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# Early History of the Wolf, Black Bear, and Mountain Lion in Arkansas

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## Abstract

During the nineteenth century settlement of Arkansas, the red wolf (*Canis rufus*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*), and mountain lion (*Puma concolor*) were not only the three largest and most dangerous predators, they also stirred the imaginations of explorers and settlers. References to these species appeared prominently in the journals of early explorers such as George W. Featherstonhaugh (1844) and Frederick Gerstaecker (1854), and their presence inspired voluminous collections of stories and tall tales. Black bears were so common that a large trade developed in pelts, oil, and other body parts, and Arkansas became commonly known as "The Bear State." Wolves and mountain lions also were common and were despised for their suspected predation on livestock and their threat to human life. As a result, the General Assembly of the Arkansas Legislature enacted laws that provided bounties for killing these animals. The species were overexploited, and all three nearly were extirpated from the state by the 1920s-1930s. A stable bear population has now been restored (due to a restoration program in the White River National Wildlife Refuge and re-stocking programs in the Interior Highlands undertaken by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission), the red wolf is considered to be extinct from the state, and the status of the mountain lion is uncertain.

"The chase in the United States is moreover rapidly on the decline; for the American hunter spares nothing, and for some time, particularly since the day when skins were first paid for in hard dollars, a war of extermination has been waged against the poor stags and bears; - so that the hunter who, some five years hence, shall visit these realms, will scarcely find his expectations of sport realized, unless he is prepared either to content himself with small game, or to penetrate to the Rocky Mountains and explore the territory of the Indians." - *Frederick Gerstaecker, 1854*

## Introduction

Arkansas' largest and best-known predators during historical times were the red wolf (*Canis rufus*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*); and mountain lion (*Puma concolor*). All three species occurred statewide. The ocelot (*Felis pardalis*) also was found in the extreme southwestern part of the state. In fact, the type locality was given as Arkansas when the ocelot was first described in 1855 (Hall, 1981). However, this species was extirpated very early and probably never occurred in large numbers. Whereas it is possible that some early reports about wildcats really were reports about ocelots, it is doubtful that the ocelot was a major predator in the state (Sealander and Heidt, 1990).

Because of their size and supposed ferocity, the former three species have received a great deal of attention, usually negative, from human inhabitants. This study reviews the history of the three species and their frequent interactions with humans during the past two centuries. It also provides a brief summary of their presumed current status.

## Early Explorations

The first inhabitants of the area now known as Arkansas included the Bluff Dwellers and the Mound Builders who are believed to have occupied the land thousands of years before the first Europeans arrived. The region later became home to many Native American tribes including the Caddo, Quapaw, and Osage. The land that is now Arkansas was untouched by Europeans until the Spanish and French began their explorations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

One of the first Europeans to travel through the territory was the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto. In 1541 he and his men entered from the east (near Helena), moved to the Northeast, then back to Hot Springs. Historians believe that they probably traveled as far south as the Red River on their quest for gold. De Soto recorded the earliest written descriptions of the vast wilderness and abundant wildlife in the area, and his journals sparked the distinction Arkansas would later gain of being a "sportsman's paradise" (Lawrence, 1991).

Over 100 years later, in 1682, Louis XIV of France sent the French explorer Sieur de La Salle to claim all the land along the Mississippi River and named the region "Louisiana" in honor of the king. La Salle's lieutenant, Henri de Tonti, later founded Arkansas Post, which became the first permanent European settlement in the territory (Table 1).

The French reigned until 1762 when the Treaty of Fontainbleau gave Spain control of much of the Louisiana

**Table 1. Early Explorers of the 1500s - 1800s**

| Explorer             | Year      | Location Explored                                  |
|----------------------|-----------|--|
| Hernando de Soto     | 1541      | Helena; Eastern AR.; Hot Springs; Red River        |
| Joliet and Marquette | 1673      | Mouth of the Arkansas River                        |
| LaSalle and de Tonti | 1682      | Memphis/Helena; Quapaw City; Mouth of the Arkansas |
| Henri de Tonti       | 1686      | Established Arkansas Post                          |
| La Harpe             | 1721      | Lower Arkansas River                               |
| Dunbar and Hunter    | 1804      | Ouachita River                                     |
| Schoolcraft          | 1818-1819 | St. Francis and White River, Parts of the Ozarks   |
| Nuttall              | 1819      | Arkansas River; Red River                          |
| Featherstonhaugh     | 1834      | White River; Little Red River; Little Rock         |
| Gerstaecker          | 1839-1842 | Mississippi Delta; Fourche LaFave River; Ozarks    |

