“Women Locked the Doors, Children Screamed, and Men Trembled in their Boots”: Black Bears and People in Arkansas

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CITIZENS OF OAK GROVE, ARKANSAS, were undoubtedly shocked when they read their local paper in the first week of January 1878—but not as shocked as John Ferguson had been. Ferguson’s “little daughter,” probably playing in the recent snow, had been snatched up by what locals described as a “huge bear.” The black bear “carried her off and, as strange as it may seem,” the Arkansas Gazette claimed, “not a single member of the family went to her relief.” The next day, following a sorrowful night for the Ferguson family, “neighbors took [the bear’s] trail in the snow and followed him to his den and found the little girl unhurt, and she seemed well satisfied with her new home.”1 The following year, on a cool October day, a couple of transients camping out beneath a railroad bridge just outside of Arkadelphia met a gruesome fate. According to the local paper, “two bears, almost as unmerciful as the scriptural bears that killed forty children, slipped up on two tramps that were asleep and killed both of them.” The killings, however, were only the beginning. “This piece of slaughter soon became known, and a military company, armed with wrenches, saws, and railroad spikes went out to fight the bears.” The correspondent then noted, “The result is hidden in the enormity of the situation.”2 When a black bear had strolled through the

1Arkansas Daily Gazette (Little Rock), January 11, 1878, p. 3.
2Ibid., October 7, 1879, p. 8.

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streets of Monticello several years earlier, “women locked the doors, children screamed, and men trembled in their boots.” Nevertheless, townspeople “feasted on Bruin’s carcass” that night.\(^3\)

These stories are just three of dozens found in the press and popular literature of nineteenth-century Arkansas. Though likely exaggerated, they provide vivid examples of the sentiments held toward black bears and wildlife in general. Humans, the stories seem to suggest, are continually at odds with wildlife. Though few bears ever dragged a young girl from her yard or ganged up on sleeping homeless people, the suggestion that bears were capable of such things illuminates the human relationship with nature in pre-twentieth-century Arkansas. Far from being congenial coexistence, the human-bear relationship was one of conflict, even mythic combat, exploitation, and eradication. The establishment of true civilization called for the displacement of things wild—and bears represented the heart of wildness.

The human posture toward black bears, by the late nineteenth century, had been shaped by a number of very different currents, including understandings of manliness and the defense of property. Both placed a premium on killing bears. The development of an extractive economy focused on resources from the state’s forests hammered the final nail in the Arkansas bruin’s coffin—and that of many other animals. After the Civil War, a growing timber industry cleared forests that had sheltered game in the Ozarks, Ouachitas, and northeastern Arkansas. Wild game meat markets, large hunting parties, and a lack of effective game laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also spelled disaster. Rather than shooting a single deer or bear for food, Arkansans killed every animal they could and often took the excess to a local market. Few understood or cared to understand the concept of conservation. Nature and wildlife were resources to be exploited whenever and however possible.

Arkansas was known nationwide as a great hunting spot from its territorial days into the latter half of the nineteenth century. Hunting adventure stories from well-known authors contributed to this reputation. An 1887 *Harper’s Weekly* article gave a glowing description of Arkansas as a major hunting destination: “Associated with scenes of sport, there is no State in the Union that affords as many different kinds of hunting as in Arkansas.” The article continued:

> Situated as it is below the snow-line, its turkeys, grouse, and quail suffer but little from the rigors of winter, while in both the

\(^3\)Ibid., July 2, 1872, p. 1.
spring and autumn it is the half-way house between North and South for many species of migratory fowl and waders. The forest, the prairie, and the dangers of the cane-brake add to the excitement of the Arkansas hunter, but whether chasing the bear in the bottoms or riding for deer in the tall grass of the plains, he surmounts all difficulties with a recklessness peculiar only to those of the manor born.

There is a certain grandeur in this somber country in winter. Its gaunt girdled trees whose leafless outlines appear like silhouettes against the leaden skies, the dense underbrush laden with crape-waving mosses, and brakes almost impenetrable from a net-work of vines—these are the haunts of many varieties of ground game and vermin, and in certain localities of numberless wild hogs.  

