What Happened to Pike's Animals

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In 1806 the Zebulon Pike Expedition passed through what is now Kansas for the purpose of “exploring the internal parts of Louisiana.” At that time, all of Kansas was part of the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase of 1803. On Sept. 10, 1806, they were at the divide between the Neosho and the Verdigris rivers and on Sept. 11 camped near Bazaar in Chase County. On Sept. 12, 1806, he was very near the site of this, the 2009 Symphony in the Flint Hills location. Here, he made reference and was since credited with naming the Flint Hills.


Commenced our march at seven o’clock. Passed very rough [ruff] flint hills. My feet blistered and very sore. I stood on a hill, and in one view below me saw buffalo, elk, deer, cabrie, and panthers. Encamped on the main [Cottonwood] branch of Grand [Neosho] river, which had very steep banks and was deep. Dr. Robinson, Bradley, and Barney arrived after dusk, having killed three buffalo, which, with one I killed, and two by the Indians, made six; the Indians alleging it was the Kans’ hunting ground, therefore they would destroy all the game they possibly could. Distance 18 miles.
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On that day Zebulon Pike not only named the Flint Hills but also gave us a description of the wildlife seen from this location. His naming of the Flint Hills has stood the passage of time. But what of the wildlife observations; what changes have occurred? Obviously some names have changed. We still recognize buffalo, elk, and deer. Cabrie is the pronghorn or the antelope. And the panther is today known as the mountain lion.

**BISON**

Without a doubt, the bison or buffalo was the most important animal on the Great Plains to both the Native Americans and the members of the Pike Expedition. For the Expedition, buffalo provided easily obtained food. For the Native Americans the buffalo was much more than food. It also provided clothing, tools, and even shelter. The annihilation and near extinction of the buffalo has been well documented and is well known. An estimate of 4 million buffalo in one herd was made in southwestern Kansas in 1871. From 1872-1874, 1.3 million buffalo hides were shipped from Kansas. The last wild buffalo was shot in Kansas in 1879 north of Elkhart. From estimates ranging from 30-70 million animals, the herd was reduced to only about 300 animals by 1893. Private herds in the United States today total less than 200,000 animals. There are no truly wild herds today in Kansas, but one of the best places to see them is at the Maxwell Wildlife Refuge east of McPherson.

**ELK**

Like the bison, the elk, or Wapiti, was also pushed from the Great Plains. Elk were still considered common in western Kansas as late as 1875. They were extirpated from most of the Great Plains by the 1890s. Elk were originally a plains animal, at home on the open prairies. Unlike bison however, elk were able to make a very tasty tea. It has the flavor of black tea but has no caffeine.

**WILD PLUM, Prunus americana**

Fleshy, oval fruits are produced on multi-branched shrubs, which can be pruned into small trees. The plums can be yellow, fire-engine red, or purple, and vary in size and flavor from patch to patch. They occur in thickets on the edges of prairies, in pastures, fields, and along streams. The smell of plum flowers in the spring is perfume and the taste in the late summer is tart and delicious. Many native tribes and immigrants have eaten them fresh, and some have dried them or made them into jams. The Lakota had a "red plum moon" in August that was a time for feasting.


Jones, Elaine Shas. Botanical Illustrator Matfield Green, Kansas.

In Praise of Prairie, Kelly Kindscher Associate Scientist Kansas Biological Survey University of Kansas Kindscher@KU.edu http://www.kbs.ku.edu/people/staff_/www/kindscher/facweb_kindscher.htm
To make a prairie it takes a clover
and one bee...
One clover and a bee,
and revery.
The revery alone will do
if bees are few.
Emily Dickinson

adapt to the forested foothills and
mountains of the west. In these areas
they are still common. In 1981 elk
were reintroduced to the Cimarron
National Grasslands in southwest
Kansas. Since then, wandering
animals have been seen in various
parts of western Kansas. Much of
this herd also dispersed to Colorado,
Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas.
In 1986 reintroductions occurred
on Fort Riley Military Reservation.
The herd quickly grew to about 250
animals, and today the herd size is
maintained at less than 200 animals.
This herd provides the only hunting
opportunities for elk in Kansas.