**Sources: Dougan (1994), Lawrence (1991), and Sutton (1998)**

Territory, including Arkansas. In 1800 the Treaty of San Ildefonso returned the territory to France. Then, in 1803 the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France and took formal possession a year later. Arkansas remained a part of the Louisiana Territory until 1812 when it became part of the Missouri Territory. The Arkansas Territory was separated from the Missouri Territory in 1819, and Arkansas Post served as the capitol until 1821 when Little Rock was designated as the permanent capitol. In 1825 much of the western part of the Arkansas Territory was severed by the Conway Line, which separated Arkansas from Oklahoma. Between 1820 and 1835 the population of the Territory increased from approximately 15,000 people to 50,000, most of whom were homesteaders settled along rivers and streams. After much political dispute, in 1836 Arkansas became the 25th state in the Union. The population of the state continued to grow, and by 1860 it had reached 435,000 (Dougan, 1994).

Before several detailed explorations were undertaken in the first half of the 1800s, there were numerous transitory visits by early explorers (Table 1). The three major explorers whose journals provided the most details were Thomas Nuttall, George W. Featherstonhaugh, and Frederick

Gerstaecker (Table 1).

American naturalist Thomas Nuttall accompanied several scientific expeditions to the Mississippi and Missouri valleys, and in 1819 his travels brought him to the Arkansas Territory that he described as "one vast trackless wilderness of trees." Nuttall was interested primarily in plants, geology, and the natives of the area; however, he commented on the predators he observed along the Arkansas River, noting, "Wildcats of two kinds, both striped and spotted as well as panthers, bears, and wolves (black and gray), are in considerable abundance in this country" and, "Panthers are said to be abundant in the woods of the Red River nor are they uncommon on the banks of the Arkansa" (Lottinville, 1999).

English geologist George William Featherstonhaugh was one of the many travel-writers to visit the Arkansas Territory (Featherstonhaugh, 1844). In 1834 he traveled from Poplar Bluff, Missouri to the White River and then headed southwest, continuing toward the Little Red River and on to Little Rock. His explorations took him through the bottomlands of the Petite Mammelle River and Mammelle Mountain where he noted "gangs of savage wolves that range about by night." After leaving Little Rock, Featherstonhaugh encountered other travelers near

the Saline River where they shared stories of large numbers of panthers, wolves, and bears that inhabited the area. He then traveled to the "Hot Springs of the Washita" where he notes, "...all roads of every kind terminate at the Hot Springs; beyond them there is nothing but the unbroken wilderness." Featherstonhaugh planned to continue on to the Mexican frontier but encountered difficulties in his search for a guide. The local hunters were unwilling to miss out on the prime bear hunting season, stating "When the bears are fat, they can surrender a good skin and from twenty to twenty-five gallons of oil." In addition, Featherstonhaugh offered to pay a guide more than the guide could make bear hunting, but the zeal for the hunt outweighed the financial gain, so the potential guides refused.

Throughout his journeys, Featherstonhaugh recorded many anecdotes from the settlers that he met along the way. The following example proved why so many of them feared the panther and other predators: "One unfortunate man ... had been attacked [by a panther] ... the man choked the beast, and retained strength enough to reach his home, where he died soon after."

One of the most prolific writers among the early travelers was the German explorer Frederick Gerstaecker. He traveled in Arkansas for two extended periods: May 1839 to February 1840, and January 1841 to July 1842. He was very enthusiastic about his home in the New World and frequently commented on the beauty and magnificence of the area, as well as the abundant wildlife and hunting opportunities available in the state.

During his first visit, Gerstaecker lived as a backwoodsman in the swamps of the Mississippi Delta (St. Francis County mostly) where he hunted and worked for local farmers in exchange for lodging. On the second trip, he traveled west of Little Rock in the vicinity of the Fourche LaFave River. He also took a side trip into the Ozarks where he described a terrorizing encounter with a bear that killed his hunting companion.