Clearly, Arkansas was a place rich in wildlife and habitat. But the article also portrays a land that was and would be heavily used. “Girdled trees” and “numberless wild hogs” show a distinctive human presence on the land. Thirty years after this article went to press—less than a generation—visitors to Arkansas would have found very few of the wondrous descriptions still true.

A study focusing on the exploitation and eradication of wildlife in Arkansas might treat any number of species. The wolf-human relationship, for example, provides excellent insight into a seeming obsession with wiping out a species. But black bears offer a story much more intricately connected to the economic and cultural history of Arkansas. The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) was the symbol of the state in the nineteenth century. But it had nearly been exterminated in Arkansas by the second decade of the twentieth century, done in by an ethic that dictated maximum exploitation of an (at the time) abundant source. Bears represented wild Arkansas and as they were gradually eliminated, so too was an important element in the cultural identity of the “Bear State.” Tellingly, by the time Arkansas’s ursine population was estimated at several dozen in 1927, the state’s moniker had already been officially changed to “the wonder state.”

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6Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, *A Survey of Arkansas Game* (Little Rock: State Fish and Game Commission, 1951), 89.
Until recently, historical scholarship concerning the environment, its creatures in general, and bears in particular was underdeveloped. Wildlife took a back seat to politicians, war, and other subjects. Since the 1970s, several important and eye-opening works of environmental history have stressed the crucial role that wild and domestic animals have played in shaping American history. Yet scholarship examining Arkansas wildlife and its relationship to human history remains scant. Joseph Key’s 2000 article “Indians and Ecological Conflict in Territorial Arkansas” offers a useful beginning but confines itself to the period before statehood. Keith Sutton’s *Arkansas Wildlife: A History* offers only a glancing overview of the late nineteenth century. On the other hand, biological work on wildlife in the state and on black bears in particular is widespread. Kimberly Smith of the University of Arkansas has led a host of biologists in researching black bears in Arkansas—their health, activity, and assimilation. From the early 1950s, when bears from Minnesota and Canada again set paw in Arkansas, there has been intensive scientific research and monitoring.

This neglect by historians cannot be justified. Black bears long played an integral role in daily life in Arkansas. They were valuable not only for their hides and meat but also for the oil rendered from their ample fat. While bear meat was often judged mediocre compared to venison or beef, bear fat was in high demand for a range of uses—from heating to illumination for cabins to insect repellent. Bear products had been harvested and traded by Indians, the French, the Spanish, and then white Americans. As early as the 1720s, “convoys” of hunters tramped through Arkansas hills and lowlands looking for bears and other game. Bears helped earn colonial Arkansas a place in larger regional economies. A thriving trade developed between Arkansas hunters and merchants in metropolitan areas like New Orleans and, eventually, St. Louis. Bottled for cooking purposes and as a replacement to butter, bear grease usually earned hunters more than furs. It also served as a wonderful product to keep hair in place—an old-fashioned hair gel. Though

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the state’s economy became increasingly identified with cotton and, in the postbellum era, extractive industry, the commercial exploitation of bears and other game continued into the early twentieth century, until there were no longer bears (or much else) to market.\(^9\)

