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TRANSACTION No. 69
MARCH 8, 1906

THE HISTORICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SOCIETY OF MANITOBA

THE MOOSE AND WAPITI OF MANITOBA

A PLEA FOR THEIR PRESERVATION

BY

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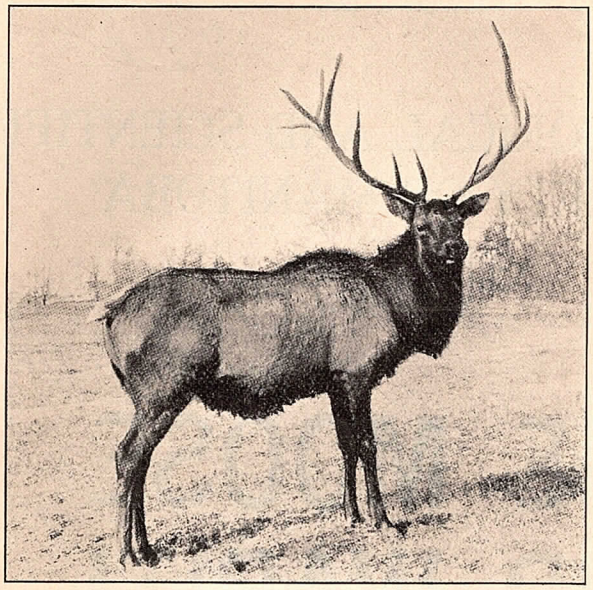
Winnipeg
The Manitoba Free Press Company
1906



THE
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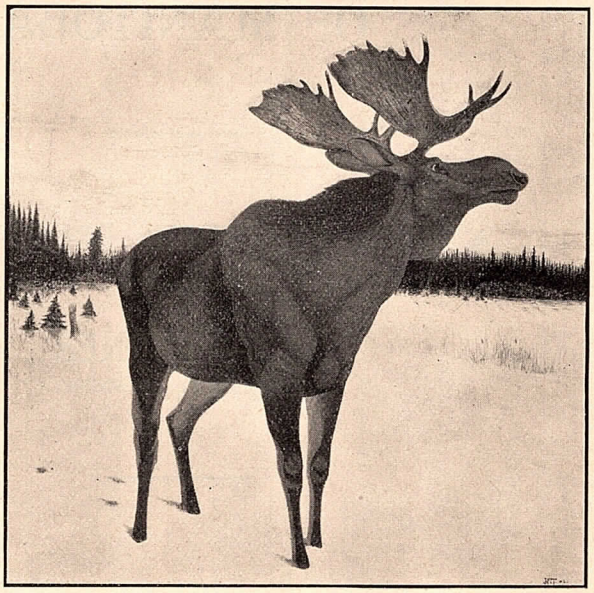

(Drawn by J. P. Turner.)

THE MOOSE AND WAPITI OF MANITOBA

AND A PLEA FOR THEIR PRESERVATION

At the Annual Meeting of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, held in the Y.M.C.A. Building, Winnipeg, on the evening of March 8th, 1906, the President, the Rev. Dr. Bryce, having introduced the subject "The Moose and Wapiti" of Manitoba, called on Mr. J. P. Turner, who read the following paper :

I have been favored with a request to read a short paper before your society, and though it may be a little out of the usual line of historical records, I have chosen for my subject one which, I think, bears a significant relation to Manitoba's history, and one which, all too probably, will be looked back upon by future generations as of far more importance than we at the present date are inclined to give it. I refer to our magnificent big deer—the moose and wapiti—and their outlook for the future. Though extremely different in general appearances and characteristics, it seems fitting to class these two together. They are probably the most important individual characters among the whole deer family on the North American continent, and throughout the world, they are the undisputed giants of their kind.

The moose is the most cunning, the most prolific, and the hardiest of any of the big game animals now existing in a wild state, and the wapiti or elk is the most imposing, the stateliest, and the grandest type of all the antlered tribes on the earth. Though a comparatively small and less highly developed representative of the moose exists in northern Europe, both these huge deer are peculiar to the North American continent, and were among the most plentiful of the large mammals on the continent when the white man first set foot upon it. The moose, assisted not only by its superior cunning and capabilities of self-protection, but by the more impenetrable nature of its forest home, can be said to have held its own against the wasting destruction of the white man's lust for killing. But next to the bison, the wapiti has suffered more than any American big game, and to-day we have at last come face to face with the scattered survivors of its former, countless thousands. Roughly speaking the vast, natural range of the moose occupies the forest regions of the northerly half of North America from coast to coast, with the chief exceptions of portions of British Columbia, and most of the country contiguous to Hudson's Bay. The immense tract over which it roams has probably not decreased in total area from that of primitive times; and some even declare that the moose occupies more territory at the present day than ever before. Be that as it may, it is undoubtedly true that in several portions of Canada it has of recent years become more plentiful than even the earliest records show it to have ever been. It is not a migratory animal, but there are many instances to show that, at long periods, it will surrender a large territory where it has been well established, to occupy another territory where it has been hitherto little known. It is natural to believe that in the course of time this assumes a slow and gradual, drifting back and forth from one area to another.

