

Wolves, Panthers and Bears, Oh My!
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The wolf- the most enduring symbol of the wild. John Page, great grandfather of Erford L. Page, the founder of the Page Seed Company, settled around 1800 on Page Brook Road in Triangle, NY. The Page family has an account of John and Rachel Page's first years as settlers. The first log hut had no windows because they struggled with the wild animals in the area. They were all alone "in the midst of a howling forest, with wild beasts as companions: bears, wolves and panthers." Rachel told the story of "hearing the wolves howling around her dwelling. Her faithful dog would drive them away, only to be followed back by the beasts."

Because the wolf was such a threat to livestock, there was a determined effort to eradicate them from the area. There was a bounty on their hides. The Eastern timber wolf was exterminated about 100 years ago in New York State and most other states also. The last wild wolf in New York was taken in the Adirondacks in 1897. There are now about 2200 wolves in the U.S. ,mostly in Minnesota. There has been an attempt to reintroduce the wolves to New York State but there is so much controversy surrounding this that it has not happened.

The same fate befell the panther. The feral cat is known by many names: panther, painter, cougar, catamount, puma and mountain lion. All the same animal. There is a road in South Oxford named Painter Hill which was Panther Hill on the 1855 map. It seems the terms painter and cougar are colloquial names, but whatever you call the animal, it was eliminated from New York State during the last half of the 19th century. There are stories of sightings of the puma in the Eastern U.S. in the last ten years as well as the wolf.

Another wild cat that was eliminated is the lynx. In a 1907 article in a neighboring newspaper, a lynx was killed in Nine Mile Swamp after a sad account of its demise. The headline was *Wild Cat Was Treed in Nine Mile Swamp by Foxhounds and Party of Hunters*. The article then says that the cat weighed over 50 pounds, was fierce with hunger and showed fight. A shot brought it down from the tree when the other hunters completed the killing of the beast. Not for many years had a wild cat been seen in this part of the country. It seems that the bobcat took its place when the deer began to increase in the Adirondacks with the onset of logging, for the deer is the bobcat's main source of food. There was an attempt to reintroduce the lynx in the Adirondacks in the late 1980s. Eighty-two of them, fitted with transmitters, were let loose but after a decade they had disappeared with their batteries long dead. Some were killed by automobiles but what happened to the majority of them is a great mystery. The balance of nature is certainly an act.

When the loggers and settlers started to clear the land, the deer were in abundance as they could find all the browse they needed with the saplings and shrubs. There were no game laws and the deer were killed off very quickly. One hunter in the 1850s told of killing 150 deer in one year. In the north, the venison was fed to the loggers in the camps besides the guests in all the big resort hotels. Game dealers also sold the meat farther afield to hotels and restaurants. Chenango American 28-Nov-1861: *There is considerable excitement over a number of deer seen in this vicinity lately, the only ones known to have been hereabouts for several years. John B. Wheeler, an excellent marksman, and his son, John, sixteen years old, each shot one. Hunting parties are scouring the woods for more.* It's evident that by this date, deer were scarce.

In 1887, the white-tailed deer was reintroduced into New York State and now the deer population is estimated to be between 800,000 to one million. There are several reasons for this huge number. The Northeast is becoming naturally reforested again with the decline of farming. There is an emphasis on the “greening” of America. People are making their backyards attractive to wildlife with new plantings, ponds, flower and vegetable gardens. Much of it may be unintentional but many suburban and rural areas alike have become havens for the deer and other animals. Last, there are fewer hunters and the deer population is increasing rapidly which is a concern to wildlife managers.

Along with the deer is the rise of coyotes. The coyotes entered New York State in the 1920s extending their range eastward after wolves were eliminated. In fact, recent DNA done on the coyote shows that there has been some hybridization with the wolf. It varies in the individual coyotes in New York State. Recent DNA analyses show no evidence of dog genetic material in New York coyotes as there had been in early colonies. The coyotes eat almost anything (they like both feral and domestic cats a lot!) but in the winter, their diet is 80 to 90% deer and now there are reports that more than 50% of their food is deer year round. This could be a good thing to keep the deer population under control. We hear the howls of the coyotes very clearly on the hills in back of our house.

Brown bears never were extirpated in New York State; there are approximately 5,000 in the Adirondacks, 2,000 in the Catskills and 500 in the Allegany Region. Today their range is extending, because of our “greening” atmosphere (bird feeders included) and the natural reforestation. They are in our area probably to stay.

19-September-1878: George W. Smith of the village has shot 107 gray squirrels in less than four weeks. Squirrels are so thick in Unadilla that the boys take their guns to school to shoot them from the Academy windows. What an image of frantic activity with guns and killing with a school involved. For the 21st century, we can barely imagine that this was allowed.

16-December-1909: The turtle on the W.B. Benedict farm has made its annual appearance for 76 years. In 1834, Mr. Benedict caught him and cut the date upon its shell. A charming, newsworthy item. In researching New York turtles, I discovered that this must have been a box turtle. Box turtles can live for 120 years. With so much rapid change in our lives, here is one image that is constant. Many turtles alive today will be here in the 22nd century and that is a comforting thought. Enjoy the photo of the box turtle.