But understanding the human-bruin relationship requires an appreciation not only of bears’ status as an important economic resources but also the place they held in Arkansas culture and the hold they had on Arkansans’ psyches. From territorial days, Arkansas was known for its wildness, and the stories of Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Charles “Fent” Noland, and Frederick Gerstaecker helped make black bears a central symbol for this wildness.\(^10\) Bear hunting stories became extraordinarily popular as Americans expanded their frontier beyond the Mississippi River in the early decades of the nineteenth century. These stories flavored what many emigrants expected as they moved into Arkansas. One story undoubtedly heard by thousands of future Arkansans was Thorpe’s “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” which pointedly conveys the power of black bears to capture the imagination and shape the frontier psyche, particularly its understanding of masculinity. Thorpe’s tale begins on a riverboat, where an “Arkansaw” bear hunter relates his experiences to various travelers, never ceasing to amaze them. Hunting the big “varmints” with his horse and hounds, the old hunter brags that he could overtake any bear with little problem—until one fall day when the hunter caught track of the biggest one yet. “The first fair chase I ever had with that big critter, I saw him no less than three times at a distance,” the bear hunter explained. “The dogs run him over eighteen miles and broke down, my horse gave out, and I was nearly used up as a man could be.” The bear easily escaped from the exasperated hunter and his animal helpers—thereafter plaguing his small farm and killing his hogs. The tables were turned, according to the old hunter: “[H]e hunted me, and that, too, like a devil, which I began to think he was.” After a series of unsuccessful hunts, the old hunter finally got a good shot at the bear. Immediately after firing, the man ran toward the wounded beast: “I started after, but was tripped up by my inexpressibles, which, either from habit or the excitement of the moment, were


about my heels, and before I had really gathered myself up, I heard the old varmint groaning, like a thousand sinners, in a thicket nearby, and, by the time I reached him, he was a corpse.” In the end, the old hunter was convinced that the big bear chose to die: he was “an unhuntable bear, and died when his time come.”\textsuperscript{11} Thorpe’s fictional story clearly illustrates the complicated depth of human-bear relationships in nineteenth century Arkansas. Kinship becomes a powerful theme in the story. Thorpe’s storyteller embodies the spirit of the great bear and becomes one with it. Yet, his tale also incorporates another crucial theme found in nearly every fictional and true story about black bears—the beast as a threat to property. Bears, while representing a wildness that Arkansans identified with, also increasingly illustrated dichotomy between nature and property. The old man’s perception of the big bear changed drastically once it started “hunting him.” By destroying his property, the old man made clear, “that bear so often took hold of my vitals, and I wasted away.”\textsuperscript{12}

Although Thorpe’s tall tale is quite telling of the popular myths surrounding black bears, true bear stories were often even more illuminating. German visitor Frederick Gerstaecker offered several portraits of the bear-human relationship in Arkansas prior to the Civil War. One extraordinary story concerned Gerstaecker and local Arkansans hunting black bears in the depth of winter. Mostly in a state of hibernation during that season, black bears occasionally emerged from their dens, especially on warmer days. Gerstaecker and his companions were not content to wait outside a den, however. Armed with only a single shot musket, hunting knives, and three pine needle torches, the young German, along with his guides—father and son—entered a deep cave to rouse a sleeping bear, shoot it, and drag it out. As the guest, Gerstaecker received the honor of going in first, carrying the musket. The son and father followed close behind. Shortly after entering the cave, Gerstaecker remembered, the “corridor had . . . become so small that I, pulling with my elbow, shoving with my feet, all the time carrying rifle and torch, could do nothing but squeeze my way through flat on the floor.” To make matters worse, Gerstaecker, with the other men directly behind him, could not back up at all. After several minutes of crawling and squeezing through the dark cave, the men heard faint whimpering ahead followed by a low and stern growl. The bear they were after was a sow with cubs—the worse kind to be stuck with in a dark cave with no quick


\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 184.
“Whoever has seen a mother bear defending her young, her ears laid back, her menacing jaws wide open,” remarked Gerstaecker, “will have some idea of what our feelings were.” They still could not see the infuriated bear and take a shot. With pressure from his companions behind, Gerstaecker inched closer while the growling increased. Faintly, by the light of the pine torches, the crawling bear hunters could make out the black outline of the sow—swaying back and forth in defensive posture.

