

Historical Accounts of Several Large Mammals in Oklahoma

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Pre-1900 accounts of the gray wolf, black bear, mountain lion, elk, and pronghorn in Oklahoma are reviewed. Because Oklahoma was not opened to white settlement until late in the nineteenth century, early reports on the natural history of the state are sparse, scattered, and frequently anecdotal.

INTRODUCTION

Because Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) was settled by Caucasians relatively later than surrounding states (beginning in 1889), there is a paucity of information on the fauna of Oklahoma. Prior to the twentieth century, the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*), mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), elk (*Cervus canadensis*), and pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) were at least locally common in the area. Since 1900, however, drastic reductions in their ranges and numbers have occurred. This paper reviews historical references to these species (Table 1) and discusses reasons for their disappearance.

GRAY WOLF

One of the earliest wolf sightings in Oklahoma was by the French explorer Brevel. Brevel mentioned seeing wolves in the Wichitas on his 1765 trip to Santa Fe (1). The Wichita Mountains are in Comanche County (southwestern Oklahoma).

In 1718, de la Harpe (10), while traveling through Muskogee County near the present town of Haskell, wrote: "One buffalo herd was followed by a pack of wolves as large as those in France." This is significant because the observer noted the size of the wolves. Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are much smaller.

Wolf packs frequently accompanied herds of bison and elk. In 1820, Long (2), traveling along the Canadian River in central Oklahoma, stated: "The bison and wolves moved slowly off to the right and left leaving a lane for the party to pass . . ." And on the Chisholm Trail between the Cimarron River and the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River, Borroum (3) wrote in 1871: "Buffalo, horses, elk, deer, antelope, wolves . . . were all mixed together and it took several hours for them to pass . . . so that we could proceed . . ."

Seven times in *The Rambler in Oklahoma*, Latrobe (4) referred to wolves. He noted their interaction with bison in the prairie habitat: "The wolves hunt the stragglers cows and calves in packs."

de Pourtales (5), on tour with Washington Irving, recounted: "I was awakened once or twice by a concert of wolves, who howled in the thicket about twenty paces from me approach . . . We get a great deal of exercise by riding twelve leagues a day and by chasing down wolves all around us . . . The prairies are full of them . . ." Their camp was near the Canadian River south of Fort Gibson, probably in what is now Muskogee County.

Gould (6) asserted that the gray wolf was still present in Oklahoma as late as 1900. According to McCarley (7), full-blooded red wolves (*C. rufus*) were completely extirpated from the state by 1950.

BLACK BEAR

Bears were abundant in the oak cross timbers of central Oklahoma in the 1830s. Latrobe (4), who accompanied Washington Irving, referred to bears five times in reporting his exploration of this region, and stated that they were fat from feeding on a harvest of acorns. Gregg (8) made a similar observation: "Among the cross timbers, the black bear is very common, living chiefly upon acorns and other fruits."

Bears were apparently plentiful across the area (6). Maley (9), while exploring the Red River (probably in present-day Choctaw or Bryan County), observed many bears. de la Harpe (10), in what is now Pushmataha County, killed a bear during a hunt for food in 1719. In 1823, a ranger with General E. P. Gaines (11) saw a bear along the Grand River in northeast Oklahoma.

TABLE 1. Early dates and locations for several large Oklahoma mammals.
 W = Wolf; B = Bear; L = Mountain lion; E = Elk; P = Pronghorn.

