

WHEN NEW MEXICO WAS PART OF THE

AMERICAN SERENGETI

BY DAN FLORES

IN LATE SUMMER THREE YEARS AGO, on one of those dawns I long ago began calling a “blanket of heaven” daybreak, I loaded my dog into our Jeep and headed out through the Northern New Mexico morning. High pressure had built in, clouds from the previous afternoon had dispersed and the air was so calm that windmills along the Turquoise Trail seemed still asleep. It looked to be a terrific day to see a part of

the West that for two centuries had made Santa Fe a final destination in an epic journey.

We had slipped out of the house early to see the sunrise sweep across Santa Fe and the flanks of the Sangre de Cristos, so we were past I-25’s wide swing around Hermits Peak and Las Vegas while morning color still lingered on the plains. Pronghorns danced in the raking light near Fort Union, and a golden eagle swung over the highway. Kodi and I pressed on. We were bound for a place I’d been reading about and now wanted to see: Dry Cimarron Scenic Byway, the original route of the Santa Fe Trail across northeastern New Mexico.

Why that remote part of the state? I’d been working on a book, soon to go off to its publisher, that I was calling *American Serengeti*. Its topic was the story of western wildlife, unfortunately not an especially happy tale. But if many of the animals were no longer here, at least the settings remained. And since I’d been reading so many accounts of wildlife encounters on the Santa Fe Trail, I’d resolved to at least witness the settings of what had for tens of thousands of years been one of the world’s great wildlife spectacles.

So many drives across New Mexico net close modern observers a few pronghorns perhaps, maybe an eagle or a coyote or two, but no buffalo, no thundering herds of colorful wild horses, certainly no wolves or grizzlies

and usually not even a prairie dog town. But this mostly blank slate is not how this country looked once upon a time.

Let me offer up an initial example, just to reset the mind. Michael Steck, a physician who traveled the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico in the early 1850s, offers us an initial glimpse of our North American equivalent of the African Serengeti. Like many other travelers, Steck and his party found that any time they got among the bison herds, their days and nights

George Catlin
Wild Horses at Play, 1834-1837





New Mexico high plains petroglyph

filled with the bellowing of thousands of animals and the sight of surging rivers of bison slowly parting to allow travelers to pass. But that was only the beginning. Large gray and white wolves also became astonishingly numerous. Indeed, wolves were such a feature of the Santa Fe Trail that Steck wrote: “We see immense numbers of them. A common thing [is] to see 50 at a sight. In the daytime [we are] never out of sight of them, see Hundreds in a day.”

Almost exactly 200 years ago, New Mexico and the Southwest were being attached to the United States via an economic ribbon, the new trail between Missouri and Santa Fe. Until they got to Santa Fe, Taos and Albuquerque, traders traveling this commercial highway found themselves in what was largely still an ancient, Indian-managed land. This West was both a Native homeland and one of the few ancient continental spectacles to last into the modern age. And no element of it amazed outsiders as much as the staggering abundance of wild animals, which American and European travelers pronounced one of the wonders of the world. As Kodi and I drove past Wagon Mound to the outskirts of Raton, then turned eastward toward the velvety grass carpet



Grizzly bear

of the graceful landforms of Capulin Volcano National Monument, I thought of the emergence 1,500 years ago of a booming, agriculture-based Indian population up and down the Río Grande. Because of these farmers, for the past 1,000 years, the largest concentrations of wildlife were mostly farther east. Hence the famous “mutualistic” trade between Pueblo farmers and plains hunters, such as Plains Apaches and Comanches, as captured vividly in the visitors center mural at Pecos National Historical Park. Plains hunters and Pueblo peoples long met at villages such as Pecos, Galisteo and Picuris and exchanged vegetables (carbohydrates) and meat products (protein) in a trade that allowed both farmers and hunters to avoid nutritional bottlenecks.

The American Serengeti truly was Africa-like. It featured the poetry and spectacle of thronging bison playing the role of thronging African wildebeests, pronghorns assuming the role of antelopes and gazelles, wolves filling the niche of wild dogs and coyotes doing an almost exact impression of jackals. While Africa had retained its lions and elephants, hyenas and cheetahs (we lost our versions of those to the Pleistocene extinctions of 10,000 years ago), the historic American Serengeti had another king of beasts, the grizzly, which played a godlike, lionlike role on the prairies.

