Author Review of
Wild Animals and Settlers on the Great Plains
by
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In the early 19th century, ecosystems within the Great Plains harbored a variety of animals, as well as semi-nomadic Native Americans, that were well adapted for life on this expanse of grassland.

It was in the late 1850s and early 1860s that the predominantly white settlers from the east began to take advantage of cheap land and push into this region bringing with them a unique culture--i.e., agriculture. The impact upon the native fauna and the Native Americans was great indeed. The tragic demise of two groups--the Native Americans and the bison--in the face of this immigration of an agriculturally based economy has been well documented.

Primary source documentation of the impact of agriculture on the other elements of the native fauna of the Great Plains is less well known. Primary source information about the native animals exists today only in archival material. Early explorers such as Pike, Long, and Fremont spent brief periods of time in this region and their journals contain references to various types of animals that were present. J.A. Allen also spent some time on the prairie and published materials are available of his findings. Although some of the early explorers numbered naturalists among their party and the work of Allen was important, none spent any large blocks of time in any single area on the Great Plains.

Though important, these early sojourns resulted in a more or less superficial examination of only some faunal elements and precluded any detailed accounts of the interactions between the newest members of this ecosystem--agricultural humankind--and the native fauna. The only ones that could provide that information were those that had extensive exposure to the faunal elements--the early settlers.

Several years ago I became interested in how those early, predominantly white settlers, interacted with the non-human vertebrate animals that were encountered on the Great Plains during 1865-79. I focused on Kansas and used it as a "window" through which I might examine the settler/animal coactions that were taking place throughout the Great Plains. I chose Kansas because it is familiar to me, but more importantly, Kansas has better preserved primary source material than most other Great Plains states. Kansas became a state in 1861 (only Texas was earlier) and had an established historical society by the 1870s. I refrained from using remembrances and reminiscences and used only the primary source material of archival newspapers, letters, and diaries. I chose 1865-79 because it was during this time that the settlement of the prairie primarily took place, augmented by the completion of two great railroads, the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe that spanned the entire length of the state.

The comments of settlers, found in archival diaries, letters, and newspapers about the presence of some animals and the absence of others can help fill in gaps in our knowledge of historical distributions,

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abundances, and interactions that occurred between themselves and the native fauna. The writers themselves were not scientists and their comments need to be read in context so that biases are recognized. Given that however, it is, in my opinion, possible to gain some insight into the native fauna as it existed on the Great Plains during the mid-part of the nineteenth century.

A remarkably large number of different species of vertebrate animals--primarily birds and mammals--were mentioned in the archival material. I divided the encounters with animals into three categories: a) hunting and fishing for food, market, and recreation; b) nuisances, hazards, and dangers; and c) pleasures and fascinations with and about the native creatures.

A small sampling of the archival material included in my book, *Wild Animals and Settlers of the Great Plains*, dealing with the categories of hunting and fishing for food, and the nuisance, hazards and dangers are presented below.

**HUNTING AND FISHING**

Many settlers supplemented their diet with fish taken by any means possible--net, dynamite, pitchfork, and hook and line. Some would sell them door to door or to the local meat market. Many settlers, both men and women, enjoyed a leisurely afternoon of fishing on a warm day.

"A great many fine fish are being taken out of the Solomon. At Milne's mill about a barrel were caught at one time and Jake Getz caught a string numbering 63 fine fellows one night this week." Osborne County Farmer, 14 July 1876

"A party of ladies and gentlemen went on a fishing expedition to the Saline on Tuesday. They succeeded in catching about 150 pounds of fish. William Geis... caught a white perch which weighted sixteen pound--probably the largest perch ever caught in this country." Saline County Journal, 27 May 1875

In the early part of this time period--1865-73, the bison found in immense herds were hunted for food, market, and recreation. Initially the settler could, without much effort, kill a bison and provide meat for his family. Quickly though, the professional hunter began to slaughter for the "hams" or just the tongues, shipping them east in the winter or salting them in barrels for shipment at other times of the year. Huge numbers were taken by the professional meat hunter.

"We saved every tongue se we would know how many we killed. That is the way we knew in all we killed 22 thousand." Diary of Matt Clarkson, 1867

Many people received considerable enjoyment from hunting buffalo and recreational hunts frequently utilized the railroad.