Remarkably, the bear bolted into another corridor before a shot could be fired—likely attempting to divert attention away from her cubs. As Gerstaecker and the boy followed the bear—leaving the older man behind with the yelping cubs—a chilling idea crossed the young German’s mind. The hunters now plugged the narrow corridor through which the bear ran. The bear, Gerstaecker pondered, “would have no choice but to kill us and, in the literal sense, to eat her way through; for to go over or around us would have been an impossibility.” Finally, nearing the end of this second, narrower corridor, Gerstaecker fired his only round at the swaying bear but only wounded her. Now, the two men began to backtrack as fast as possible, only able to push themselves backward through the cave. The increasingly angry wounded sow, who was still attempting to protect her cubs, chased close behind. Only a few flaming pine needles dropped by Gerstaecker kept her at bay long enough for them to get back to where the cubs were. In the meantime, “the old man Konwell had crushed their little skulls against the cave’s sides” to prevent the mother from being agitated by their cries. Luckily, the wounded bear darted into another corridor, but Gerstaecker did not take this opportunity to flee. Instead, he crawled back to recover the rifle that he tossed in retreat. Reloading it, he again gave chase and finally killed the bear. Thereafter, the hunters had the long and arduous chore of dragging the bear from deep in the cave.13

Gerstaecker’s story, while fascinating in its own right, says a lot about the human-bear relationship, particularly bear hunting’s status as the ultimate testament to manliness. Hunters went to great lengths to kill bears in Arkansas—risking their lives for the sake of sport, food, and, importantly, masculinity. A successful hunter was equated—at least in Arkansas—with a successful man. Charles “Fent” Noland’s character Pete Whetstone describe the rewards of hunting bear: “I had despaired of finding a new sensation—but I had never then tried a Bear Hunt. Be-

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lieve me, in comparison to the thrilling interest and almost painful excitement of this noble exercise, the manly chase, all former pleasures seen as tedious as a twice told tale, vexing the dull ear of drowsy man.”

Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bear hunting remained steeped in concepts of masculinity. To kill a bear with a rifle was considered cowardly, according to one bear hunter. Guns—at least for some hunters—had become too commonplace. Anyone could kill a bear with a gun, but to use a knife made it somehow more honorable. Hunters would wait until the dogs wore a bear down, when “one or more [hunters] would go in to kill the bear with a knife.” Meanwhile, the dogs “kept biting the bear from unexpected quarters while their master was busy cutting the bear’s throat.” Back at the often massive camp, “the first bear to be killed . . . was consumed by the hunters.” The hard-working dogs received, as their reward, the intestines and other organs. This is not to say that every bear hunter, or even the majority, used their hunting knives to dispatch black bears—most still relied on their rifles. Rather, this account suggests the hyper-masculine imperative that had been present since Frederick Gerstaeccker ventured into the cave.

Thorpe’s story suggests, though, that as Arkansans’ livelihoods became more exclusively based on agricultural and pastoral pursuits, the protection of property and not simply the assertion of manliness became a major factor in the human-bear relationship. In economic terms, bears were not only a resource to be exploited but a threat to resources. Hogs were the most common domesticated animal in the state and one of Arkansas bears’ favorite meals. Hogs were also ecological competitors, consuming some of the same food (particularly mast). With a large bear population in Chicot County, in the most southeastern part of the state, hog-bear confrontations were bound to happen regularly. The Arkansas Gazette reported that one such meeting occurred in 1869 near the “Yellow Bayou” plantation. A local resident “while passing through a heavy canebrake . . . heard a hog squeal.” Interested in the “unusual porcine outcry,” the man headed in the direction of the noise. Passing through the dense cane, “he very soon came upon a very large bear, quietly feasting upon a fine hog which he had just slain.” The passerby, while unarmed, attempted to scare the bear away from the carcass. The bear had other ideas. The insolent “Bruin, with all the coolness of a carpet-bag-

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ger, refused to budge a peg, until finally, after frequent shouts and clapping of hands, [the bear] was induced to seize the carcass of the hog and make off into the canebrake.” In an adroit conclusion, the Gazette’s writer claimed “such bear-faced insolence should be severely punished.”16 In all seriousness, such hog killings had the potential to hurt farmers—especially those who depended upon their hogs to survive the winter. As a result, farmers killed bears by the dozens throughout the canebrakes and river bottoms. Just three months after the Chicot County hog slaying, the Monticello Guardian reported that two “old bear hunters of south-east Arkansas have just returned from one of their periodical hunts and report having killed thirteen bear.”17

