good years for shooting prairie chickens in the Rochester area were followed by one that prompted a writer for the *Rochester Post* of August 14, 1869, to remark: "It is generally conceded that these birds have never been as scarce in this region at this season of the year as at present." These few statements indicate very definitely that Minnesota wild life did not exist in a continual state of abundance in the early days, but that it had very pronounced ups and downs.

In studying the past history of wild life, one soon realizes that the experiences of different groups of animals in their encounter with mankind have varied greatly. I might begin by considering these groups one at a time, pointing out the fate of a few of the important

in the preparation of this paper from Evadene Burris Swanson's unpublished doctoral dissertation on "The Use and Conservation of Minnesota Game, 1850-1900." A copy of her thesis, which was submitted in 1940, is in the library of the University of Minnesota.

³ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River*, 1:302, 303, 2:143 (London, 1825).

species in the group and the present standing of the group as a whole. Minnesota's big game, to begin with, originally comprised the bison, the moose, the elk or wapiti, the white-tailed and mule deer, the woodland caribou, and the antelope. Two of these, the mule deer and the pronghorn antelope, have never been important as Minnesota game animals. The mule deer existed in Minnesota in extremely small numbers even when the earliest explorers and traders reported their game, and even today an individual is apt to be taken anywhere from central to northwestern Minnesota.⁴ The status of this animal thus has remained almost the same for more than a century.

The antelope likewise is hardly deserving of consideration as a significant Minnesota mammal. Keating made no mention of it in what is now Minnesota, and the sight of a single antelope seventy miles north of Pembina in Manitoba led him to state that "This animal is not abundant here; we occasionally saw tracks of it." George Bird Grinnell notes what was probably the last antelope to roam the Minnesota prairies. He writes: "A recent issue of the Minnesota Game Commission's Bulletin states that in 1885, L. M. Eriksrude saw an antelope near Tracy, in southwestern Minnesota, which he and other boys chased away. Mr. Eriksrude has confirmed this statement by a personal letter to me. This is the only definite record by an eye witness of antelope in Minnesota of which I have knowledge."⁵

The bison undoubtedly was the most conspicuous and significant Minnesota mammal during pioneer days. Unfortunately, its huge size and herding habit made it inevitable that this animal should disappear before the establishment of agriculture. The original eastern limits of the bison in Minnesota were given by the eminent naturalist and conservationist, Dr. W. T. Hornaday, as a line extending roughly from Pine County to Lake of the Woods. Nearly all the

⁴ In the fall of 1948 a mule deer was shot near Pillager. This specimen is now in the collection of the Minnesota Museum of Natural History.

⁵ Keating, *Narrative*, 2:59; Grinnell, "Pronghorn Antelope," in *Journal of Mammalogy*, 10:135 (May, 1929). Grinnell is quoted by Dr. Thomas S. Roberts in an article on "The Vanished Mammals of Minnesota," in Minnesota Department of Conservation, *Technical Bulletins*, no. 2, p. 17 (St. Paul, 1945). Roberts mentions also a few records of antelope that could have been in Minnesota.

early explorers, from Radisson and Hennepin in the 1600's, mentioned the abundance of this animal. On the last day of March, 1801, Alexander Henry, who was trading south of Pembina on the Red River, saw in the stream "great numbers of dead buffalo from above, which must have been drowned in attempting to cross while the ice was weak." On the day following, Henry again observed dead bison: "It is really astonishing what vast numbers have perished; they formed one continuous line in the current for two days and nights," he remarked in his journal. A month later, on May 1 and 2, he recorded that "The stench from the vast numbers of drowned buffalo along the river was intolerable. . . . I am informed that every spring it is about the same."⁶

Commenting on his travels just north of Lake Traverse in 1823, Keating remarked: "as we proceeded, the buffaloes began to thicken before us; in every direction numbers of them were seen. They generally collected in herds of thousands together, keeping at a distance from us, though sometimes suffering us to approach very near to them, and, in some cases, indeed, running through our line of march." Henry H. Sibley believed that two bison killed by Sioux on the Trempealeau River in Wisconsin in 1832 were "the last specimens of the noble bison, which trod, or will ever again tread, the soil of the region lying east of the Mississippi River."⁷ In July, 1866, R. M. Probstfield saw a large herd of bison on the Dakota bank of the Red River. He reports that "There may have been 10,000 or 100,000 of them for all we could tell, as we could not see their limit either north or west. A few got across the Red River onto the Minnesota side," in Clay County. "We only killed four of them," writes Probstfield. The last authentic report of wild bison in Minnesota was of a group of four seen in Norman County in 1880.⁸

⁶ William T. Hornaday, "The Extermination of the American Bison," in United States National Museum, *Reports*, 1886-87, part 2, p. 385 (Washington, 1889); Elliott Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and of David Thompson*, 1:174, 177 (New York, 1897).