"At this season of the year the herds of buffalo are moving southward to reach the canyons which contain the grass they exist upon during the winter. Nearly every railroad train which leaves or arrives at Fort Hays on the Kansas Pacific Railroad has its race with these herds of buffalo.... The train is slowed to a rate of speed about equal to that of the herd; the passengers get out fire-arms which are provided for the defense of the train against the Indians, and open from the windows and platforms of the cars a fire that resembles a brisk skirmish.... When the "hunt" is over the buffaloes which have been killed are secured, and the choice parts placed in the baggage-car.... Ladies who are passengers... frequently enjoy the sport...." Buffalo Hunting, 1867

Recreational hunts were short lived for the average settler did not have the time nor the means to follow the dwindling herds.

Although hunts for meat and
recreation exacted their toll, the real demise of the bison occurred after 1871 when factory tanning techniques were developed and the hide hunters frequented the plains. Often only the hide was taken leaving the carcass to rot.

"[From] September 1872 to January 1873, 43,029 hides were shipped from Dodge City." Rocky Mountain News, 19 January 1873

"In 1874... 1,315,300 pounds of hides were shipped over the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe Railroad." Ellsworth Reporter, 15 April 1875

By the close of 1874 the bison as a source of food, hide, or recreation was essentially completed in Kansas. Only the bones remained and became the basis of a thriving but brief, business—"bone picking." Bones gathered by farmers, to supplement their income, or in rare cases professional bone hunters gathered the bones and hauled them to the nearest railhead where they were stacked for shipment east. There the best were made into handles for knives etc., used to purify sugar, and to be ground into fertilizer.

"In 1874, 3,160,000 pounds were shipped over the Kansas Pacific Railroad, and 6,914,950 were shipped over the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe." Ellsworth Reporter, 15 April 1875

"4000 pounds of bones were shipped from Kinsley this week." Dodge City Times, 17 August 1878

By the end of the 1870s, all recreation and commercial use of the buffalo in Kansas essentially was concluded.

Other animals hunted included the antelope for food and market as well as recreation. Antelope were frequently hunted with greyhounds and this was great sport.

"Mayor Kelly brought in four antelope as the fruit of his chase Sunday. It challenges any one west of Leavenworth to cooperate with him in the chase." Dodge City Times, 9 February 1879

Geese and plover were hunted with great success.

"Mr. Noble took us down in his cellar and showed us a sight the other day that was truly interesting. It was nothing more nor less than a hundred and five wild geese, laid out in regular rows and covered almost the entire floor of the cellar. They were the result of Mr. Huntley's two days' hunt on the Rattlesnake, made a few days previous...." Larned Optic, 28 November 1879

"Capt. Geo. Hinkle, Senator Bassett and Major Thompson, three crack shots, made a nice game on Tuesday. In two hours' sport they bagged forty-seven plovers." Dodge City Times, 16 August 1879

There was in Kansas a tremendous variety of game for the sportsman.

"The Chapman party report the result of their hunt as follows: 213 ducks, 8 geese, 40 quail. The Kesler-Sisy party report: 200 ducks and 100 snipe. The boys stocked the markets with a grand supply of game." Saline County Journal, 30 October 1879

"Our superintendent, spent last Saturday (sic) with us and had a chicken hunt with conductor Warner and Major Anderson.... They bagged sixty-four chickens, and every agent from here to Wallace got a brace of nice birds with compliments of [the] superintendent." Ellsworth Reporter, 31 August 1876

"Two hundred wild turkeys were captured in a single day's hunt, recently by some of the soldiers at Fort Larned." Hutchinson News, 10 April 1873.

Furs were taken from a variety of native animals including the skunk, the prairie wolf (coyote), and the gray wolf.

"A man down in Reno County killed twenty-six skunks in one day. There hasn't been any more scents." Newton Kansan, 24
December 1874

"We poisoned fifty wolves by cutting small pieces of meat put in strychnine with the point of a pen knife just a little. then take a fresh hide, turn it flesh side down and drag it for miles over the prairies with our saddle horses, dropping a piece of meat about every hundred yards. The wolves traveling strike the scent of the trail made by dragging the hide and follow it up. We figured that a wolf taking poison will die in less than a hundred yards." Letter of Arthur Bill, 1879.

Competition between two groups of hunters were frequent social events and helped control what the settlers perceived as pests.

"The hunt in this county on Thursday and Friday last was a grand success. About 1400 rabbits were killed. The hunters on Aldrich's side were treated to a supper served up at both hotels at the expense of the hunters on Meadow's side." Smith County Pioneer, 28 December 1876

NUISANCES, HAZARDS, AND DANGERS

There were a number of encounters, many humorous, that I classed as nuisances.

