

Introduction

Like most Canadian families, mine has a bear story. It was best told by my great-aunt and -uncle Hazel and Lee, longtime residents of Calgary, who in the 1960s frequently drove up to a garbage dump in Banff National Park to watch the bears. The dump was generally known as the best place to see bears. While they were there on one occasion, my aunt sent my uncle out of the car with a bag of marshmallows to entice one bear closer to her window. She had a camera and wanted a good picture.

At family dinners and other social events, Lee used to relate what happened next. The marshmallows that he scattered around the front bumper of the car eventually attracted the attention of a big black bear. Head swaying, the massive animal moved within yards of the car. My aunt, however, was squinting through her camera's wide-angle viewfinder. Unsatisfied with the picture that she was composing, she urged Lee to entice the bear closer. (He would imitate her in the storytelling: "Closer, Lee! Closer!") When he found himself offering a marshmallow to the bear's sniffing nostrils, he realized that the animal was altogether too close. It unexpectedly reared up, teetered forward on hind legs, and grabbed my uncle in what can only be described as a bear hug. Fortunately, the vigilant dump attendant working nearby intervened before anything serious happened. He ran over and hit the bear with a baseball bat.

Our favourite part of the story came at its conclusion. Back inside the car, Lee discovered that Hazel had been so startled during the encounter that she had forgotten to take the picture.

Besides its entertainment value, the story raises questions about why my aunt wanted to photograph a bear in a dump in the first place. The public has less interest now in visiting wildlife in such settings. Wild animals are not ideally viewed, much less photographed, living off human garbage. If they are still allowed to frequent dumps, these garbage-eating bears are generally passed off as too domesticated for photographic preservation. I learned this when I asked a park attendant in Kananaskis Country, Alberta, where I

could find a similar garbage dump to watch bears. I was told in frosty tones that such recreation was no longer available in provincial parks, or in Banff National Park for that matter, and that if I wanted to see a bear that way I should go to a zoo.

Evidently, bears and other “wild” animals are appreciated differently according to historical circumstances. Like other aspects of the natural world, wild animals continue to occupy specific but changing places within the modern imagination. In this book, I attempt to identify such places in the history of the Canadian west up to the Second World War. As a “social” history, the book depends on a broad range of intellectual, social, and economic indices to evaluate the subsistence and imaginative purposes of wildlife within communities that happened to be in conflict with the natural world. It will become clear that, when they are followed to their sources, stories, symbols, and rituals surrounding wild animals found meaning in particular settings where expectations and fears accompanied western development. In the case of the Canadian west, frontier and pioneer societies invested wild animals with new symbolic meanings at critical moments of environmental and economic change.

Most European and North American communities have similar histories worth pursuing. This book delimits its geographical boundaries according to outstanding features of western Canadian history. In its earliest conceptualization, the area sprawled west of Lake Superior and beyond the mountains as a wild animal reserve. This expanse of forest, lake, river, and plain tended to form a single geographical reference in European mind-sets as early as the late eighteenth century. By then, it was the most contested beaver-pelt-producing region of Rupert’s Land, earlier ceded to the Hudson’s Bay Company as the extent of watershed drainage into Hudson Bay. By the early nineteenth century, it extended farther, as did the fur trade, when the British “Indian Territory” that encompassed the Mackenzie region and the western drainage of the Rockies was annexed to Rupert’s Land. The centre of the fur trade, western Canada found its first unity in the returns of animal pelts; a far more important economy of wild meat protein, however, gave these regions a common history. This was particularly the case with food sharing between First Nations and newcomers. Such a geographical boundary remained meaningful to early settlers making sense of their new surroundings.

Members of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, who first met in 1879, for instance, still collected the animals, fishes, birds, historical objects, and fur trade relics found within much of this area. Their interest in preserving the area’s wildlife specimens – including the almost extinct buffalo – was no accident. They identified meanings in wildlife that were attached to a particular place, the west. For them, wildlife had long returned tangible benefits to their western communities, social stability being one of

them. Subsequent periods of western development, becoming intensive by the late nineteenth century, led westerners to develop common directions of naturalist study, conservation schemes, and even some of the first preservation programs.