⁷ Keating, *Narrative*, 2:6; Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, 4:94 (Philadelphia, 1854).

⁸ Alvin H. Wilcox, *A Pioneer History of Becker County*, 50 (St. Paul, 1907); Roberts, in Department of Conservation, *Technical Bulletins*, no. 2, p. 11.

Native Minnesota elk or wapiti seem to have disappeared from the state about the beginning of the present century. During the drought years in the 1930's, numerous elk antlers were retrieved from shallow lakes at various points in southern and central Minnesota after extremely low water levels exposed them to view. These records, as well as many historical accounts, indicate that this largest of our deer, except for the moose, originally roamed over all the prairie parts of Minnesota and well into the edges of the forests. The fact that many records of elk taken were reported in local newspapers in the last half of the nineteenth century indicates that even then they were not considered common. By 1890 Aitkin, Itasca, Kittson, and Roseau counties only harbored remnants of this once widespread animal. W. P. Andrus of the state game and fish commission said in 1894 that the area near Thief River Falls was the only place in the state where wapiti remained.⁹

Many records for elk are unreliable as the result of a confusion in names. The European name "elk" or "elg" referred to an animal almost identical with our moose. Consequently, many Scandinavian emigrants knew our moose as elk. In the winter of 1946 I interviewed an old hunter and trapper living northeast of Thief River Falls. He told me in detail of finding the tracks of two elk crossing his trap line in 1907 and how, after a grueling chase, he succeeded in shooting both of them. This I consider an authentic record, which probably concerned one of the very last remnants of the native Minnesota elk. What impressed me about the account was that this trapper appeared to have no idea of preserving what he then knew must be the last of its kind in the region. He took the attitude that, since elk were in the area, if he did not track them down and kill them someone else would.

After 1907 nearly thirty years elapsed with little or no evidence of native elk in Minnesota. In 1935 twenty-seven Wyoming elk of the western race, comprising the Itasca Park herd, were released in the region north and west of Red Lake. The descendants of these animal make up the present herd of perhaps sixty animals that are

⁹ Minnesota Board of Game and Fish Commissioners, *Fourth Annual Report*, 17 (St. Paul, 1895).

doing a little better than holding their own in this wild retreat. Except for a few antlers, no specimens of native Minnesota elk with reliable data are preserved. Since the elk is such a large animal, is very gregarious, and prefers to graze on land suited to agriculture, it appears to have little future in Minnesota except as small bands may be maintained on extensive refuges.

The woodland caribou was originally a common resident throughout the coniferous forests of northern Minnesota. Scattered bands remained until the early years of the present century. According to C. A. A. Nelson of Lutzen the animal was still present along the North Shore of Lake Superior in 1890, but it soon disappeared. By 1930 the only remaining resident caribou in Minnesota were in a small band living north of Upper Red Lake in the Big Bog country. The group had dwindled to three animals by 1938, when ten caribou were brought in from Saskatchewan in an effort to rejuvenate the herd. Apparently the entire band has now disappeared; at least all attempts by plane and from the ground to locate any of the animals have failed during the past several winters. So now we must admit that the state has lost another spectacular big game animal. A few caribou may still appear occasionally in the Northwest Angle, but they are only winter wanderers from Manitoba or Ontario, not resident animals. Its specialized feeding habits, its herding tendency, and its natural shunning of civilization's disturbances make it highly improbable that the caribou will ever return as a huntable game animal to its ever-shrinking original domain here in Minnesota.¹⁰

The moose, although it is larger than the elk, is fortunate in being a browsing rather than a grazing animal. Its haunts consequently comprise extensive coniferous forests, bogs, and lake country, and it has never intruded on agricultural areas. As a result there still are hundreds, if not possibly thousands, of these largest of the