Another attempted hog-killing caused quite a spectacle in Prairie County in the warm June of 1870. Taking an afternoon ride on his plantation, M. M. Erwin “heard a hog squealing in the woods a short distance from him.” Running his horse in the direction of the noise, Erwin “found that a large four-year old bear had the hog and was trying to make a meal of him.” After spooking the bear, Erwin gave chase, albeit without any firearm with which to dispatch the swine killer. Thinking a gun was essential to kill the bear, Erwin galloped toward town “yelling worse than ever did Maxey’s Choctaw brigade.”18 While local residents scrambled to find a gun with which to shoot the bear, Erwin “kept the bruin making a kind of circle in the prairie, or rather a great many circles, and had succeeded in getting him very tired.” Finally, someone arrived with a gun and killed the bear, though “he was almost entirely exhausted, and could have been killed with a cane knife.”19

Bruins liked to vary their diet—always to the chagrin of local farmers. Corn, as well as hogs, made easy meals for black bears throughout Arkansas. In Mississippi County, the Osceola Times reported that an “ursine marauder was tearing down corn at a fearful rate” on Capt. Ed McGavock’s farm. Seeing this, John Cowan did his neighborly duty and quickly killed the bear, which weighed in at a corn-fed 509 pounds. The article concluded that the local “folks revel in bear fat, as bruin was in fine order.”20 In 1871, another corn-loving bruin thrived among the

16Arkansas Daily Gazette, September 24, 1869, p. 3.
17Ibid., December 14, 1869, p. 3.
18S. B. Maxey’s Choctaw Brigade was a Confederate unit noted for its ferocity at the battle of Poison Spring, Arkansas: Gregory J. W. Urwin, “Poison Spring and Jenkins’ Ferry: Racial Atrocities during the Camden Expedition” in “All Cut to Pieces and Gone to Hell”: The Civil War, Race Relations, and the Battle of Poison Spring, ed. Mark K. Christ (Little Rock: August House, 2003), 107-137.
19Arkansas Daily Gazette, June 8, 1870, p. 3.
20Ibid., October 6, 1870, p. 3.
small farms on the other side of the state in Washington County. The
“large wild bear was discovered in the corn field of Mr. William McIl-
roy,” exclaimed the Gazette. After an attempt at catching the bear, “his
bearship made good his escape” but was later killed in Benton County
to the north.21 Near Augusta, Arkansas, in 1872, black bears created
quite a nuisance in the cornfields. “They are abundant,” the Augusta
Bulletin claimed, “the mast is so scarce that the bears are destroying
corn by thousands of bushels.” At one point, a farmer “ran four out of
his field at one time.”22

Bear sightings and subsequent hunts were community events. Ev-
everyone within earshot banded together not just for the excitement of the
hunt but to give a hand in killing a property-destroying beast. During the
warm and humid August of 1871, a man who lived just outside of Mag-
nolia ran through the streets of town reporting that he had just seen “a
large bear in his cornfield devouring the fruits of his labors.” That threw
the town into an uproar. Bears were common, to be sure, but to have one
practically in town in the early afternoon ignited a bruin-induced fervor.
The farmer was “not long in rallying to his assistance a goodly number
of gentlemen who love the fun of bear hunting.” After gathering some
“good” hound dogs and establishing a bear posse, the Magnolia men set
off after the now scared and fleeing bear. The dogs caught the bear’s
track, and, shortly after, “the crack of a gun was heard.” As in so many
cases, though, the shot only wounded the bear, which now possessed an
increased impulse to fight. The man who fired the shot, Capt. Billy Reid,
was in trouble. The black bear “made for Billy’s ‘crust’ . . . [and] seemed to say: ‘you can’t come that on me, Billy Reid.’” Reid had po-
sitioned himself to become a hero—or a dead man. After a brief stare-
down, Reid “managed to keep the bear off by jobbing it in the mouth
with the muzzle of his gun, until assistance arrived.” The dogs—not fel-
low posse members—saved the day by biting at the bear’s hindquarters.
Finally, “other hunters poured a volley of shot into the ‘black varment,
which ‘settled his hash.’” The frenzied hunt ended less than a mile from
the center of town. “Who was the bravest and who was the most cow-
ardly, we will not say,” one account concluded, “but it looks like one
must have been brave to get upon a high stump right over the bear!”23