When we consider the enormous extent of its natural home, most of which

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will never be adapted to settlement, and the shy, elusive nature of the animal, we are almost safe in saying that it will never become extinct. In the course of time its range will probably decrease and it will vanish from many of its present haunts; but in the great trackless wilderness of the north, it will always have a comparatively safe refuge. Even in the settled portions of the country, where enough wild, timbered land is available, it will continue to exist and thrive if properly protected, as it conforms readily to its surroundings.

A Vast Range.

The former, natural range of the wapiti covered an immense area from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from New Mexico in the south to British Columbia, the valley of the Saskatchewan, and the Great Lakes in the north. Though most of the herds now existing are found in wild, mountainous stretches of country covered with forest growths, the wapiti thrives equally well on the open plains, and before forced to take refuge in its wilder and more inaccessible strongholds of today, it roamed in countless thousands throughout the high, dry plains of the west. Wapiti were once very plentiful in the Adirondack and Alleghany Mountains, and early records show them to have once existed in Quebec and Ontario. Towards the south, they roamed in great bands over the country now occupied by Kentucky, Tennessee Ohio and Indiana, and to the north they were very plentiful throughout Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, the Dakotahs, Manitoba and portions of the Northwest Territories. Over the greater part of their range their extermination was accomplished almost as completely as that of the buffalo, and in the early '80's they practically ceased to be a plains animal. Early in the nineteenth century they were totally exterminated in their eastern range, and at the present day the most easterly country occupied by them is in Manitoba. In California they have all but ceased to exist. The same thing can be said of Oregon and Washington, and the country southward from Colorado. Manitoba and Wyoming are the only portions of their once great range where they can be said to be still plentiful, and in parts of Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Alberta and British Columbia scattered herds exist.

Owing to its gregarious habits and the comparatively open character of its western range, the wapiti had little to protect it against the destructive warfare waged upon it in the winning of the west. To the fact that it will adapt itself and thrive in widely differing surroundings, can thanks alone be given that it did not follow in the bison's wake. Several years ago, in spite of this, the wapiti in the wild state threatened soon to vanish forever; and even in its most isolated ranges, it could not have held out long against the scores of head, hide and teeth hunters who preyed upon it. But the American nation awoke to a realization of the wapiti's hopeless outlook, and by adopting stringent measures for its protection, and creating an increasing public sentiment for its perpetuation, the danger of its extinction was apparently averted. By the establishment of the Yellowstone National Park, a comparatively safe refuge was provided for the largest herds of wapiti existing at the time, and in other parts of the country state legislation made the laws so stringent that few people dared to violate them. This movement for the protection of the wapiti has met with success, and in the Yellowstone Park at least they will always exist in a practically wild state.

Protection Wanted Here.

Turning our attention to Canada we

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do not see the same favorable state of things existing. In the matter of game protection it has long been felt that we have been far more successful than our neighbors to the south, but the time has arrived for us also to seriously consider the wapiti and its future outlook. If we do not take prompt measures for its further protection, the day is not far distant when we will be unable to include it among the wild animals not only of Manitoba, but of Canada.

Though often termed the "prairie province," Manitoba in reality only embraces within its boundaries about one-half of its total area in prairie country. Roughly speaking, this prairie belt is the eastern extremity of the great prairie of the Canadian West, which enveloping the southwestern half of the province, gradually dies away as it approaches the valley of the Red River and the southern and western slopes of the Riding and Duck Mountains. Bluffs and belts of deciduous trees lie irregularly scattered over this broad expanse, or follow the many winding courses of the rivers and streams, and in some localities the country assumes a rough and hilly character, where isolated growths of evergreens—outriders of the great, coniferous forest of the north—replace the unvarying monotony of the windswept prairies. Over the northeastern half of the province, and in marked contrast to this matchless land of farm industry and plenty, the silent, thinly-settled forest stretches away in all its wild, untrammeled grandeur; and though showing the ravages of forest fires and the bite of the woodman's axe, it still defies the outer world and holds aloof the persistent tread of settlement. Far back from the encroachment of the steel-shod roads of commerce, and the little, frontier towns lies the wilderness—where the poor remnants of the persecuted redman still find freedom, and where the magnificent, wild animals of the north, still roam in the threatened security of their natural haunts. Here in one of the finest game-lands of the modern day, though threatened by the march of modern time, the mighty moose and lordly wapiti

Still Live and Thrive.