References to the territories three most feared predators appear throughout Gerstaecker's published journals (Gerstaecker, 1854). During his first journey he noted, "Although I heard the howls of several wolves, I did not mind them, but enjoyed a sound sleep. In order to avoid the bears and panthers, I had climbed up a tree. ...I heard the howling of wolves and once the roar of a panther in the distance" (Gerstaecker, 1854).

### Bounty Laws

Depredation of livestock and fear of personal attack fostered perceptions held by early settlers concerning the threatening nature of large predators. Many settlers suffered heavy losses when their cattle, hogs, and colts fell prey to

wolves and panthers. Tales of human attacks became widespread, and out of desperation people often barricaded their homes against these predators. Accounts by travel writers during this time period also helped to reinforce these fears. Wolves and panthers became known as ruthless killers and as a result bounty laws were enacted which encouraged the mass removal of these animals. From 1816 to 1921 a series of legislative acts were formulated to encourage the killing of wolves and panthers, which ultimately played a significant role in their demise (Table 2).

### Species Accounts

#### Red wolf (*Canis rufus*)

The red wolf is larger and more robust than the coyote. Its muzzle, ears, nape, and outer surfaces of the legs are tawny. The remainder of the pelage is a mixture of cinnamon-buff and tawny interspersed with gray and black above (often giving rise to a description of the animal being gray). A black color phase occurs where the animal is predominately black except for a white pectoral spot. Red wolves weigh between 16-41 kg (35-90 lb) (Gipson, 1976; Sealander and Heidt, 1990).

As Arkansas was being settled, red wolves ranged throughout the state and were apparently quite numerous. They could be found singly or in packs. Wolves of any kind have been the source of terror throughout recorded history, and Arkansas settlers and explorers have been no exception (e.g., Thomas, 1972; Allen, 1989b). People not only feared for their lives, they also attributed much of their livestock loss to wolves. Consequently, wolves were killed when encountered and, as seen in Table 2, have been the subjects of a number of bounty laws through the years (Holder, 1951; Sutton, 1998).

As settlements grew during the 1800s, the numbers of wolves decreased. By the turn of the century wolf populations had significantly diminished, particularly in eastern Arkansas. The decline of wolf populations continued during the first two decades of the past century. During the 1930s coyotes apparently started expanding into the state and hybridization began to occur (Holder, 1951; Sealander and Heidt, 1990).

Wolf populations, however, continued to exist in the Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas and in parts of the Gulf Coastal Plain. In the early 1940s it was estimated that 40-100 wolves still were present in Sharp County. In Washington County, 32 were trapped in 1943 and 1944. During this same time period, 32 wolves were trapped in Miller and Little River counties, and 2 to 10 were trapped in other southwestern counties of the Gulf Coastal Plain. In the winter of 1942-43, nine wolves were trapped in Pulaski County (Holder, 1951). Continued trapping and killing and

Table 2. A History of Statewide Bounty Laws

1816 Missouri territorial legislature enacted bounty laws designed "to encourage the killing of wolves, panthers, and wildcats."

1819 Act of 1816 repealed

1838 An Act to encourage the killing of wolves in the state of Arkansas. Act included:

1. Bounty of \$3.00 from county for wolf scalp
2. County magistrate to burn or destroy scalp
3. Master receives provisions for wolves taken by slaves
4. Penalty for cheating, \$4.00
5. Form of certificate

1843 Section 1 amended to give county discretion over bounty

1885 Act 44, An Act to Amend -- added wildcat and panther scalps

- \$5.00 wildcat
- \$8.00 wolf
- \$10.00 panther

1915 Establishment of Arkansas Game and Fish Commission

1917 Act 133 -- gave AG&FC authority to protect and regulate hunting of game and furbearers

1919 Act 269 "An Act to Amend Act 44 of the Acts of 1885"

1. Set statewide bounties rather than county
  - \$5.00 wildcat
  - \$10.00 wolf
  - \$25.00 panther
2. Penalty for stealing increased, 45 counties exempted

1921 Act 146 -- exempted two additional counties

1921 Act 198 -- 22 counties exempt from paying any bounties

increased hybridization caused the red wolf to be extirpated from Arkansas by the early 1970s (Gipson and Sealander, 1976; Gipson et al., 1974, 1975).