This topic can be approached as a regional study for another reason. In many areas of western Canada, common symbolic meanings were attached to wildlife. Westerners joined in the heavy promotion of the west officially undertaken by the federal government's Department of the Interior after 1870. Provincial, territorial, and municipal governments added their own promotional images. Wildlife taxidermy, illustrations, photographs, and peltry communicated certain ideas about vacant homestead lands and resource industries that demanded immigrant workers and outside investment. As might be expected, westerners using animals for such promotional purposes modified significantly the ethics and message of the North American conservation movement gaining ground elsewhere. Westerners indeed often advertised – and exaggerated – regional wealth by describing wild animals, fishes, and birds as superabundant. In doing so, they sharpened contrasts between the Canadian west and the impoverished American (and by implication) central Canadian wildlife populations.¹ Some aspects of environmentalism, indeed, were rejected completely in a region represented as inherently abundant in wildlife and, more evocatively, providing refuge for animals fleeing American overdevelopment, pollution, and industrialization.

The idea of western superabundance conformed to the expectations of visitors and writers who had long imagined the region as a “refuge” for wildlife. In early representations of Rupert's Land and the British “Indian Territory,” wild animals ranged in abundance. Animals, indeed, defined the region as wild. When *Saturday Magazine* published a lengthy essay on the fur trade in the 1840s, it conceptualized the region as a natural world separate from civilization;² it was, as the article suggested, a place for “privations and trials” where trappers and hunters not only faced hunger, cold, and fatigue but were also “frequently attacked by grizzly bears.”³ In this account and numerous others, wild animals defined certain harsh qualities that thrilled European readers of the time. This wildlife, indeed, gave to Rupert's Land a transcendental nature and inspired romantic writers who hoped that a close encounter with a terrifying natural realm would allow the soul to commune, or find its correspondence, with the natural and the unexplainable. Wildlife remained an essential ingredient in the mixture of geographical, topographical, and climatic features forming contemporary ideals of the British North American wilderness. Overrun by nature's “minions,” the territory was viewed as distinct from the artificial and temporal world of fallen humans. The *Saturday Magazine* article turned with great interest toward the fur traders themselves, who lived “in the depths of

wilderness": it was a wonder that men "more or less civilized" would abandon comforts at home to "wander through the wildernesses and sterile plain, the companions of wild beasts, or men almost equally wild."⁴

This was by no means an isolated case in which a narrative describing the fur trade territories identified animals and men as "companions," living together in such close proximity that they were equally confused as "wild." In many of the earliest published accounts, western images blurred distinctions between a wildlife and a human refuge. The region gained an identity from titles such as H.M. Robinson's *Great Fur Land*.⁵ The 1885 Achilles Daunt narrative more blatantly drew the west as a wildlife refuge. The central characters of *In the Land of Moose, Buffalo, and Bear* (describing areas of present-day northern Alberta) were wild animals and humans, the latter rejecting the false promises of civilization to live in wilderness areas. Sportsmen such as Dr. W.B. Cheadle, Lord Milton, Charles Messiter, and the Earl of Southesk sold their nineteenth-century narratives to readers back home fascinated by natural regions abounding in wildlife. The habit of thinking about the west as a land where wildlife ranged in plenitude proved to be long-standing. Even in the twentieth century, big-game hunters from abroad described western areas as "unexplored" and drew maps by hand to show the "wild" state of the land and their quarry. Never missing a promotional opportunity, Canadian Pacific Railway shipped taxidermy displays to Europe to magnify the western image as an abundant big-game reserve and a region welcoming homesteaders. A region so well stocked with wild animals, fishes, and birds offered almost unimaginable natural wealth. So persuasive was this proposition that, by the early 1900s, British Columbia's first chief game guardian, Bryan Williams, coined the expression "jumping-off places" to describe the province's many departure points for hunting and fishing opportunities. The expression suggested some of the emancipation offered by a visit to the western wildlife refuge.⁶