¹⁰ See a "Field Report," in the files of the Minnesota Museum of Natural History, of a trip made in 1922 by Thaddeus Surber. But few specimens that give evidence of the caribou's existence in Minnesota have been preserved. The Museum of Natural History has the skull, with a fine set of antlers, of what probably was one of the last old bulls from the Red Lake herd; it was found in the Big Bog in 1928. The skin of what was probably the last native cow, which was found sick in the bog and died in captivity in 1940, and that of a yearling animal are also in the museum's collection. Dr. Gustav Swanson discovered that three mounted animals and five skins in the museum of the University of Kansas were taken in northwestern Minnesota by E. L. Brown in the 1890's.

world's hoofed animals still in our northern bog country. Its large size makes the moose a prize bag for both trophy and meat hunters. The killing of moose for food in logging camps in the late 1800's and early 1900's cut down this animal's numbers rapidly, while the lumbering operations themselves reduced tremendously its range in Minnesota. Fortunately, man foresaw the reduction in numbers before it was too late, and since 1922 no legal hunting of moose has been permitted in Minnesota. In spite of this protection, however, poaching, disease, deer hunters' mistakes, and some wolf predation, coupled with gradual reduction of habitat area, seem to have kept pace with the moose's natural reproduction, and little, if any, change in the state's moose population has occurred in the last decade or so. All these factors will probably continue to prevent this animal's increase, and the prospects of renewed moose hunting in the state are very poor.

The picture of the white-tailed deer is in direct contrast to those of the other large hoofed animals. This fine game animal was abundant originally throughout the forests of southern, central, and western Minnesota. In 1841 Sibley reported that an Indian band on a winter hunt in southern Minnesota and northern Iowa took two thousand deer. Schoolcraft found deer common in the Lake Itasca area in 1832. On the other hand, La Vérendrye, Jonathan Carver, Tanner, and many others who visited what is now the Canadian border country more than a century ago did not mention the white-tail at all. Dr. Thomas S. Roberts made no mention of seeing deer on a trip from Grand Marais to Duluth in 1879. Nelson did not find deer at Lutzen when he settled there in 1890, but he said that they appeared for the first time a few years later.¹¹ "We learn from Capt. John Donovan of 63-12, and John Jacobs, that red deer tracks have been seen for the first time, within a short distance of this village," reads an item in the *Ely Times* for February 20, 1891. Beyond doubt deer originally were rare north and east of a line from Duluth to the Lake of the Woods. In the 1860's and 1870's lumbering and forest

¹¹ Henry H. Sibley, "Reminiscences of the Early Days of Minnesota," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 3: 265; Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Narrative of an Expedition through the Upper Mississippi to Lake Itasca*, 49, 54, 57 (New York, 1834); Surber, "Field Report," 1922.

fires began to eliminate the pines, and aspen, birch, and broad-leaved shrubs began to grow in northern Minnesota. With this change, the deer began moving northward, though apparently they did not become abundant in the Superior National Forest area until nearly 1900. As the deer were pushing farther northward, heavy hunting pressure was eliminating them in the south. Dr. Roberts told of a hunter who lived near Minnehaha Falls killing seventeen deer in a swamp near Lake Harriet about 1885. These, Dr. Roberts said in 1930, were the last deer in the Minneapolis area.

In the last two or three decades deer have been moving back into southern Minnesota in large numbers, until today they occur in every county in the state. Since they still remain abundant in the north, it may well be that deer are even more numerous in the state today than they were a hundred or more years ago. As favorable as this seems, it must be kept in mind that improperly controlled hunting can much more quickly endanger Minnesota's deer herd today than formerly. This is true both because the number of hunters has increased tremendously (there were 160,100 in the fall of 1947), and because hunters can cover the state with great thoroughness in cars on present-day roads.¹² It follows then that the conservation department's responsibility in properly regulating the deer take is great, and its decisions should favor the deer whenever there is any doubt about proper restrictions.

In addition to the hoofed animals, the cougar and the bears are often included as big game. Judging from all historical records, the cougar, or mountain lion, could never have been a common Minnesota animal. Dr. Roberts, in his essay on the "Vanished Mammals of Minnesota," saw fit to record nearly every known authentic record of this big cat in the state. He lists seven or eight records, the last being that of a cougar killed by a Chippewa Indian near Detroit Lakes in 1897.¹³ All the numerous reports of Minnesota cougars in recent years remain in the rumor class, or at best they are unsubstantiated sight records.