The Magnolia bear hunt embodies two important themes in the human-
bear relationship—the bruin as agent of property destruction and mas-
culinity. The bear, feasting on a farmer’s corn, was immediately tar-

21Ibid., June 23, 1871, p. 1.
22Ibid., November 3, 1872, p. 4.
23Ibid., August 9, 1871, p. 4.
geted for death, and Capt. Billy Reid likely enhanced his reputation for manliness by fighting the bear with an unloaded musket.

For all it might do to underscore one’s masculinity, bear killing, however, was not a task tended to solely by men. Not far from Fort Smith, Justice Watts’ wife heard “a loud squealing in the yard back of the barn” and quickly discovered that a large black bear was attacking a family hog. “She did not faint or scream, as some silly woman would have done,” declared the Gazette, “but showed herself a woman worthy of Arkansas.” Mrs. Watts promptly grabbed a “double barreled shotgun that happened to be loaded, and returned to the field where Bruin was engaged in tearing the hog to pieces.” Instead of screaming, trembling, or locking the door, she took on the bear, showing that women might be celebrated for behaving like men when property was at stake. Set on dispatching the hog-killing bear, “she went near enough to be sure of her aim and discharged both barrels, when she had the satisfaction of seeing him drop dead.” Shotguns usually were not lethal at long distances—especially when a bear was the target—so she had to have gotten quite close to the bruin before pulling the trigger.24

While bears threatened agricultural and pastoral pursuits, they remained even after the Civil War a resource to be harvested. If anything, the expansion of railroads in the 1870s and 1880s and the development of refrigeration enhanced the commercial exploitation of the animal.25 Meat markets were plentiful throughout Arkansas and boasted a vast assortment of wild game. Late nineteenth-century photographs of such markets typically show at least a bear or two hanging from hooks for sale. Turkeys, fox, deer, quail, prairie chickens, squirrels, and anything else palatable could also be found at most meat markets. At times, they even sold mountain lions and wolves. Locals simply went to the market and picked an animal, never having to tramp through the forests themselves.26 After hunters killed a number of healthy bruins in the “bottoms” near Helena, resident Albert Hornor remembered, those bears not eaten by the party “were brought back to Helena and often one was displayed in front of Mr. Burton’s meat market.” At the market, “a choice cut could be purchased by a non-hunting game lover. At the same time, Mr. Burton might have wild geese, ducks, quail, or venison for sale.”27

Furs, too, proved profitable. National magazines, for example, adver-

26Sutton, Arkansas Wildlife, 32.
tised black bear robes for sale on Broadway in New York City. New York firms like Arnold Constable & Co. also bought bear meat.\textsuperscript{28}

By the late nineteenth century, Arkansas meat markets were saturated with wild animals. When market hunters killed excess game, they shipped it to cities such as Memphis and St. Louis for sale. Prices varied dramatically. In the 1890s, prices hovered around seven cents per pound for bear meat, and venison sold for five cents per pound. Wild turkeys went for a cool fifty cents apiece.\textsuperscript{29} With shortages or increased demand, however, wild game prices increased significantly. In January 1893, bear meat sold for record prices in northwest Arkansas, a Bentonville meat market charging twenty-five cents per pound.\textsuperscript{30} This cycle occurred throughout Arkansas, spurring local economies while providing a varied diet for townspeople accustomed to pork and, increasingly, beef.