As the foregoing suggests, such an understanding of the west had a specific meaning. By the early nineteenth century, wild animals were increasingly invested with potent imaginative associations. The rise of Darwinian understandings of a "web of life" connected animals more closely with human natural history. Natural selection itself was founded on the mechanism and drama of competition between species in nature. It is difficult to assess the impact of Darwinian science on popular mind-sets in the nineteenth century; however, social Darwinists certainly capitalized on a distorted version of Darwinian theory that in turn heightened lay interest in animals in nature. By the late nineteenth century, wild animals displayed natural instincts. They competed with each other according to the amoral dictate of self-preservation, surviving at all costs. To Europeans, the struggle between wild animals raised an evocative corollary in urban settings: the relations of wild animals in nature might parallel a struggle between races,

between rich and poor, between civil and “savage” within human communities. Wild animals, then, gained new currency in writing and philosophical debate. European and American city dwellers, moreover, already perceived a distance between urban and rural environments; many, reviving Arcadian pastoralism, identified the degraded human condition within heavily populated places by pointing to alternative relations between animals in nature. Humanitarian campaigns against cruelty toward animals, the purity movement to cleanse dirt and morals in impoverished city areas, and the public drive to establish parks in cities all gathered momentum when their supporters pointed to the evident lessons of the wild animal kingdom.⁷

Although there were innumerable ideas about animals in the nineteenth century, Romanticism itself likely allowed Europeans and North Americans to view wildlife as essentially different from domesticated animals. Before the Romantics, traditional systems of philosophy ranked life on Earth according to scholastic hierarchies. Medieval thinkers, drawing on Aristotle and other classical writers, placed both wild and domesticated animals in the same category. Animal life was defined not according to its proximity to the human home and the degree of submission to human will but according to the nature of the soul invested in it by God. The popularity in France of René Descartes’s writings, as radical as they were in their conception of “animal machines,” revived interest among the *philosophes* in recognizing animals – and sometimes even humans – as machines driven by natural instincts. But many eighteenth-century thinkers still believed that humans had a divine intellect breathed into them by God and that their animal counterparts belonged to a lower order. Although that subkingdom gained greater complexity with naturalist study, its members were still separated by equal distance from humans’ special place in the divine order.

A new appreciation of nature in the nineteenth century prompted a revolutionary new sensibility toward animate and sentient beings. Now writers more readily separated wild from domesticated animals. The Romantic legacy defined nature as an organic rather than a mechanical entity and invested it with a host of positive qualities. Although the Romantics themselves did not display great interest in wildlife, their literary and artistic adherents subsequently appreciated animals living in nature as inherently different from their domesticated counterparts. This “wild life,” as it was first understood, had a mystical nature and an essential purity compared with animals subjugated to human will. As a construct of the imagination, “wildlife” as *indominitus* (i.e., not domesticated by humans) seemed to gain its positive understanding during the post-Romantic period.⁸ Thus, as ancient as the notion of wilderness is, as the “nest” or “lair” of wild animals (from the Anglo-Saxon expression *wylde(n) ness*),⁹ the nineteenth century was a period when modern values and veneration of wildlife came to the fore. Wild animals lived beyond human control; they offered numerous lessons to and

gained didactic usefulness among writers and social critics deeply troubled by growing urban squalor and later by the social and environmental effects of the Industrial Revolution.