**Mountain Lion (*Puma concolor*)**

The mountain lion is a large, powerfully built cat with a long tail (slightly more than one-third of the total length). These animals range in size from 1500-2743 mm (59.1-108.0 in) and weigh from 36-103 kg (79.4-227.0 lb); females are smaller than males. The pelage is uniformly pale brown to reddish brown above and dull white below (Sealander and Heidt, 1990).

During the early history of Arkansas, the mountain lion

or panther was found statewide, but was probably more numerous in the remote upland regions of the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains. The panther was the terror of settlers, and many stories, probably exaggerated, were told of harrowing experiences of cat encounters (Holder, 1951; Thomas, 1972; Allen, 1989a; Sutton, 1998).

By 1900, most mountain lions had been killed or driven to remote areas, and it was thought that by 1920 they had been extirpated from the state. In addition to hunting pressure, the reduction of the white-tailed deer herd (which had dwindled to less than 300 animals) may also have played a role in the decrease of the mountain lion (Young and Goldman, 1946). Due to restoration projects, the deer population had increased by the late 1940s, and soon after-

ward a mountain lion was killed in Montgomery County (Sealander, 1951). In the 1950s and 1960s, sightings and observations of sign increased (Lewis, 1969, 1970), and a second animal was killed in Ashley County (Noble, 1971). Sealander and Gipson (1973) summarized 63 mountain lion records from 1945 to 1972 and concluded that due to the increasing deer population, a small population of mountain lions existed in the state. The last mountain lion killed in the state was in Logan County in 1975 (Sutton, 1998).

McBride et al. (1993) concluded there were no reproducing lions in the state after conducting an extensive field study. Reports of sightings or sign have persisted, however, and currently at least four mountain lions have been documented (Witsell et al., 1999; Clark et al., unpubl. data). The origin of these animals is not known, although there are over 100-150 captive animals currently in Arkansas (Sasse, 2001), and free-ranging animals might possibly have originated from that source.

Mountain lions in Arkansas originally were designated as *P. concolor coryi*, the endangered Florida panther. However, Culver et al. (2000), using mitochondrial DNA, have placed all North American mountain lions into one subspecies, *P. c. cougar*.

#### Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

The black bear is large and heavily built, measuring 1270-1980 mm (50-78 in) and weighing 100-227 kg (220-500 lb). The pelage is deep glossy black to cinnamon-brown; there may be a white patch on the pectoral area (Sealander and Heidt, 1990).

At the time of the early exploration of Arkansas, black bears were found throughout the state and were extremely common. Bears played an important role in the lives of Indians providing them with clothing, food, and ornaments (teeth and claws). As settlers began inhabiting the state, bears were economically important for the same reasons as well as for the utilization of bear grease. This grease or oil was highly prized for cooking in that it did not become rancid as quickly as butter (Featherstonhaugh, 1844). Thousands of barrels of bear oil/grease were shipped annually to ports such as New Orleans. It is said that Oil Trough (Independence County) received its name from the fact that commercial hunters stored bear grease in troughs made of hollow logs before shipment down the White River (Sealander and Heidt, 1990). Due to this commercial trade, thousands of bears were killed annually during the first half of the 19th century. The bear trade was so important that until 1923, Arkansas was unofficially known as "The Bear State" (Holder, 1951; Sealander and Heidt, 1990; Sutton, 1998). As would be expected from such a large and potentially dangerous animal, bear stories have been extremely numerous (e.g., Thomas, 1972; Allen, 1988).

With the exception of the lower White River bottoms and the Ouachita Mountains, bears had been largely exterminated from Arkansas at the turn of the 19th century. By 1910 the population in the Ouachita Mountains also was scarce. Holder (1951) estimated that there were only 40-50 bears remaining in the state in the early 1950s. More than half of these were in and around the White River National Wildlife Refuge, and the remaining were scattered in the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains.

During 1959, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission began a highly successful restocking program in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains (Smith et al., 1990). It is now estimated that there are over 3500 bears in the state and the AG&FC conducts an annual hunting season (R. Eastridge, AG&FC, pers. comm.).

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