

FIRST DRAFT

HUNTING GROUNDS

Excessive kills were the norm in early years of Colorado hunting

Harry B. Jones recalled sitting by the Gunnison River near Grand Junction after the first heavy snowfall struck Grand Mesa. He knew that mule deer would begin to head off the mesa and come down Kannah Creek, then across East Orchard Mesa and travel to their wintering grounds on Pinyon Mesa.

"I remember I shot nine deer one morning," he told Daily Sentinel columnist Merle McClintock in 1937. "In the morning we would hide near the ford, and it was easy to bring down all the deer we wanted. We always had lots of venison in those days."

That was in the late 1880s, when Grand Junction was still a brand-new community, and the state of Colorado was barely a decade old.

As rifle hunting big-game seasons get underway this month in Colorado — and state voters consider a ballot measure to ban most hunting of mountain lions, bobcats and lynx — it's worth examining some of the history of hunting here.

Colorado, like most of the West in the 19th century, was a place where multitudes of animals were killed. And it wasn't just the bison hunters, who slaughtered millions of the West's largest native animal for their hides.

So-called sportsmen, wealthy individuals who could afford years-long hunting trips, sometimes boasted about the incredible numbers of animals they killed. Most famous of these was Sir St. George Gore, for whom Gore Creek and the Gore Range near Vail are named.

Gore was an Irish nobleman who spent from 1854 to 1857 hunting in today's Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. He hired 40 men, including famed mountain man Jim Bridger, had 27 wagons, two that carried nothing but guns, and slept each night under a bright-colored linen tent. Gore claimed he killed over 2,000 bison, 1,500 deer and elk, as well as 105 bears.

Gore wasn't unique. Sir William Drummond Stewart, a Scottish nobleman, made several journeys through Colorado and Wyoming and other parts of the West during the 1830s and 1840s. He may have



PUBLIC DOMAIN THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Alfred Jacob Miller painted this water color from sketches he made in 1837 while accompanying Sir William Drummond Stewart on one of his hunting expeditions through the West. It give a sense of the size of the hunting party. Stewart, who usually rode a white horse, may be the man mounting the horse in the foreground.

been the first person to use an inflatable rubber boat for recreational fishing on a Rocky Mountain lake.

Stewart's entourage was every bit as elaborate as Gore's, and like Gore, it included Jim Bridger as a guide. No one knows how many animals

Stewart and his companions killed, but unlike Gore, Stewart commissioned an artist named Alfred Jacob Miller to record his exploits.

The list of famous sports hunters in Colorado also includes Theodore Roosevelt, who hunted on the Western

Slope in 1901, just before he was sworn in as vice president, and again in 1905 when he was president.

The 1901 trip took him to Meeker and along the White River, where Roosevelt and his friends hunted cougars with

a guide and dozens of dogs. Based on an article Roosevelt wrote for Scribner's Magazine, he and his entourage shot at least 10 mountain lions.

Roosevelt returned in April 1905, when he stayed at the Hotel Colorado in Glenwood Springs, then hunted on Divide Creek, south of Silt. Hunting with three friends and the same guide, Roosevelt's party killed 10 black bears, six of which Roosevelt shot himself.

Roosevelt's numbers seem excessive in the 21st century, but he wasn't violating any laws. He obtained appropriate hunting licenses and hunted legally under the laws of the time.

Sports hunters, moreover, couldn't hold a candle to market hunters — people who killed large numbers of game animals and birds for their meat or hides. Most profligate were the bison hunters. Estimates are that there were 7 million bison roaming the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains in 1870. By 1900, there were fewer than 1,400.

Other species were also targeted. Pronghorn antelope declined from about 5 million animals in 1870 to roughly 20,000 by 1900. Elk saw similar population declines. And famed conservationist William Hornaday estimated in 1912 that the population of mule deer in the West had declined 80 percent over the previous four decades.

Colorado was not immune to market hunting. A man named Frank May reported that in three months in 1878 he killed more than 80 mule deer, a nearly equal number of antelope, and close to 70 elk in Middle Park near Kremmling. The meat from the animals was shipped to the booming Leadville mining community.

Harper's Weekly magazine even ran a cover story about mule deer market hunters in the Rocky Mountains in April of 1890.

In 1900, the Lacey Act became law, prohibiting market hunting in the United States, and each state became responsible for the management of its own game and hunting seasons. Colorado had begun to do



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Market hunters, like these deer hunters at the turn of the last century, killed millions of animals throughout the west.

that before the Lacey Act was passed by Congress. By the late 1880s, there was a public clamor for more game wardens and better pay for the wardens. The Legislature listened and made multiple changes to hunting and fishing laws.

Even so, problems remained. In his 1903-1904 report to the governor, Colorado Game and Fish Commissioner John M. Woodard bemoaned issues he faced, even with a law adopted in 1903 that, for the first time, required people to obtain a license to hunt big game.

"One of the greatest difficulties to overcome is the fact that our small number of paid Game Wardens is not sufficient to enforce the law in more than three counties," he wrote. "I would recommend a change in the law, instead of providing for five Chief Game Wardens, to read twenty-five Chief Game Wardens."

Woodward also said that too many game wardens in the past had turned a blind eye to hunting and fishing violations, especially when they knew the violators. But with changes in the law, he added, "I believe that we now have the best lot of game wardens that has ever been connected with the Game and Fish Department."

Even good game wardens couldn't overcome public sentiment, however. In "the more isolated, lawless, backwoods parts of the State," Woodard said, it was nearly impossible to obtain a guilty verdict for game violations because most of the

potential jurors ignored fish and game laws themselves.

Gradually, things began to change, with more professional wardens and more arrests throughout the state for hunting violations. Still, it took many decades to rebuild the mule deer and elk herds and other big-game populations in Colorado.

It's still a struggle to manage Colorado's game, but it's a far cry from when Harry Jones was hunting around Grand Junction. "There were no closed seasons and no bag limits for game," McClintock wrote. "It was taken as a matter of course for every hunting party to stay out until they got enough game for their needs."

Sources: "With the Cougar Hounds," by Theodore Roosevelt, Scribner's Magazine, November, 1901; "Theodore Roosevelt in Colorado," by Agnes Wright Spring, The Colorado Magazine, October, 1958; "The Market Hunters: Demand, Depletion, Devastation," Ricard C. Rattenbury, Boone & Crockett online, boone-crockett.org; "Declining Mule Deer Populations in Colorado: Reasons and Responses," by R. Bruce Gill, Colorado Division of Wildlife, 1999; "Biennial Report of the State Game and Fish Commissioner For the Years 1903 and 1904," by John M. Woodard; "Gore, Sir St. George," www.encyclopedia.com; "Scotsman in Buckskin," by Mae Reed Porter and Odessa Davenport.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



BOB SILBERNAGEL



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Beginning the great hunt — President Roosevelt and party entering bear country — Colorado. Believed to show Roosevelt's 1905 bear hunting party near Divide Creek. Roosevelt is on the white horse.

Stay independent.

Live safely at home.

Celebrating 3 Years of HopeWest PACE in Mesa County!

Home Care • Transportation • Day Center—Meals & Group Activities
Care Clinic • Prescriptions • Medical Equipment • And More!



PACE
at HopeWest

Schedule a home visit, take a tour, or talk to an Enrollment Specialist—970-255-7223 • HopeWestPACE.org