Over this little-known regio n of the northern forest, Nature seems to have run riot in a bewildering chaos of muskeg and ridge, rock and swamp—in summer a forbidding, fly-infested land palpitating with wild life, in winter a huge, frozen solitude—and to have thrown down in careless disorder tangles of forest growths made the more inextricable by the destructive elements of fire and storm. Deep-furrowed heaps of storm-tossed trunks lie piled in countless confusions of decay ,while from the tangled roots and wreckage underneath, the young, straight-stemmed forest of the second growth springs up. Or where the forest fire has swept along great, lonely wastes of bare, blackened tamaracs ear their sullen stumps above the spongy swamps. Here and there between the dense belts of forest lie broad, park-like ridges free of underbrush, over whic the jackpines grow planted and spaced off by Nature's hand with wonderful exactness. Groves of poplar, spruce and birch, hazel and willow thickets, tamarac and cedar swamps, clothe the land in an endless succession of vast, silent forest which stretches far away to the north toward the "land of little sticks."

Through most of the length and breadth of this forest region and reasonably distant from the settlements, moose are plentiful. Penetrate it in winter almost where you will, and you will find their tracks leading back and forth from one feeding ground to another. Everywhere you go you will see the willow and birch growths shorn of their upper branches as with a scythe,

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and in every swamp and muskeg will be seen the deep-trodden, summer runways.

Each year in Manitoba the number of moose killed increases, and strange to say, each year it becomes easier for the sportsman to secure a trophy. Where twenty years ago only the native hunters could successfully track and lay low this elusive, giant deer, to-day anyone fitted to withstand a little hardship and exposure, can bring it to bag with ridiculous ease. All we have read and heard of the wonderful sagacity of the moose seems to be failing it as its enemies increase, and today instead of a thorough knowledge of the animal and its trickeries, the hunter in most cases needs but to take into the bush a modern rifle and a little luck, if he would bring out an antlered head and a big story. I have met unexpectedly with moose while travelling straight down wind, and have driven up to them with a team of horses in a noisy, cumbrous bobsleigh, only to have them stare inquiringly at me and shamble slowly off. On other occasions I have known them to feed close to our camp night after night, in spite of a hundred different noises from wood-chopping to singing, which broke the silence of the surrounding forest. Of course there are exceptions to this, and there are many old moose ranging through the wilds of Manitoba, whose inherent, protective instincts are such that they will unconsciously lead the hunter away upon a long tramp, from which he will invariably return empty-handed unless he be a master of his art. Let the hunter but betray his presence through the agency of any of the clever precautions the animal will instinctively take as he travels along, and his hunt will be over for that day. To such an animal the precaution to guard against the close approach of an enemy comes naturally, and it is through no premeditated planning, or immediate fear of danger, that it resorts to artifice intended to warn it of any trailing danger. Only the trained hunter, and one who is fully equal to evading the animal's keen powers of scent and hearing, and who can approach unawares to within easy shooting range, is a match

For This "Real" Moose;

and more moose are killed each year by sportsmen stumbling blindly upon them, or by a lack of protective instinct on their quarry's part, than by clever tracking. For this there is but one explanation. The moose which inhabit that part of the forest country adjacent to the settled districts become as it were half domesticated. They in time get used to the noise of trains, wagons, wood-chopping and many other sounds, and are constantly hearing or seeing things that would send the shy, wary moose of the far north into panicky flight. Even a rifle shot at no great distance does not seem to alarm them to any extent, so that it is little wonder that the embryo moose hunter usually attains his end with surprising ease. As one gets farther into the wilderness the moose becomes correspondingly more difficult to hunt, and in the great, silent forest of the far north, it is practically immune from all but the native tracker. Any old resident of Manitoba will declare that before the country was settled, the successful Indian moose hunters were few and far between, and whenever one succeeded in killing a moose it was a matter quite worthy of comment in the settlements. Now there are probably five hundred moose killed annually by people from the cities and towns, who know little more of the animal other than its appearance along a rifle barrel.

