

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.

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 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 cattle and sheep.

The intelligence of the musk ox is by turns fully known and dangerous character of man, and it does not know that every wild animal not under protection should fly from the presence of man.

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°.

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."

During the last three years of his life, Dr. Hewitt put forth his utmost efforts to save the musk ox of the northern Canada from extinction by those who wanted their skins for the fur trade.

But the needs of the natives constituted the one soap-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.

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.

Let us begin with the farthest north of the long-range high-power repeating rifles. It is high time for some one to find out how many musk oxen remain, where they are and what is likely to be their fate.

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.

It seems to be a fact that the great Greenland ice cap is destitute of inhabitable life. 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 the north coast of Greenland, 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.

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.

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 suffer just as any other hoofed animal would.

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.

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.

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 Arctic that is not so tightly bottled up.

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 the large protected or fenced areas and multiply. The task is perplexing and difficult, because up to this date the musk ox never has bred in captivity.

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.

Lack of Stamina. 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.

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.

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

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.

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