"A wedding in Cloud County was postponed last week, because the bridegroom accidentally tread on the tail of a cat while walking to the domicile of his intended, the night the wedding was to take place. The cat was one of those dark-complexioned fellows that flourish a bushy tail when tread upon, and take the cologne out of a fellow's clothes in about one-eighth of a second." Hays City Sentinel, 27 April 1878

"A farmer near New Baden, Dickinson county, who deposited his money in the walls of his dug-out, has been robbed of his deposits by ground squirrels." The Larned Optic, 25 July 1879

"An army of swallows settled under the eaves of the court house at Great Bend suddenly migrated in a body to the Catholic Church. The noise of the lawyers was too much for them." Dodge City times, 31 May 1879

"The buffaloes found in the telegraph poles of the overland line a new source of delight on the treeless prairie—the novelty of having something to scratch against, but it was expensive scratching for the telegraph company; and there, indeed, was the rub, for the bison's shook down miles of wire daily. A bright idea struck somebody to send to Saint Louis and Chicago for all the brad awls that could be purchased, and these were driven into the poles with a view to wound the animals and check their rubbing propensity. Never was there a greater mistake. The buffaloes were delighted. For the first time they came to scratch sure of a sensation in their thick hides that thrilled them from horn to tail. They would go fifteen miles to find a brad awl. They fought huge battles around the poles containing them, and the victor would proudly climb the mountainous heap of the fallen and scratch himself into bliss until the brad awl broke or the pole came down. There has been no demand for brad awls from the Kansas region since the first invoice." The Junction City Weekly Union, 25 April 1869

Other encounters were a bit more on the hazardous side.

"A man named Parks, met with a serious accident a few days ago, while chopping in Elm Grove. He and a brother were endeavoring to kill a wood rat that they had found, one trying to step on the rat and the other striking at it with an ax—when the former received a full force of the blow on the instep of his right foot, cutting in nearly half off. Dr.E.J. Donnell dressed the wound, which is doing well." The Stockton News, 16 January 1879

"A young chap down at the river
accidentally (sic) sat down on a wood rat Christmas Eve. He will probably be able to sit down again in about six weeks." The Kirwin Chief, 31 December 1879

"On Sunday morning last, while an escort of the 10th Infantry, were about sixty miles southwest of here one of the number met with a serious accident. It seems that Private Anderson, of "A" Company, was riding a blind mule, and the animal stepping into a prairie dog hole, he was thrown over its head, breaking his forearm. By the time the Fort was reached the arm had become so badly swollen that it was impossible to set it for some time." Ellis County Star, 8 June 1876

Although not directly hazardous to the settler's life, the depredations that occurred as the native fauna utilized the crops and livestock was significant.

"A skunk killed one-hundred and twenty-five spring chickens for a farmer near Ellis last week." Hays City Sentinel, 19 July 1876

"Fourteen opossums were killed in one hen-house, by one man, in one night recently, at Chanute—and it wasn't a very good night for possums, neither." Hays City Sentinel, 25 May 1878

"An animal supposed to be a mountain lion has killed nine head of cattle and a number of sheep in Trego County." Hays City Sentinel, 19 July 1879

"Ellis county possesses thousand of the genus Coyote, and while their depredations never extend to the slaughter of humans they are inflicting incalculable damage upon herds, flocks, and poultry yards. Speaking on this subject Mr. Tom Hamilton says... that a short time ago he and one or two others put out some poison and the next day found between forty and fifty dead wolves lying about, while the number of live animals seemed in no wise decreased." Hays City Sentinel, 9 July 1880

Upon settlement and the planting of crops and the keeping of livestock some of the native fauna turned to these as a ready source of nourishment.

"In 1870, the amount of crops planted, consisted of about three acres of sod corn, a few beans and vines. But the Buffalo which were about the only inhabitants that could be utilized by man, and which roamed these hills in vast herds, completely demolished that small planting and nothing came to maturity." Smith County Pioneer, 27 July 1876

"Droves of antelope feed on the wheat field of our county daily." Ellis County Star, 4 January 1877

"Prairie chickens are very numerous—helping themselves to the unhusked corn." Saline County Journal, 26 December 1878

"There are a great many yellow-headed black birds in Langdon township, which have done much damage by pulling up the young corn and scratching up the millet seeds that were recently sown. But they are supposed to have aided the cold weather in killing the young 'hoppers, none are left.'" Hutchinson News, 17 May 1877

"The prairie dogs are making terrible havoc on corn and wheat fields in our immediate neighborhood. The farmers have waged war on them and say they intend to drive them away." Saline County Journal, 12 June 1879

"Winter wheat is looking excellent in this section. The jack-rabbits, however, are reported to be destroying small fields in some parts of the county. More greyhounds are needed." Smith County Pioneer, 2 November 1876

"Wild geese and white cranes are doing their best to acquire their share of the growing wheat crop, and some of our folks are doing their best to secure their share of said geese and cranes." Pawnee County Herald, 14 April 1877

There were encounters in which the
very life of the settler or his family was in jeopardy.