Profit led directly to over-exploitation. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, large groups, working with dogs, hunted bears and other animals by the dozens for meat markets and fur traders. Mass killing was usually the result—slaughter that played a large role in the bears’ eventual near extirpation. Organized hunts mobilized many men and much material. A thirty-man hunt in Phillips County, one hunter recalled, employed “10 wagons and 40 mules to move our camping equipment into the wood where we pitched camp” and took thirty-two black bears.\textsuperscript{31} Similar hunts occurred across the state, though often with fewer participants. Still, hunts with six or more men were common. In 1889, an eight-man party in St. Francis County had “a graphic encounter with the rugged denizens of the forest, three of which they succeeded in slaying.” In the process, as was often the case, “two of the hunter’s dogs were killed in a desperate fight with one of the bears.”\textsuperscript{32}

Large-scale hunting had pernicious effects upon wildlife. Bears and other animals suffered terribly. Game and fish laws were either non-existent or flouted prior to the 1920s, and hunting carried on throughout the calendar year. Habitat destruction proved to be a key factor in black bear extirpation. Logging in the Ozarks and Ouachitas and the draining and deforestation of delta regions to create farmlands destroyed much

\textsuperscript{28}Arnold Constable & Co. advertisement in \textit{Harper's Weekly} 27 (December 1, 1883): 775.
\textsuperscript{29}Harry Williams, “Market Hunters of Early Arkansas,” \textit{Arkansas Game and Fish} 2 (Fall 1968): 8-11.
\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Arkansas Gazette}, January 20, 1893, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Arkansas Gazette}, November 24, 1889, p. 1.
Commercial hunters with a bear (over the pole) in late nineteenth-century Arkansas. Courtesy Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.
of the bears’ stomping grounds. Bears and other species declined dramatically in numbers.

Efforts to restrict hunting gained ground as this occurred. As early as 1878, the *Arkansas Gazette* published a series of editorials concerning the “preservation of game.” In response, one reader exclaimed, “I have long desired the passage of a law that would restrain the worthless negro, and the almost equally worthless white pot hunter from shooting the partridge off her nest, destroying the noble wild turkey in the breeding season, and killing the doe big with fawn.” The writer continued by calling for the legislature to enact a “game-law” that would make Arkansas a “veritable sportsman’s paradise.” Such rhetoric shows how things other than a disinterested concern for the preservation of species prompted the growing interest in such legislation. Across the post-Reconstruction South, Redeemer Democrats passed game and trespass laws seemingly intended to undermine the independence of the rural poor, who, increasingly unable to secure food through hunting, had to cultivate a landlords’ property in order to provide for their families. By the beginning of the twentieth century, well-to-do sportsmen also sought laws restricting market hunters’ access to land and game. Many Arkansans wished at the same time to prevent both visiting sportsmen and market hunters from carrying off the wildlife that local people felt entitled to.

Beginning in the 1880s, the Arkansas General Assembly passed dozens of game laws concerning specific hunting techniques and species. Many, especially in the beginning, were quickly repealed due to mass public outcry. In 1885, the state legislature passed a law setting hunting seasons for deer, turkeys, and quail. Amended in 1889, the law prohibited the export of any game across state lines—an effort to curb the out-of-state market hunters. By 1897, the legislature had amended game laws to prohibit chasing deer in certain counties. Four years later, the legislature enacted a law requiring written permission to hunt on private property. In 1903, the General Assembly passed Act 162, severely

33 *Arkansas Daily Gazette,* August 14, 1878, p. 2, August 24, 1878, p. 2; August 30, 1878, p. 3.


limiting game hunting and trapping during certain periods of the year. Importantly, most of these regulations applied only to certain areas or counties. Few covered Arkansas in its entirety. Nor did they apply equally to all species. Wolves, coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, and to a large degree black bears did not merit protection from market hunters or from year-round seasons. Indeed, these “vermin” were seen as threats not only to domestic livestock and crops but also to what were designated as “game” animals—deer, quail, turkey, and other commonly hunted animals. Bears, though, gradually moved from vermin to something in the middle. Wolves, mountain lions, and bobcats continued to be targeted for eradication, while deer and turkeys were given protection. Bears simply were not mentioned.\(^\text{36}\)

Not until the General Assembly created the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission in 1915 did game laws cohere into a statewide statute. The commission curtailed exploitation, and, remarkably, bears gained a new recognition in the statutes. They finally found a designation, along with deer, turkey, and quail, as game. The new laws limited hunters to one bear per year and the season to the last half of November into January. No longer could hunting parties kill thirty bears every trip, even if such were still possible. Wildlife population in Arkansas by 1920 was at an all-time low. There were simply not many bears left to protect.\(^\text{37}\)