Visitors usually applied some aspect of Romantic criteria of landscape to appreciate the geography of Rupert's Land. Wild animals, too, helpfully defined the boundaries of this natural world against those of the civil one thousands of miles away. Even by the beginning of the twentieth century, back-to-nature adherents searched for wildlife so that the regions visited could be validated as truly natural. The same visitors, meanwhile, were chiefly interested in certain types of wildlife. Present-day nature guides list over seventy-five wild mammals in western Canada. They range from wolverines to white-tailed rabbits, golden-mantled ground squirrels to hoary bats. Nature lovers now search for amphibians, reptiles, birds, invertebrates, and fishes in their ramblings through wilderness. In earlier periods, as published accounts suggest, the wildlife species most interesting to visitors were comparatively smaller in number. The beaver and its amazing social and survival habits and the seeming intelligence of voles, gophers, and other animals became interesting according to the degree to which these animals attained self-sufficiency, struggled to survive in nature, and lived apart from human control. Fish and fowl also interested naturalists in the nineteenth century from this perspective, especially when they proved the existence and suggested the complexity of either a design in nature or natural law. But the wild animals that attracted the greatest attention were the larger-framed mammals, which lent themselves to moral storytelling. They later occupied many of the narratives of Canadian nature writers such as Charles G.D. Roberts and Ernest Thompson Seton.¹⁰ Large mammalian quadrupeds – buffalo, elk, deer, bear, antelope, and other animals – shared with humans important morphological similarities. Their mouths could display anger and a range of other emotions. Their eyes could communicate fear, pain, and sometimes pleasure. Newcomers easily switched from thinking of these animals as objects of utilitarian exchange in a subsistence economy to granting them a new place in a Romantic pantheon. Whether in folklore or in a taxidermy hall, these animals suggested aspects of the human condition but were still wild. The Earl of Southesk suggested how such sympathetic traits could be identified after a mountain sheep hunt at Jasper House in 1859. He looked over the dozens of animals he had recklessly shot and wrote, "One thinks little – too little of the killing of small game, but in shooting large game the butchery of the act comes more home, one sees with such vividness the wounds, and the fear, and the suffering."¹¹

Since it was believed that such wild animals were inherently different from their tamed counterparts, it is not surprising that the former served didactic purposes. To old-timers, wildlife became important indices of economic and social change. To newcomers, wildlife embodied natural wealth.

Their interest in wild animals, then, barely concealed their expectations, fears, and aspirations in the lands that they were newly occupying. In numerous pioneer settings, wildlife symbolized the obstacles – natural and human – that farmers encountered when they tried to claim and clear land. Charles Dickens's *American Notes* described a Canadian government official who had to dissuade an eastern European immigrant "from investing some of his small capital in firearms and knives to kill the buffalo, wolves and other wild animals which his fellow passengers had persuaded him were to be encountered in the streets of Winnipeg."¹² Most settlers expected a confrontation would take place between themselves as agents of civilization and the wildlife that they would encounter on the prairies. Many of the killing rituals in settler society – the railway platform shooting sprees (before they became illegal), the piles of ducks in town sites, and the strings of fish in postcard photos – find sociological explanation in the dual cosmos that newcomers imaginatively traversed in coming to a wild land.¹³

To analyze such matters, I have divided this book into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I examine fur trade society, its "traditional" uses of wildlife, and the social relations established with the exchange of wild meat. The chapter does not provide a complete treatment of Amerindian hunting and religious traditions concerning wildlife. It does, though, identify elements of Amerindian customs involving the exchange of wild meat that lay the foundation for fur trade society. Sharing food in the fur trade significantly altered the European experience in the west and determined in no small measure the outcome of relations at contact and the outlines of an interdependency between people in the west.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the period when the dominance of the fur trade in western life officially ended, at the time of the transfer of the Hudson's Bay Company lands to Canadian care in 1870. Although many watersheds in western history preceded the transfer, the chapter identifies the imaginative construction of an old order and a new order at the time, when a way of life dependent on wild animals was replaced by one dependent on individuals, merit, and farming improvements. The 1870s were a difficult period for westerners who made the agricultural transition successfully. Moreover, continued dependency on wild meat undermined western promotion. More distressing, however, was the real social crisis that arose when wildlife populations began to disappear by the mid-1870s. The near extermination of the buffalo and the extirpation of many big-game populations in the west led both old-timers and newcomers to assign new symbolism to wild animals. They also kindled some of the first interest in conservation, particularly in wildlife domestication schemes that promised to safeguard features of the old order in a new settler society and thereby to ensure social stability.