When Zebulon Pike observed deer
in this area in 1806, he likely was
observing mule deer. Mule deer are
at home in the open prairies whereas
white-tailed deer are typically animals
of the woodlands. In Pike's day few trees
lined the rivers and streams. White-
tails were restricted to the woodlands
of far eastern Kansas. As with the other
large animals of the prairies, deer were
decimated with unregulated hunting
by the early 1900s. Although mule
deer were historically abundant in the
western two-thirds of Kansas, by the
1930s only a few mule deer remained in
far western Kansas. White-tailed deer
began showing signs of recovery in the
1950s. Although originally limited to
eastern Kansas, increasing woodlands along rivers and streams allowed whitetails to move into parts of Kansas not historically occupied. Today the abundance of white-tailed deer may be pushing mule deer further westward.

**PRONGHORNS**

Pronghorns or antelope have always been an animal of the wide-open grasslands. They are more comfortable on the flat open shortgrass prairies of western Kansas, eastern Colorado, Wyoming and Montana than on the rolling Flint Hills and the tallgrass prairies of eastern Kansas. At the time of settlement, the Flint Hills were likely the eastern edge of their range in North America. Unregulated hunting pushed the pronghorns to the western edge of Kansas by the late 1800s. Pronghorns were never completely eliminated as roaming herds crossed back and forth between Kansas and Colorado. Reintroductions into some of their historic range in Kansas began in 1964. Reintroductions began in the Flint Hills in 1978. Today, approximately 2,000 pronghorns are found in western Kansas. A few live in the Red Hills of Barber and Comanche counties and perhaps 50 can still be found in the Flint Hills.

**MOUNTAIN LIONS**

When Pike reported seeing panthers, he was in fact seeing an animal that we know as a mountain lion, cougar or puma. These are different names that all refer to the same animal. This large cat has a huge range that stretches from Alaska to southern South America. It’s found in areas where it has sufficient food and deer is one of their favorite prey animals. It’s not surprising to expect these animals to disappear along with the big game that historically provided them food. Like the previous animals discussed, the mountain lion had nearly disappeared by the late 1800s. During that era the last recorded animal was killed in Ellis County in 1904. As deer populations recovered, people again began reporting sightings of these large cats. Today, mountain lions occur in Kansas in small numbers.

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DEER
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investment was enhanced by the fact that
turkeys were a sporting bird, a promising
attraction for hunters, and also an inviting
prospect for other wildlife enthusiasts and
many landowners.

My father looked forward to the
time they would colonize the family
farm in Washington County. In the
1980's my wife and I purchased two
modest ranch properties in the northern
Flint Hills. Less than a year later I was
couraged to discover turkey tracks
and a feather. Two gobblers and three
hens established local residency during
the courtship and nesting season the
following spring. That fall I surprised a
flock of twenty-two, mostly poults-of-
the-year. They were searching for acorns
under Chinquapin oaks. There were
exactly forty-four in a flock observed in
the same spot a year later. The rest is
decision! Wild turkeys haven't increased
exponentially and doubled annually,
but they have achieved numbers within
the carrying capacity of the habitat and
continue to do well.

John James Audubon's paintings
of these colorful birds are among the
most popular of his illustrations. His
fascination was also illustrated by the
written detail of his observations of this
noble bird. He wrote, "I have been much
diverted, while watching two males in
fierce conflict..." He added that in late
winter and early spring when "They
begin to experience the impulses of
propagation" the gobblers "puff and strut,
moving with as much celerity as their
ideas of ceremony seem to admit. While
thus occupied the males often encounter
each other, in which case desperate
battles take place...."

Nothing compares to the courtship
rituals of a group of male greater prairie-
chickens. However, for the person who
isn't in a position to be in a blind an
hour before sunrise and remain hidden
for hours on a prairie ridge, watching
long-bearded gobblers spread their
huge tails and display their fans is a
worthy and more achievable alternative.

Human disturbances can be highly