Year	Observer	Ref.	Location (some counties uncertain)	Species				
				W	B	L	E	P
1601	de Onate	2	Roger Mills Co. (?)				x	
1718	de la Harpe	10	Muskogee Co., near Haskell	x				
1719	de la Harpe	10	Pushmataha Co.		x			
1765	Brevel	1	Wichita Mtns.	x	x	x	x	x
1800	Records	16	Eagle Chief Cr.	x	x	x		
1806	Wilkinson	2	Arkansas R., near Salt Fork				x	x
1811	Sibley	21	Salt Fork of Red R.				x	x
1812	Maley	9	Kiamichi R.			x		
1812	Maley	9	Red R.		x			
1812	Maley	9	Salt Branch of Red R.		x			
1819	Nuttall	12	Near Poteau R.		x			
1820	Long	2	Can. Oklahoma, near Canadian R.	x				
1820	Long	2	W. Oklahoma, near Canadian R.		x		x	x
1820	Long	2	Canadian R.					x
1823	Gaines	11	Grand R.	x	x	x		
1832	de Pourtales	5	Canadian Fork near Arkansas R.	x				
1832	Lumbard	4	Pawnee Co., Bear's Glen		x			
1832	Latrobe	4	Tulsa Co., Sand Springs				x	
1832	Bean	20	Tulsa Co., Red Fork of Arkansas R.				x	
1832	A ranger	4	Oklahoma Co., NE of Edmond		x			
1832	Latrobe	4	Oklahoma Co., near Arcadia		x			
1832	Latrobe	4	Cleveland Co., Norman	x				
1832	de Pourtales	5	Canadian R. below Ft. Gibson	x				
1832	Latrobe	4	Seminole Co., Little R.					x
1834	Evans	32	McIntosh Co., Eufaula		x			
1834	Wheelock	26	Comanche & Kiowa Co., Wichita Mts.		x			
1834	Dragoons	26	Comanche Co., Saddle Mt.; E. Cache Cr.			x		
1839	Gregg	8	Stephens Co.		x			
1839	Gregg	8	Woodward Co., near Richmond					x
1843	Boone	31	Near Oklahoma-Kansas line				x	
1843	Boone	31	Kay Co.					x
1843	Boone	31	Grove Cr.					x
1849	Woodhouse	19	Muskogee Co., Ft. Gibson	x				
1849	Woodhouse	19	Nowata Co., Childers Ford, Verdigris R.			x		
1850	Woodhouse	19	Major or Blaine Co., Longdale					
1852	Marcy	15	Cotton Co.		x			
1852	Bushman	15	S. Branch of Cache Cr.			x		
1852	Marcy	15	Tillman Co., Grandfield			x		
1852	Marcy	15	Beckham Co.				x	
1852	Marcy	15	Wichita Mtns.					x
1852	Marcy	15	N. Fork of Red R.					x
1853	Marcy	15	Red River	x				
1853	Whipple	27	Near Deer Cr.		x			
1858	Sitgreaves & Woodruff	18	Cimarron R.	x		x		
1859	Mead	24	E. Indian Terr.	x				
1860	De B. R. Keim	1	Wichita Mtns.		x			
1864	Mead	24	Alfalfa Co.			x		
1868	Mead	24	Indian Terr. S. of Canadian R.			x		
1869	Sheridan	1	Wichita Mtns.				x	
1871	Borroum	3	Chisholm Trail near Cimarron R.	x			x	x
1880	Records	16	Eagle Chief Cr.					x
1881	Hopkins	1	Kiowa Co.				x	
1883	Payne	17	McClain Co., Canadian R.	x	x	x		
1885	Cross	29	Grant Co.			x		
1889	Richardson & Rowley	28	NW Oklahoma	x				
1880s	Hildreth	16	Major Co. (?), W. of Glass Mtns.				x	
1890	Gaut	1	Greer Co.					x
1900	Gould	6	Oklahoma	x				
n.d.	Ward	28	Indian Territory			x		

Ursus americanus inhabited such diverse habitats as prairies, mountains and woodlands. Nuttall (12), an early botanist, also took notes on the fauna of eastern Oklahoma. Nuttall said: ". . . in the morning our party fell upon a favorite amusement, in the pursuit of two bears; harmlessly feeding in the prairies, which being fat were soon overtaken and killed" (sic.).

In the Wichita Mountains of southwest Oklahoma, bears were once fairly common. Brevel mentioned bears in the Wichitas (1). Keim (1) found fresh bear signs in 1869 on a tree near Mount Scott. Skins of a sow and cub collected on Mount Scott by Gaut (30) are in the U.S. National Museum. According to Halloran and Glass (25), the last four bears in the Wichitas were killed in 1934.

MOUNTAIN LION

Although the bobcat (*Felis rufus*) is still widespread in Oklahoma, its larger relative, the mountain lion, was probably extirpated by the early 1900's. This large cat impressed early travellers who encountered it.

The French explorer Brevel (1) in the Wichita Mountains in 1765 wrote: ". . . on the mountains, spotted tiger (an early record of jaguar in Oklahoma?), panther, and wild cat." "Wild cat" refers to the bobcat; however, the "spotted tiger" could possibly have been a jaguar. Jaguars ventured into southern Texas during this time (14), but have never been recorded in Oklahoma. It is possible that Brevel saw the spotted cub of a mountain lion.

On July 15, 1852, Bushman was hunting deer along the south branch of Cache Creek in southwestern Oklahoma when he attempted to bring a fawn closer by "bleating." But, to his great surprise, he attracted instead a mountain lion. Marcy (15) wrote of the incident: ". . . when immediately behind the fawn came a huge panther bounding rapidly towards him." Marcy also encountered a cougar. While passing through present-day Tillman County near Grandfield on May 17, 1852, he saw a large animal coming toward him. He wrote: "I fired several shots which took effect . . . He was a fine specimen of the North American Cougar (*Felis concolor*)" (15).

Records (16) mentioned mountain lions among many other mammals seen in 1800 near the Alfalfa-Major County line. Payne (17) wrote that in February 1883, panthers, wild cats, prairie dogs, and jack rabbits, etc., were found along the Canadian River in McClain County, central Oklahoma. Sitgreaves and Woodruff (18), during their travels through Oklahoma in 1858, stated: ". . . of quadrupeds (we) found but a few Dusky Wolves (*Canis nubilus*), panther (*Felis buco*) . . ." These scientific names have of course since been changed.