¹² Alfred L. Nelson, "A Centennial of Natural Resources," in *Conservation Volunteer*, vol. 12, no. 68, p. 7 (January-February, 1949).

¹³ Roberts, in Department of Conservation, *Technical Bulletins*, no. 2, p. 18; Wilcox, *History of Becker County*, 75.

The grizzly bear appears as a Minnesota mammal only on the strength of one or two records from the Red River Valley.¹⁴ They mark the extreme eastward limits of that animal's wanderings in search of bison in the early 1800's. The black bear was a very common mammal a century or two ago, and it is still maintaining a substantial population in the more remote wooded areas. Although it cannot be tolerated where agriculture is extensive, in our wilderness areas it probably will persist for many years.

Now we may turn our attention from the big game to another group of animals important to Minnesota's past—the fur bearers. All the trapping of Minnesota fur bearers through the past centuries has apparently resulted in the elimination of but two of the state's original mammals of this class—the wolverine and the marten. The wolverine, that terror of the trappers known variously as carcajou, glutton, and the "Devil of the North," undoubtedly always was scarce and was restricted to the evergreen forests. At his Red River trading post, Henry reported receiving only twenty-one wolverine skins in the seven years between 1800 and 1808. In the eighteen years between 1869 and 1887, Joseph Ullmann of St. Paul, then one of the largest buyers of furs in the state, bought only thirteen wolverine skins in Minnesota. According to a Grand Rapids newspaper, one was taken in 1894 near the Rainy River. There is an apparently authentic record of a wolverine caught in St. Louis County in 1918, and another telling of a farmer who dug one out twelve miles north of Bemidji in 1923.¹⁵ Records as recent as these indicate that although the wolverine probably is not to be found in Minnesota at present, it is possible that a rare wanderer from Canada may appear occasionally within the state's borders.

The pine marten, or American sable, was apparently well established and widespread as a fur bearer in the coniferous forests of Minnesota until near the end of the last century. Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike, who explored the Minnesota country in 1805, reported the

¹⁴ Coues, *New Light*, 1: 440.

¹⁵ Coues, *New Light*, 1: 198, 221, 245, 259, 281, 422, 440; E. B. Swanson, "Conservation of Minnesota Game," 155; *Grand Rapids Magnet*, March 13, 1894; Gustav Swanson, "A Systematic Catalog of the Mammals of Minnesota," in Department of Conservation, *Technical Bulletins*, no. 2, p. 67.

marten take for the winter of 1804-05 as 47 at Red Lake, 26 at Leech Lake, 61 at Sandy Lake, and 201 at Fond du Lac. The combined take of marten from five Minnesota trading posts in 1857, according to a recent writer, was 1,600. In 1870 the Ullmann firm handled 623 marten from Canada and Wisconsin as well as from Minnesota. While trapping in southwestern Koochiching County in 1894-95, E. L. Brown took 43 marten. In recent years this animal has been protected by law, and as a result practically nothing is on record regarding its recent status. Mr. Thaddeus Surber described for me in detail a marten he saw near Bemidji in 1918. An experienced trapper in the Northwest Angle of Minnesota, Mr. Adolph Hodap, told of taking his last marten in 1920, and there appears to be no positive evidence that any have been taken in the state since then.¹⁶ This arboreal weasel is so easily trapped that until game laws can be more strictly enforced, it seems improbable the animal will become re-established in Minnesota.

Perhaps the most significant of all fur bearers in Minnesota's history has been the beaver. Its fortunes have varied greatly through the centuries. After the search for the Northwest Passage to the Indies failed, it was largely the value of beaver pelts that inspired the exploration of the Minnesota lake country for nearly a century and a half. The heyday of Grand Portage and the fur traders highway along our border country in the late 1700's and early 1800's probably marked the peak of the Minnesota beaver harvest. Then bales of pelts by the ton came down from the North Country in fleets of huge birch-bark freight canoes. Intensive trapping was largely responsible for the almost complete disappearance of beaver in the late 1800's. Lumbering and fires may have temporarily hastened the reduction of these animals, but the aspen that grew up following this destruction was actually more favorable to the beaver than was the original coniferous forest. In attempting to save the remnants of the beaver, Minnesota's conservation officers carried on a continuous