In spite of the many dangers with which the moose has to contend, it is surprising how it adheres to its favorite haunts in Manitoba, but there is

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little doubt that its range is slowly but steadily contracting. Each year the number of sportsmen and meat-hunters increases, and consequently the number of moose killed increases accordingly. At the present day the bulk of the population in the forest country depends largely upon deer meat for its livelihood, not from necessity but from choice, and many lumber and tie camps provide their men almost exclusively with vension. I know of several large companes who employ men to provide their camps with deer meat throughout the winter and each of these men are accountable for the death of about thirty animals per season. Others kill them for the hides and heads alone, for which they find a ready market in the cities and towns. Naturally this state of affairs cannot always exist, as it will cease with the extermination of the deer in the province and unless the moose and wapiti are protected during the close season they will gradually disappear altogether from our forests. This might be excusable were there no land which the province could afford to give them, but there are large tracts which will never be of real value, and which if the law were properly enforced, would provide a refuge for them for all time to come.

The most worthless land we have within our boundaries is the natural home of the moose. Barring winter lumbering, which should not be detrimental to the animals, the huge, low-lying tracts of muskeg, overgrown with stunted tamarack, spruce and willow offer no commercial industry.

As I have said before, the moose is in no apparent danger of total extinction, but in the course of time it will most certainly cease to exist in portions of its present range and while we have space to give it in Manitoba, we should put forth every effort to preserve it among our big game animals.

Wapiti Vanishing.

In comparison to the moose, the wapiti is in far greater danger of extermination. Its range in the province is much more limited comprising a piece of country between Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba, and the districts of the Riding and Duck mountains. Formerly it was plentiful in southern Manitoba, but with the exception of an occasional straggler, it is seldom seen there now. Each year its range shrinks before the advance of settlement, and the constantly increasing number of hunters who pursue it. Between the lakes it is probably making its last stand, and reports from there show that it now occupies a very limited area. Several more years will suffice to kill it off in this district, unless prompt steps are taken to preserve it. In its wilder and more inaccessible range of the Riding and Duck mountains it is reported to be still fairly plentiful, but I have recently been informed that it is steadily decreasing in numbers. The number of wapiti existing to-day in Manitoba is probably far smaller than is generally believed. In the Riding Mountains district lies an extensive tract of wild country splendidly adapted for the wapiti. It is practically useless for settlement, and barring some lumbering it will never be of value to the province except as a large and magnificent game and timber preserve. Here the moose lives also, as well as smaller deer, and if the people of Manitoba give evidence enough of their support of such a movement it is altogether likely that the provincial government will bring to a successful issue a proposition now before it to establish such a preserve.

Under present conditions, the wapiti will disappear, but if we arouse ourselves to the importance of maintining it in the province, we can do so, and preserve it for all time. All

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that is required is public sentiment in favor of the movement, as we hav able men in our legislature ready to comply with any such reasonable request. Therefore, I say, let us preserve the wapiti, and not relegate it to history and museums. To an unthinking man it is probably nothing more than hide and meat, but to the lover of the great out-of-doors, the naturalist, the sportsmen and the wholesome-minded citizen, it is a subject of the deepest admiration.

What will the outcome of all this needless destruction mean? Simply that the people of Manitoba will lose two of the grandest of big animals now existing, through the agency of a few who are slaughtering them for purely personal gain. Will we allow future generations to look back upon the killing of these splendid animals as an indelible blot upon our national character Many say to protect them is to frame class legislation, which will preserve them only for those who would kill for sport. To such people, we can but extend sympathy. They are so engrossed with their own personal affairs that they care little for the magnificent things Nature has bestowed upon them. They see nothing of the beauty of Nature, they care for nothing other than that which directly concerns them, and they do not realize that after all, the true sportsman is the most potent factor in game protection.

In allegiance to our country, and its big game heritage, let us not put upon the minutes of our history, that the wapiti sought its last refuge in Manitoba and was miserably exterminated, or that the moose was driven forever far beyond our borders.

The Manitoba Game Protective association has for some time past been advocating the establishment of a provincial game preserve, having brought the proposition before the legislature; and, I think, if other societies were to offer their support they would greatly assist in the accomplishment of the desired results. No organization in the province is more worthy of lending a helping hand in such a cause than the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, which, for many years, has kept constantly in touch with the many important factors in our provincial history, and I trust that its members will consider the future of our big game and give their support in providing for its perpetuation.

At the close of the reading of the paper a discussion arose on the matter of the preservation of the deer family in Manitoba, when it was moved by Mr. W. J. McLean, seconded by Chief Factor William Clark, and unanimously agreed as follows :

"Whereas this Society learns that a proposition has been brought before the Legislature of Manitoba by the Manitoba Game Protective Association to establish a provincial game preserve in the Riding Mountains District : this Society begs to give notice of its hearty endorsation of the movement."