

GREAT AMERICAN ANIMALS

By WILLIAM T. HORNADAY, Author of American Natural History

II. THE VANISHING MUSK OX

THE last chapter of the life of the musk ox now in the making? Let us look over the ground and judge.

For a hundred years or more the people of the United States and Canada have been enjoying the possession of three great wild animal varieties, all strictly limited to North America. They are the white mountain goat, the prong-horned antelope and the musk ox. So far as continuance is concerned, we have felt no uneasiness about the goat. We have been worrying hard about the antelope, and now the musk ox has become a source of anxiety.

Prof. Henry Fairfield Osborn has been warning us in strong terms about "the end of the age of mammals"; and a year ago last January when an observer from the far north openly declared his belief "that today not more than one hundred musk oxen remain alive on the mainland of North America," it gave his hearers a jolt. He said that the Eskimo tribes of the northeastern edge of the Canadian Barren Grounds have been liberally supplied by the fur traders with modern high-power rifles, and that as a result the slaughter of musk oxen has almost exterminated the herds of the Barren Grounds.

This is the regular thing to-day and quite in line with the treatment of wild life everywhere else in wild regions. The wise thing for American young people to do is to become acquainted now with the musk ox while it is possible to find a few outside the stuffed-animal collections of our museums of natural history.

Of all strange animals of North America the musk ox is one of the queerest and most interesting. First of all, it is a true connecting link between wild cat and sheep. It challenges our keen admiration because it is able to live and thrive in the fiercely-cold arctic regions, even up to the farthest north for hoofed animals, the musk ox inhabits the wild cape buffalo of Africa, cattle-like hoofs, and its flesh looks and tastes like beef. It has next its body a dense coat of soft, clean, woolly hair, and through this grows a rain coat of very long, straight, brown hair like that of the Tibetan yak. It has a tail so short and small that the animal seems tailless. Its supply of "musk" and its "musky" odor are both wholly imaginary.

The intelligence of the musk ox is by turns as fully and as defective. It does not fully know the dangerous character of man, and it does not know that every wild animal not under protection should fly from the presence of man. For thousands of years the musk ox herds have been preserving their calves from the hungry wolf packs of the north by the most excellent military strategy. When wolves threaten a herd it once forms a compact circle, with the adult bulls and cows standing shoulder to shoulder in the outer ring, and with all the calves and young stock inside.

Even to hungry wolves with time aplenty that circle of deadly drooping horns is impenetrable. A bull may leave his place for a moment to rush out thirty yards or so in an effort to puncture a wolf, but he never is lured too far. Back he goes to the circle, backs to his place, and plays the game to the end.

Now, although that plan is exceedingly wise in defense against wolves, with man as the enemy it is fatal. It means the easy shooting down of the entire herd! Is it not too bad? The musk ox only dimly realizes the deadliness of man, and, worst of all, he has not yet learned that the Eskimo and the Indian now have deadly repeating rifles instead of old-fashioned spears. When a man is sighted in the offing, either at one mile or the other, the herd should rush off at top speed in the opposite direction and run for about five miles. I wish I could give Oxibos a tip on that point.

Now, is there anyone who holds that in forming his defensive wolf-proof circle the musk ox does not think and reason? I hope not. The wild animal that attempts to live in the far north must either think or die!

For nearly fifty years the killing of the musk ox has been proceeding on a determined scale. And what is the most striking result up to date? It is nothing less than the complete disappearance, or extinction, of the Barren Ground species all the way from the longitude of Point Barrow, Alaska, to about longitude 100° which means the head of Chesterfield Inlet. This area of extermination is precisely fifteen hundred miles long from east to west! We know that the musk ox herds once lived as far west as the meridian of Point Barrow, Alaska, because Mr. Charles D. Brower, who lives at that point, recently sent me some musk ox skulls, horns and hair to prove it.

A Tale of Extermination.

The tale of extermination during the past seventy-five years has been wrought by the coast Eskimo and Indian tribes, with help from white men through the help in skins. It rarely has happened in our own time that savages have exterminated their own wild-animal food supply. The Indians chiefly concerned, east of the Mackenzie River, are the Dog-Rib and Yellow-Knife tribes; and they have virtually finished their work.

To-day it is the coast Eskimos that are killing the last musk ox on the mainland of North America. It was one of the coast Eskimo clans of that region that recently murdered the two white explorers, Mr. Harry V. Radford of New York and Mr. Street of Canada.

The late Dr. C. Gordon Hewitt of Canada has published in his new book, the Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada, this startling statement: "The remaining herds of musk ox are now restricted to the region between Chesterfield Inlet and Back's River." This area is approximately one hundred miles by three hundred, and the total number of survivors there recently has been estimated at "less than one hundred."