Woodhouse (19), an avid ornithologist, made camp at Childers Ford on the Verdigris River while passing through Oklahoma during 1849. A quote from his journal reads: "I was awakened one night whilst in the camp by the cry of a panther (*Felis concolor*, Mountain Lion) . . . in the swamp in back of our tent." This would have been in southwestern Rogers or northeastern Wagoner County.

The exact date that cougars were extirpated from Oklahoma is not known. Ranger Earl Drummond stated that "the last cougar killed in the [Wichita] mountains was in 1900" (1).

ELK

In 1601, de Onate (2), traveling through what is now Roger Mills County in westcentral Oklahoma, encountered ". . . deer which are as large as horses. They traveled in droves of two and three hundred and their deformity (antlers?) causes one to wonder whether they are deer or some other animal." These were almost certainly elk.

While de Onate did not specifically identify the animals he saw as elk, most explorers described them in greater detail. Bean (20) crossed Oklahoma in 1832 with Washington Irving. Irving wrote of Bean: "He abandoned his pursuit of the deer, and followed the newly discovered track. After some time he came in sight of elk, and had several fair chances of shot, but was anxious to bring down a large buck, which kept in advance."

Elk travelled in large herds. Sibley (21) stated: "Numerous herds of elk and antelope were frisking in the gay flower plain, giving life and animation to the charming scene." This was in 1811, probably in present-day Alfalfa County. Long (22), while passing through western Oklahoma along the Canadian River, observed: "In the afternoon the country we passed was swarming with innumerable herds of bison, wild horses, deer, elk, etc. . . ." In northeastern Oklahoma in 1806,

Wilkinson (2) wrote: "It appeared as if we had just gotten into the region of game; for the herds of buffalo, elk, goat (pronghorn), and deer surpassed credibility." The exact date that native elk disappeared from Oklahoma is uncertain.

PRONGHORN

The pronghorn is strictly a mammal of open grasslands. Vast Oklahoma prairies once provided excellent habitat for this animal, which probably surpassed even the bison in numbers.

The pronghorn can achieve speeds of up to 40 mph and the early explorers took note of this. While in the Wichita Mountains in 1852, Marcy (15) spotted several pronghorns and remarked that several greyhounds in his party could not catch them (1). Gregg (8) observed them near Richmond in Woodward County. He wrote: "Although we had encountered but very few buffalo since we left Spring Valley, they now begin to make their appearance again, though not in very large droves; together with the deer and the fleet antelope, which the latter struck me as being much more tame in this wild section of the prairies than I had seen it elsewhere." Latrobe (4) on October 30, 1832, entered the following passage in his journal: "A small group of goats or antelopes was pointed out to me, but I was unable to approach them to give their figure or appearance with any distinctness."

It is conjectural as to when the last pronghorn left the grasslands of Oklahoma. Gaut (30) stated: "As late as 1890 antelope were numerous in Greer County southwest of Mount Scott . . ." Gould (6) wrote: ". . . in 1900 there were several droves of antelope in what is now Tillman County."

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Historical references demonstrate that these five large mammals were a conspicuous element of Oklahoma's fauna prior to the twentieth century. Why did they disappear? The major reason was the rapid expansion in human population after the state was opened to settlement in 1889. As homesteaders settled into the territory, widespread deforestation, burning, and plowing of the rich prairie sod followed. Overgrazing was commonplace after barbed wire fences were erected. Because no game laws were in existence to protect wildlife, overhunting was also rampant. In 1912, Barde (23) portrayed the opening of the state ". . . as though the lightnings of heaven had fallen upon its wild life. Fires swept the country in all directions; armies of horsemen penetrated to remote places; wagons rumbled over the hills and down the valleys; there was a tumult of shouting and the roar of guns, and violence reigned, where until that day had been the peace of a primeval solitude. The slaughter had begun."

As ranchers moved in, they looked for possible solutions to the predator problem. Bounties were placed. In 1859, Mead (24) wrote: "Hunters with strychnia finally exterminated the wolves, myself and men killing some 5000 of them. They never molested people." Cougars were shot, wolves poisoned, and bears hunted down. All animals that were thought to harm livestock were killed with great fervor.

Elk and pronghorn diminished quickly after white men entered Indian Territory because of extensive hunting for food and sport.

Elk have been reintroduced into the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge and parts of eastern Oklahoma, and small numbers of pronghorns still roam the Panhandle. But the wolves, bears and cougars are gone. Occasionally, a bear or mountain lion wanders into the state, but none of these large mammals is an important component of Oklahoma's fauna today.

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