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## What Happened to Pike's Animals

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AMERICAN BISON  
*Wade Parsons*

### *What Happened to Pike's Animals*

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.

#### THE JOURNAL OF ZEBULON PIKE: Sept. 12th.

*Commenced our march at seven o'clock. Passed very ruff [rough] 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 Baroney 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.*

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

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



DEER  
*Wade Parsons*

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.

## DEER

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



PRONG HORN  
*Wade Parsons*

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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*Bob Gress is director of the Great Plains Nature Center in Wichita and coauthor of The Guide to Kansas Birds and Birding Hot Spots, Faces of the Great Plains: Prairie Wildlife and Watching Kansas Wildlife: A Guide to 101 Sites.*

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*



NOTES



PURPLE PRAIRIE CLOVER *Dalea purpurea*