During the last three years of his life, Dr. Hewitt put forth his utmost efforts to save the musk ox from the northern Canada from extinction by those who wanted their skins for the fur trade. His efforts were entirely successful so far as the enactment of prohibitive laws was concerned; but to stop all killing by Eskimos was impossible. The killing of the musk ox for marketable furs was stopped, and the shambles of Melville, Banks and Victoria Islands were transformed into musk ox preserves.

But the needs of the natives constituted the one loop-hole in the Eskimos north of Chesterfield Inlet in exterminating the musk-ox. The law gave them the right to kill "when they are actually in need of the meat of such musk ox to prevent starvation." They are grossly abusing this privilege, and therefore, the alleged "starvation" of native tribes can be averted without the extermination of the valuable wild animals to which they look for food; but it takes a superhuman effort to make governments believe it and act upon it.

So far as written records reveal the life histories of wild animals very few wild animal species ever have been exterminated by savage tribes using their own weapons. For between the crude weapons of savages and the natural increase of wild animals was excellently preserved. For example, our North American Indians alone never would have exterminated the millions of American bison with their own weapons and for their own purposes. It was the deadly white man who did it, and the Indians, helped with the firearms of the white man. To-day with the Eskimos of the North shooting down the musk-ox herds with beautiful repeating rifles of high power for some one to find out how many and what is likely to be their fate.

Let us begin with the farthest north of Oxibos and swing westward. In the first place, be it known that there are two well-defined species. The species of the farthest north is called the white-fronted musk-ox, and its Latin name is Oxibos wardi. It is marked by a conspicuous dull white band across its forehead, which is particularly noticeable in the calves before their horns develop. When Peary made his long sled journey over the great ice cap of Greenland to the extreme north, he actually jumped-off place there at the end of his outward hike and most northerly point of land in the world he found a small band of musk oxen of this species, and killed one. And mightily glad too were the Eskimo explorers thus fortunately to obtain several pounds of delicious meat for themselves and their sled dogs. The musk ox often has thus contributed to the ease of arctic exploration and saved many a hard-pressed explorer from scurvy or worse.

We know that halfway down the east coast of Greenland, around Franz Josef Fjord, which is in latitude 70 degrees, the white-fronted musk ox still exists in fair numbers. We have today in the New York Zoological Park five lusty calves that were caught there in the summer of 1922 by a party of Norwegian whalers, who took time off from their whaling to accomplish that task. The Zoological Parks of Philadelphia and Washington have each a pair of calves that were taken on that occasion.

It seems to be a fact that the great Greenland ice cap is destitute of uninhabitable. It is in the rough and broken country at the edge of the ice cap, where the valleys and mountains meet the sea, that vegetation

grows and musk ox and caribou can live.

The Range of the Musk Ox

The white-fronted musk ox crosses from Hall Land, in Greenland, to Grant Land. When Lieutenant, afterward General A. W. Greely established his party of polar observers and explorers at an abiding place that he named Fort Conger, on Lady Franklin Bay, he found a musk-ox herd within easy reach. In 1902 Commander Peary sent to us a calf that his party had captured alive at Fort Conger in the summer of that year.

From that fearsome northerly point the white-fronted musk ox ranges southward through Ellesmere Land and Melville Island, and I know not just how many more of those great arctic islands, before it meets the other species. I am unable to draw a boundary line between the two. At all events it seems to be true that wherever the northern species leaves off the southern species begins; and the two once roamed over all the huge arctic islands that lie between Greenland and the mainland of North America. The southern species is known as muschatus. Once it inhabited the arctic coast and the hinterland of the North American mainland all the way from the northern finger of Hudson Bay westward to the longitude of Point Barrow, northwestern Alaska. That is a stretch of eighteen hundred miles! North of it lie the "lands" and islands of the great arctic maze; they are so numerous that to recite their names would be hopelessly confusing. In winter many of the islands are connected by ice. It is safe to say that in past times, before the modern rifle began its deadly work of harvesting musk-ox hides, before the killing by exploring parties and by sportsmen for sport, every large island of that vast region was inhabited by the musk ox.

The extermination of the Barren Ground musk ox began about a century ago in the vicinity of Point Barrow, its extreme western range. It is only the oldest of the Point Barrow Eskimo who remember having heard their fathers tell of having killed musk oxen and eaten their meat. The herds were so quickly annihilated everywhere fully a quarter of a century the better prevailed, even among some American zoologists, that the species never had lived in Alaska during recent times.