Conservation initiatives and domestication schemes quickly disappeared with the first land rushes and the beginnings of the wheat boom. Chapter 3 examines the Laurier era, when rapid homesteading, western promotion, and immigration formed a backdrop of change that affected local understandings of wildlife. Although rapid settlement and city growth brought about an unprecedented demand for wild meat, westerners were anxious to achieve complete self-sufficiency within western nature. A new priority was the revolutionary transubstantiation of a food source into a symbol of western development. To curb subsistence hunting and end settler dependence on provisioning hunters, newspapers showed animals as emblems of western climate, poor soil, and thick forests that inhibited the growth of towns and crops. Charter groups began “safeguarding” local resources, particularly wildlife, from Amerindian subsistence hunts in a period when they hoped to gain control of natural wealth and conserve British-Canadian values. In fact, not only Amerindians but also recent immigrants and marginal groups within communities faced stringent game ordinances while wildlife became closely associated with the natural wealth that pioneers sought.

Meanwhile, as I point out in Chapter 4, local boosters began using wildlife in promotions, natural history museums, postcard photographs, and slaughter rituals to suggest the natural wealth of the region that they were promoting. Rapid demographic changes and competition between towns and cities for people and investors intensified this promotional effort. Pioneers now portrayed the wildlife to be as abundant as the wealth that they advertised in virgin western soils, pristine forests, and unexploited mineral claims.

The close association of wild animals with natural wealth led, in no small measure, to the formal conservation strategies that took shape just before and after the Great War. In Chapter 5, I examine the membership and aims of fish and game protective associations that gathered momentum between 1885 and 1940. These associations seemed to gain their greatest following during acute moments when boosterism, overspeculation in western resources, and demographic explosion wreaked havoc on settler communities. Rising fears of “foreigners” and disagreement over the use of the land and its resources energized early conservation work, often against marginalized outsiders, particularly new immigrants and First Nations. Leading townspeople enacted the first wildlife ordinances to control groups and, conversely, to conserve community values associated with the intended model of charter societies. By the beginning of the Second World War, preservation campaigns had already led to the opening of game preserves. But even these initiatives can be traced to local social concerns. Particularly after the Great War, westerners supported wildlife preserves in part to create areas of abundance to enrich neighbouring settler communities and to

replicate a pre-Fall state in nature from which western society would benefit morally, spiritually, and economically.

As a contributor to environmental history, I remain unapologetically anthropocentric. In this book, I seek chiefly to identify early ideas about wild animals and a wider western context of hunting, conservation, and preservation history. My emphasis on local history takes me in a different direction from that of Janet Foster in her examination of the rise of preservationism in the federal civil service. The development of national parks policy had, as she rightly points out, great implications for the west, where many preserves were soon established. I have identified a grassroots movement that Foster did not address. Robert G. McCandless has more recently undertaken a similar analysis in his “social history” of Yukon wildlife, as has Paul-Louis Martin in his analysis of hunting in Quebec. My book, indeed, focuses more on changing definitions of “good” and “bad” animals, new uses for wildlife, and the social backdrop of game ordinances. I follow, in that respect, some of the social analytical approaches in western Canadian history that David Elliston Allen, Harriet Ritvo, Keith Thomas, and James Turner have used in studies of the changing place of animals in English society at critical points in its social, intellectual, and economic development.¹⁴