"A negro soldier at Fort Hays, one day last week was gored to death by a buffalo. There is vast amount of amusement in hunting buffalo, but when a wounded one turns on a fellow it is not so fine." The Junction City Weekly Union, 5 October 1867

"Mr. Manning of Kingman was in our city on Friday and related to us a rather thrilling adventure of James Ball two miles north of Kingman on the 2nd inst. Ball and a comrade saw a buffalo about dark on a ridge bordering a valley through which they were riding. Dismounting they fired with a Spencer rifle. The animal was wounded and charged down upon them. They could not get the gun to fire again and so they ran for their horses, and mounted with the buffalo in hot pursuit. They fled in opposite directions. The buffalo selected Ball, pursued, notwithstanding several revolver shots, so rapidly as to overhaul and kill his horse. The furious brute's horns struck astride of Ball's right leg. One of the horns was stopped by the saddle but the other plowed a mortal wound. Ball was thrown about ten feet and on regaining his feet is said to have done the fastest running ever seen on the Minnescah. Fortunately the buffalo passed off in another direction, which however, Ball did not notice until he was several hundred yards away. Ball says it was a damned shame that a cow buffalo should 'get away' with two men mounted and armed, but under the circumstances it could not be helped." The Hutchinson News, 16 July 1874

"Some parties the other day found the skeleton of a man about four miles west of town. From the shape of the skull it is supposed to be that of a white man. Near this skeleton lie the bones of a large buffalo, and a few feet away the barrel of a very large rifle was found, and a little to one side was found the broken gunstock. From the position of things generally, it is very evident that there has here taken place a life and death struggle between a wounded buffalo and a hunter. The broken gun would indicate that the struggle was a bitter one, and that away from camp and friends the hunter had fought the enraged animal until death, and, that they had then died together." Hays City Sentinel, 11 April 1879

Rattlesnakes posed a continuous problem for the Kansas Settler.

"Miss Nettie C. Carpenter, a young lady from Michigan, had quite an adventure recently. She has taken herself a claim, built thereon a very neat stone dug-out, roofed with poles and dirt. To keep the dirt from falling down she put heavy paper on the under side of the pole, and, hearing a rattling noise on the paper, she thought that the mice were at work. She got the broomstick and gave the paper a gentle tap, when instead of mice as the young lady thought, she brought down a hissing viper. His vipership immediately took possession of the bed and coiled himself for a fight, but he got more of it than he could stand and has to succumb to the courage of Miss Nettie. He measured four feet in length. How many of you eastern ladies would have fought and killed it with a broomstick?" The Larned Optic, 30 May 1879

"Mr. Brummit gave the account of a boy who died from a rattlesnake bite. It seems that the boy was barefooted, and that the snake reached his head out of hole and struck him twice. He thought he has stepped on a sharp stick until alarming symptoms began to appear. He died in four hours after being bitten." Stockton News, 22 August 1878

Some of the native animals were hydrophobic, and a number of settlers died from being bitten by rabid animals.
"About two weeks ago a young man...was out on the plains beyond Wallace, with a party engaged in hunting buffalo. During the night the young man to whom we refer was bitten by a skunk. He was sleeping on the ground at the time, and the animal, through some means, made the attack, inflicting an ugly wound. The victim bandaged the cut as best he could, and troubled himself very little about it at the time, as it gave him pain only occasionally. Last Saturday he made his way to Wallace, --the wound having swollen and become extremely painful,--in hope of having it dressed and inflammation subdued. Shortly after his arrival at Wallace, the unfortunate young man was seized with a sudden fit of drowsiness. To this he succumbed, and within two hours after dropping to sleep he breathed his last.

Deceased was buried on Sunday last, and when placed in his coffin his body threw off in a great degree the odor of the much-detested animal that caused his death." Daily Rocky Mountain News, 17 January 1873

This book would be an excellent addition to a school library and could be used in science courses to portray the interactions that occurred between the native fauna of Kansas and the newest members of the Great Plains environment--the permanent settler.

This cloth bound book may be ordered from the University of Oklahoma Press, P.O. Box 787, Norman, Oklahoma 73030-0787 or by telephone at (800)627-7377. The cost of the book is $27.95 plus shipping and handling.