By 1927, black bears were completely protected by law in Arkansas. The decade-old Game and Fish Commission estimated a total black bear population of about twenty-five. Those were mostly hidden in the deep recesses of the lower White River swamplands. But even with this extraordinarily small population, the commission had reservations about their continued protection:

> As a general rule the average person believes in killing a bear on sight and, if one is not easily sighted, there is strong inclination to get the dogs and chase him down. When brought into court for ending the life of a bear the killer usually proves that the animal was destroying crops, poultry or livestock for him and thus creates a knotty problem for the judge or jury. We are hopeful that as the black bear is re-established in considerable


numbers he will grow in popularity and his protection become assured from the public sentiment standpoint.\textsuperscript{38}

Black bears, thus, held a peculiar place in the rush to save “game” animals and the equally powerful impulse to eradicate predatory animals, or “vermin.” Bears found themselves in both categories. But they reached the coveted game animal status only at the brink of extirpation.\textsuperscript{39}

By contrast, coyotes, bobcats (also known as wildcats), red wolves, and mountain lions, presenting real threats to livestock and perceived ones toward humans, continued to be targets for eradication. Of the four, the red wolf and mountain lion suffered most dearly. At the same time bears gained new protection, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission published pamphlets and articles detailing ways to dispatch wolves and other vermin. A shotgun with shot that spread liberally was recommended to achieve the highest kill ratio per round for wolf pups scampering from a smoked-out den. But to save ammunition, the commission advised a heavy club might well suffice. Mountain lions fared little better, though few Arkansans dared face one with just a heavy club. Instead, the mass destruction of deer, a crucial food source for the cats, undoubtedly played a larger role in mountain lion extirpation than did direct attacks from men. But on the rare occasion that a lion was spotted, death for the big cat was often the result. Everyone, including officials in the Game and Fish Commission, sought the eradication of such vermin. “It can reasonably be assumed,” claimed the \textit{Arkansas Conservationist}, “that this work of trapping and killing predatory species has saved much game of various species.” Tellingly, the majority of the anti-predator program funding came from Arkansas’s Game Protection Fund.\textsuperscript{40}

By the late 1950s, the conservation mindset in the state shifted from what historian Samuel Hays called the “gospel of efficiency” (manifested in Arkansas by the effort to sustain game animal populations so that they might continue to be utilized as prey) to a gospel of preservation. Not only would the state’s native black bears, now numbering an estimated fifty, enjoy protection, the Game and Fish Commission pro-

\textsuperscript{38}Sutton, \textit{Arkansas Wildlife}, 99.

\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., 100-103.

\textsuperscript{40}“Predatory Animal Control,” in \textit{Arkansas Conservationist} 3 (October-December 1929): 9. Historical literature on mountain lions is about as elusive as the lions themselves. A study focusing on the mountain lion-human relationship in American history begs to be written, but see Harold P. Danz, \textit{Cougar!} (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1999).
posed to import more from Minnesota and Canada. In the nine years following 1959, Arkansas wildlife officials released 254 bears into the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains. The public seemed to embrace this preservation. There was little public outcry concerning reintroduction of bears in the state and no major problems. By the 1980s, the state reinstated limited hunting seasons, and, by the end of the twentieth century, a thriving population of nearly 3,000 black bears existed in the state. Perhaps suggestive of the peculiar hold bears had on the minds of Arkansans, no comparable programs emerged to reintroduce the red wolf or mountain lion. With centuries of tangled human-ursine relationships, Arkansas, it seems, remained unwilling to surrender its identity as “the Bear State.”

41Clark and Smith, *Proceedings: Tenth Eastern Workshop on Black Bear Research*, 17. The state still offered bounties for red wolf pelts and other predators. The last official sighting of an Arkansas mountain lion was in 1975, when a healthy male was killed near Lake Dardanelle; Sutton, *Arkansas Wildlife*, 246.
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