And there was this: a specific event of New Mexico history would actually add a creature that had been missing from the American bestiary for at least 8,000 years. After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 drove the Spaniards out of New Mexico and liberated their horse herds, stallion bands of Spanish barb horses — many with zebra-striped legs and black dorsal stripes — went wild across the plains within a century. Since horses had evolved on the North American savannas, had spread from there around the world and had then mysteriously gone extinct in their homeland, their population explosion gave the plains

a Pleistocene look for the first time in millennia. It also drew Indian peoples from all over the West to what seemed like the point-source supply of wild horses.

Like Steck, scores of travelers left accounts of this marvelous world of only 200 years in the past. Trader Josiah Gregg, an amateur naturalist who authored the 19th-century best seller *Commerce of the Prairies*, is one of our best sources on New Mexico wildlife. He wrote perceptively about “prairie wolves,” which residents of Santa Fe knew by their ancient Aztec name, coyotes: “Like ventriloquists, a pair of these will represent a dozen



Bison in New Mexico

distinct voices in such succession — will bark, chatter, yelp, whine, and howl . . . that one would fancy a score of them at hand.” On pronghorns, Pleistocene survivors that had actually outlived their extinct cheetah predators, Gregg wrote, “That species of gazelle known as the antelope is very numerous upon the high plains . . . [and] is most remarkable for its fleetness, not bounding like the deer but skimming over the ground as though upon skates.” And gray wolves? “Although the buffalo is the largest,” Gregg averred, “he has by no means the control among the prairie animals; the sceptre of authority has been lodged with the large gray wolf.”

Grizzlies may never have been as numerous in the southern West as they were farther north, but originally their range covered almost all of New Mexico. Like elks, grizzlies were originally common on the plains, scavenging on the bison surplus. Southwestern grizzlies first attracted international attention in 1807, when explorer Zebulon Pike sent a pair of grizzly cubs from the unknown West to President Thomas Jefferson.

In 1821 a famous encounter with a grizzly, a story told and retold on the frontier, took place on Purgatory Creek, just beyond the present New Mexico/Colorado border. There a group of Louisiana and Missouri traders (including journalist Jacob Fowler) stumbled on a huge grizzly, likely their first inkling that the West held anything like a grizzly bear. The bear was killed, but so was one of their party, who died three days after being bitten through the skull. Three decades later, in 1850, John Cleminson wrote that his emigrant party killed one “very large brown bear” and a smaller one — both likely grizzlies — near Wagon Mound.

Many surviving accounts describe two other large, charismatic animals of historic New Mexico: wild horses and bison. The artist George Catlin, who in 1834 observed wild horse herds in western Oklahoma, both painted and wrote compellingly about them. But it was Bostonian Albert Pike, a traveler in early 1830s New Mexico, who perhaps waxed most poetic about mustangs: “Hardly a day passed without our seeing a herd of them, either quietly feeding or careering off wildly in the distance. They are the most beautiful sight to be met with in the prairie . . . with their manes floating in the wind, they present a beautiful contrast to the heavy, unwieldy herds of buffalo.”

As for bison, fascinated accounts stretch across the centuries, from the Coronado *entrada* to Colonel Richard Dodge’s famous posting from the Santa Fe Trail in 1871: “The whole country appeared one mass of buffalo.” One of my favorites was left to us not long after the Stephen Long expedition of 1819-1820, returning from a Rocky Mountain investigation, fell upon the Canadian River in New Mexico. The numbers of pronghorns, wild horses, bison and their predators astonished them. The animals “appeared wholly unaccustomed to the sight of men. The bisons and wolves moved slowly off to right and left, leaving a lane for the party to pass,” wrote one member of the group.



Gray wolves under assault on the plains

PHOTOS COURTESY DAN FLORES

TRAGICALLY FOR OUR GENERATION, THE UNEASY HISTORICAL TRUTH IS THAT THIS AMERICAN SERENGETI BECAME THE SCENE OF A SLAUGHTERHOUSE. IN THE YEARS FROM THE 1820S TO THE 1920S, THIS SINGLE AMERICAN REGION EXPERIENCED THE LARGEST WHOLESAL DESTRUCTION OF ANIMAL LIFE DISCOVERABLE IN MODERN HISTORY.

Tragically for our generation, the uneasy historical truth is that this American Serengeti became the scene of a slaughterhouse. From the 1820s to the 1920s, this single American region experienced the largest wholesale destruction of animal life discoverable in modern history. In years of good rainfall, the Great Plains could support 30 million bison. By the 1880s, only about 1,000 remained. But the global market’s insatiable appetite for wildlife wasn’t confined to just bison. Pronghorn antelope numbers had probably reached 15 million. We drew them down to a mere 13,000 before we decided we’d killed enough of them. Grizzly bears once had a continental population in excess of 100,000. By the 20th century they were down to a few hundred scattered bears, none left on the plains. New Mexico’s very last grizzlies fell in the 1940s.