During the past twenty-five years it is possible to trace the progress of the extermination eastward. For example, it reached the latitude of Cape Bathurst about 1902. It passed the chain of lakes north of Great Slave Lake about 1910. Now it is up to the head of Chesterfield Inlet, within three hundred miles of Hudson Bay. Between that river-like inlet on the south and Back's River on the north the last musk ox herds of the North American mainland are making their last stand. It is to be feared that the whole of them was shot down by the King William Land Eskimos in 1923—before the Canadian Government could forcibly intervene to prevent it.

Lack of Stamina.

No, even in New York musk oxen as we keep them do not suffer from the heat; but if kept in a cruelly hot sun-baked, unshaded corral they animal would suffer just as any other hoofed animal would. They cannot endure the thirteen or fifteen inches of rain that fall in New York City every winter, and when those drearily rains come in cold weather we drive our animals into their house and shut them in. If we did not do so, every musk ox we have soon would die of pneumonia. They can stand any amount of dry cold, however, and flourish on it.

Once by way of experiment we caught a two-year-old musk ox in the shedding season and controlled it while our keepers skillfully combed out through the long, straight hair of its rain coat the curly wool. The wool had been shed from the skin, and the operation was painless. It required the service of half a dozen men to get that one ennobled into our possession; and this enabled us to determine just what it would mean to get the wool from a full-grown, strong and dangerous musk ox for wool growing is not a proper commercial undertaking. The wool we obtained weighed almost fifteen pounds, but we had

Preservation or Extinction?

All this brings us squarely up to the question of the preservation or extinction of the musk ox species of North America, the Arctic Islands and Greenland.

The answer to the musk ox question rests one-tenth with Denmark and nine-tenths with Canada. We of the United States are out of it, because we own not one wild musk ox in the north lands.

The former Canadian Government was keenly alive to the perils of the situation. I say "perils" because no statesman or good citizen can possibly be indifferent to the fate of a species so valuable and so extremely interesting as the musk ox. It is unthinkable. In 1916 when the Canadian Conservation Commission was framing the new Northwest Game Act I had a golden opportunity, to the late Dr. C. Gordon Hewitt, the special advisor of the Commission, I know that the utmost protection then procurable was put into the new game act and enacted into law in 1917.

The act prohibits entirely the killing of the musk ox for its skin; it prohibits all killing by white men except under Government license, and even then only two skins or heads may be taken under each license. Bona-fide explorers may kill musk oxen for food, but not for their skins. Victoria, Banks and Melville Islands were constituted musk ox

reserves "and as centres for their natural distribution to other parts."

So far as killing by white men is concerned all Canadian-owned musk ox territory—that is, everything outside Greenland—now is tightly bottled up. But alas! there is one North Pole in the law encircling the world that is the right to kill the animals accorded to natives who are "in need of the meat to prevent starvation"; and what is easier or more natural than for an Eskimo fox-trapper to claim and pretend even to swear that he is "starving" whenever wherever he gets a chance to kill musk oxen! Every Eskimo always "needs the meat!" And so the high-power-automatic Eskimos can by subterfuge and pretense evade the spirit as well as the letter of the Northwest Game Act as it now stands and exterminate the musk oxen everywhere outside Greenland. At present I do not know whether or not Denmark now prevents the killing of musk oxen by white men for their skins.

At this moment the Canadian Government is giving serious consideration to the possibilities in the domestication of the musk ox—which means inducing dry in fenced areas and multiply. The task is perplexing and difficult, because up to this date the musk ox never has bred in captivity. Our own experiences with an animal in captivity have been squeezed dry in our efforts to give the Canadian Government all the facts we have that may prove either helpful or suggestive.

First and last we have had fourteen musk oxen in the New York Zoological Park. We have had one Barren-Grounder from near Cape Bathurst, one white-fronted musk ox from Fort Conger, one from Melville Island, six from Ellesmere Land; and to-day we have five from eastern Greenland.

The herd of six from Ellesmere Land, presented to us in 1910 by Mr. Paul J. Rainey, gave an excellent account of itself. Some of them achieved a longevity in captivity beyond any previously attained. The last survivor was with us nearly eight years! But there was only one cow in that herd, and there was no breeding. Our female that Captain Bernier brought to us in 1909 from Melville Island lived until 1916, but she was so savage that no other animal could share her corral.

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rather be excused from combing a herd of full-grown animals!

On Mr. Paul Rainey's ship I dined on musk-ox steak. It was quite like beef, and there was neither musky odor nor musky taste.

The temperament of musk oxen always is nervous, and when they are under compulsion their temper is vicious and dangerous. They persistently refuse to be petted or handled; and many adult animals are of savage disposition. Their horns meet in a broad base over the top of the skull, drop far down, then sharply curve upward for several

(Continued on page 7.)

An old timer's notion of dressing for dinner was to let out his belt two holes.

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