In taking this approach, I am attempting to remedy a feature of environmental history that overlooks social explanation to explore attitudes toward wildlife. Most work addressing the place of wildlife in North American thought has investigated the rise of conservation and later preservation policies that occurred after environmental change.¹⁵ Although some writers have assessed the scientific, industrial, and economic backdrops to such matters,¹⁶ historians have mainly been concerned with identifying the emergence of modern sensibilities, chief among them critical pathways to ecological understandings.¹⁷ As valuable as their work has been, this primary interest has generally been directed at Americans who formed sport hunting lobbies or founded a scientific interest in animal preservation.¹⁸ Endangered and extirpated species such as the buffalo have also captured a great deal of attention in this respect. The buffalo’s rapid disappearance in the west certainly figured in the march of such ideas. Once the bloody skin trade had begun by the 1870s, predated by environmental and human population changes on the Great Plains, the alarming spectacle of near extinction sparked new sensibilities.¹⁹ By the 1880s, the first conservationists were using the buffalo as a powerful symbol to fortify campaigns against other forms of commercial hunting and the still thriving but environmentally devastating feather industries.²⁰

Historians, however, often look to specific groups affected by the disappearance of such animals for intellectual changes,²¹ such groups often

being the sport hunters who lost their game and turned to conservation work.²² But there is little work exploring the interplay between social thought and environmental thought, modes of subsistence and attitudes toward wildlife, conservation practices and contemporary economics, and preservation movements and social phenomena such as xenophobia and nativism. Moreover, little research has been directed at what are arguably unique Canadian responses to the environment and local traditions in wildlife hunting, use, and conservation. This last point seems to be all the more important because many western Canadian environmental activities grew out of the belief that settlers had a right to wildlife abundance. The political history of western environmentalism is often marked in fact by a complete disregard of the American conservation movement or by innovations to it.²³ In this book, I look at some western understandings of environmental sensibilities, those established within local settings, by examining wildlife in its social context.²⁴

I am reviving more than simply a past drama; I am also indicating some of the problems that the past continues to impose on the present. In light of what are now understood as ecological realities, the Romantic definition of wildlife makes mistaken assumptions about nature and contradicts conservation priorities. Wildlife has been viewed, and continues to be understood, as animate creatures that live beyond the imaginary boundaries of town and city. Although preservationists sometimes benefit from the enduring popularity of this conceptualization, its archaic intellectual foundations continue to influence government policy and public opinion. It is often easy for conservation groups to mobilize public support against measures that affect wildlife in distant park reserves. But when the same animals violate boundaries and enter civilized spaces, they become either virtuously domesticated or hunted as vermin. Wildlife can easily become a nuisance to civilization and a detraction to investment capital. As wildlife biologists and ecologists often point out, the human mind-set that dichotomizes human from wild nature places significant restrictions on real ways of maintaining environmental diversity and initiatives in biodiversity. Reincorporating wildlife into human society will only take place with major intellectual changes and a complete rejection of Romantic conceptions about any animal being “wild” and any life form really being “domesticated.” In that regard, a historical lesson drawn from western Canada is that an animal that transcends its nature and is understood by a community as “wildlife” does not, and really cannot, become truly extinct. This chilling thought is best apprehended in the case of the buffalo. This animal still generates the emotional response among westerners that it did in the 1890s, when newcomers saw massive piles of bones along railway lines. That response was likely as striking as the emotions felt by those who saw the original herds in the Saskatchewan River valleys. Perhaps, indeed, ecologists have difficulty

trying to preserve the diversity of wild animals when they move against the modernist human mind. Dead or alive, wild animals provide nourishment for the human imagination. John A. Livingston's recent condemnation of the "fallacy" of wildlife conservation is greatly supported by my own findings.²⁵ The problem is not that wild animals have not been conserved in the past; indeed, much of western Canadian history has been shaped around the conservation of wildlife as food, totems, symbols, and valuable commodities for recreational pursuit. The problem is in trying to move the human mind beyond the dated conception of wildlife as a resource to be "managed," "husbanded," "harvested," or "preserved." I provide an overview of this modernist dilemma as it was played out in the Canadian west when human society underwent change and shared an uneasy history with the wild animals in its midst.