¹⁶ Zebulon M. Pike, *Expeditions to Headwaters of the Mississippi River*, 1:284, 285 (Coues edition, New York, 1895); A. W. Schorger, "Extinct and Endangered Mammals and Birds of the Upper Great Lakes Region," in Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, *Transactions*, 34:23-44 (Madison, 1942); E. B. Swanson, "Conservation of Minnesota Game," 158; Gustav Swanson, in Department of Conservation, *Technical Bulletins*, no. 2, p. 63, 64.

battle with poachers during the early 1900's, and they have succeeded in their efforts to such an extent that the income from the beaver today is exceeded only by muskrat and mink. In recent years the beaver has spread far into southern Minnesota, several colonies having established themselves in the Twin City area. One group actually is living in the Mississippi River on the University of Minnesota campus only a few hundred yards from the Museum of Natural History.

Since there are no adequate figures in existence indicating what the total fur take may have been a hundred years ago, it is almost impossible to evaluate the results of a century of trapping on the Minnesota fur-bearer populations in general. A large number of isolated figures on fur buyers' purchases are available, but there is no way of knowing what percentage of the total state take these may represent. Furthermore, although St. Paul was considered the fur center for the state, the local dealers' fur purchases came in a large part from the Red River Valley, and included large catches from Canada. Figures indicating the size of the St. Paul dealers' total sales for 1869 for two staple furs, muskrats and mink, were published. Although not directly comparable with the conservation department's calculated total state catch for 1945, a comparison of the two sets of figures suggests a rather surprising tenacity on the part of these animal populations. The 1869 St. Paul figure for muskrats was 1,600,000; the 1945 figure, 1,211,106. The 1869 sale of mink was 16,000; the 1945 figure, 95,782. One gains a similar impression from an examination of the reports of the Ullmann company. That firm handled 3,270 skunk in 1870, while the 1945 take was 82,860; Ullmann's 1870 total for red fox was 1,896, and the 1945 take was 17,751; the company's 1870 total for raccoon was 1,949, and the 1945 total was 20,140. Even the pioneer company's 1870 beaver sales of 1,309 appear insignificant beside the 1945 take of 9,477. These two sets of figures definitely do not represent comparable totals, and they should not be compared directly; but since the 1945 fur harvest figures are so much larger in most cases, they certainly do not suggest any alarming decrease in the populations of these most important fur animals. Certain other species of lesser importance as fur bearers do, however,

show a definite drop in abundance. These are the otter, fisher, and marten. The Ullmann company's otter total for 1870 was 202, while the 1945 total was but 46; and its 1870 totals were 828 for fisher and 623 for marten.¹⁷ In 1945 fisher and marten were protected in Minnesota; only a few individual fisher were taken accidentally, and no marten at all were reported.

Offsetting these losses to some degree is the definite increase in the Minnesota populations of opossum, spotted skunk, gray fox, and bobcat. The case of the state's lynx and bobcat populations is interesting. The Ullmann company in 1870 sold 2,286 lynx and 43 bobcats—figures that are roughly reversed in the 1945 take of 3,085 bobcats and 56 lynx. Similar proportions are suggested by statements I heard from an old trapper in the Red Lake area about his take of these two cats in the 1890's as compared with local takes there today. Throughout northern Minnesota the lynx apparently has been almost wholly replaced by the bobcat.

One might get the impression from the figures quoted that the state's fur-bearer populations have increased during the past century. This probably is not the case, however. The large recent fur take from a smaller animal population than that existing a century ago may well be explained by the fact that the trappers of 1945 harvested much more of the total increase of fur bearers than was taken in 1850. In other words, a much larger proportion of the fur bearers of a century ago died of natural causes and were not being utilized by man as they are today. I do think it is true, however, that—with the exception of the lynx, the fisher, the marten, and the otter, which even a hundred years ago made up only a small percentage of the total fur take—the fur bearers as a group are showing remarkable adaptability and tenacity in holding their own against civilization's inroads on their habitat.

[*To be concluded.*]

¹⁷ *Minnesota Monthly*, 1:293 (September, 1869); E. B. Swanson, "Conservation of Minnesota Game," 30; Paul R. Highby, "Value of 1945 Fur Catch Tops All Records," in *Conservation Volunteer*, vol. 9, no. 55, p. 49 (November–December, 1946).



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