Naturalists think that by 1880, two centuries after the Pueblo Revolt, wild horses had reinhabited the plains in numbers well upward of 2 million. But then they were relentlessly caught



Pronghorns in New Mexico

GENE PEACH

(and killed) in drive corrals, shot by cowboys as cow competition, used as carcass bait to poison wolves and coyotes, and sacrificed in European wars. By the 1920s, the last wild horses on the plains ended up bound for new dog food plants in the Midwest.

When the Santa Fe Trail opened, somewhere between a quarter and a half million gray wolves were functioning as the dominant, keystone predators on the Great Plains. But bounties and wolf hunters with strychnine baits took hundreds of thousands, and in the 1920s salaried federal hunters trapped and poisoned the last few scattered plains lobos. A final, pathetic story from the Colorado/New Mexico border tells of a legendary female wolf named Three-Toes. With no male wolf left for creating a pair-bond, desperate to find a mate, she seduced a ranch collie. Federal hunters killed her collie paramour, then all their hybrid pups and finally her in the early 1920s.

Aside from those ultra-survivors, coyotes, and a carefully reconstituted population of pronghorns, we Americans have erased this ancient plains world. And while Africa has great game reserves such as Kruger National



Mexico, Kodi and I passed within a few miles of one of early America’s most important archeological sites. Just north of Capulin Volcano lies the first discovered site of the famous Folsom culture, whose practitioners lived out their lives on these grasslands 10,000 years in the past.

Like Blackwater Draw near Clovis, another legendary early human site farther south on the New Mexico plains, Folsom presents a fitting irony for the New Mexico plains’ peculiar burden of history. When humans first came to America, *this* was the place they settled. One hundred centuries ago, it was the plains’ wildlife that drew Folsom and Clovis people here.

Now, in our time, the plains are mostly an empty stage, and we modern Americans can’t seem to drive through it fast enough.

Dan Flores, a “New York Times” best-selling author, lives in the Galisteo Valley outside Santa Fe. His most recent books are “American Serengeti” and “Coyote America,” both published in 2016.



KITTY LEAKEN

WHERE THE WILD THINGS WERE

Dan Flores held the A.B. Hammond Chair in Western History at the University of Montana in Missoula from 1992 until he retired to his home outside Santa Fe in the spring of 2014. Alternately described as a “historian of place,” an “environmental historian” and a “master storyteller,” he is the award-winning author of 10 books and dozens of essays and articles on the environment, animals and culture of the West. His most recent works are *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains* and *Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History*, both published in 2016. *American Serengeti* (University Press of Kansas) took both the 2017 Stubbendieck Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize and the 2017 Wrangler Award for best nonfiction book from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. *Coyote America* (Basic Books) won the 2017 Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award and was a finalist for the 2017 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award.

Flores told *The Santa Fe New Mexican* last fall that he plans to write a “new, updated and more impressionistic version” of the classic *Wildlife in America* by Peter Matthiessen, continuing the saga of wildlife endangerment and the human story affecting it.

About *American Serengeti*:

“America’s Great Plains once possessed one of the grandest wildlife spectacles of the world, equaled only by such places as the Serengeti, the Masai Mara, or the veld of South Africa. Pronghorn antelope, gray wolves, bison, coyotes, wild horses, and grizzly bears: less than two hundred years ago these creatures existed in such abundance that John James Audubon was moved to write, ‘it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals.’

“In a work that is at once a lyrical evocation of that lost splendor and a detailed natural history of these charismatic species of the historic Great Plains ... Dan Flores draws a vivid portrait of each of these animals in their glory — and tells the harrowing story of what happened to them at the hands of market hunters and ranchers and ultimately a federal killing program in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. ... Far from the empty ‘flyover country’ of recent times, this landscape is alive with a complex ecology at least 20,000 years old — a continental patrimony whose wonders may not be entirely lost, as recent efforts hold out hope of partial restoration of these historic species.”

— University of Kansas

About *Coyote America*:

“Legends don’t come close to capturing the incredible story of the coyote. In the face of centuries of campaigns of annihilation employing gases, helicopters, and engineered epidemics, coyotes didn’t just survive, they thrived, expanding across the continent from Alaska to New York. In the war between humans and coyotes, coyotes have won, hands-down. *Coyote America* is the illuminating five-million-year biography of this extraordinary animal, from its origins to its apotheosis. It is one of the great epics of our time.”

— Basic Books

“A masterly synthesis of scientific research and personal observation.”

— *Wall Street Journal*

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