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Hunting in Early America

For our colonial ancestors: hunting was a mixture of pure survival and a sometimes short sighted view of the game as an infinite resource. Today, we put great emphasis today on sportsmanship and conservation. The goal of a hunter is to stalk and kill his prey with minimum suffering to the animal. The goal of our fish and game departments is to manage the animal populations for sustainable yields. Organizations such as Ducks Unlimited work to protect habitat for game—doing far more good to preserve America’s wild places than some well-meaning “bunny hugger” environmentalist groups.

The mass media seldom portray these sides of hunting, preferring instead to focus on a relatively small number of drunken buffoons. Those negative views of hunters and rural life constantly spread by the mass media infected me pretty thoroughly when I was younger, growing up in Los Angeles. I still recall with embarrassment when a survey from the NRA arrived in my mailbox about 1980 or so that asked, “Do you hunt? How often? What do you hunt?” I did not have a positive image of hunters, NRA, and the “gun culture,” and my snotty answers were “Yes. Daily. People.”

I grew up a city boy, and I still am one. I’ve never hunted, and I suspect that I never will. Until my wife and I moved to a relatively rural part of California in 1982, I had never met a hunter. Our new neighbor next door, Cliff, hunted. As I grew to know Cliff better, I realized that had he grown up in Los Angeles, instead of being a hunter, he probably would have joined the Sierra Club. I began to see that hunting was something

of an excuse for Cliff to be out in the wilderness, communing with Nature. Hunting wasn't a blood sport for Cliff.

Exposure to NRA magazines has given me a profound appreciation for the important role that hunters perform in America. Many of the predators that used to keep the large herbivores in check have been wiped out. Why were the big predators wiped out? Often it was because the government wanted them exterminated, and put its considerable financial resources behind such efforts.

California paid a bounty to hunters to kill mountain lions from 1876 to 1963, and even hired employees to kill them.¹ Wisconsin paid \$5 for every timber wolf killed, starting in 1865. In 1900, they increased the bounty to \$20 for adult wolves, and \$10 for pups. The program did not end until 1957—and the timber wolves were gone by 1960.² Bears have also been subject to this government-subsidized program as well.³ There are many other examples available—a reminder that if you really want a species exterminated, you can't count on the free market to do it—it takes a government.

Human hunters have taken the place of the wolf, the mountain lion, and the grizzly bear. We don't have the speed or strength of these magnificent (and dangerous)

¹ “DFG Testimony Before Senate Wildlife Committee,” <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/lion/outdoor.lion.html>, last accessed August 18, 2003; *Statutes of California and Digest of Measures* (1876), ch. 391, cited at <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/Exhibits/bearinmind/themes/captivity/15print.html>, last accessed August 18, 2003; Jason Pautz, http://www.rw.ttu.edu/sp_accounts/mt_lion/management.htm, last accessed August 18, 2003.

² Sumner Matteson, Adrian Wydeven and Barbara Zellmer, “On things lost and brought back from the brink,” *Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine*, June 1998, available at <http://www.wnrmag.com/stories/1998/jun98/lost.htm>, last accessed August 18, 2003; Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, “Timber Wolf,” available at <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/er/factsheets/mammals/wolf.htm>, last accessed August 18, 2003.

³ Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources, “The Regulations Of Bear Management In Nova Scotia, Canada,” available at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/natr/WILDLIFE/lgmams/talk1.htm>, last accessed August 18, 2003; *Statutes of California and Digest of Measures* (1876), ch. 391, cited at

animals, so we more than make up for it with superior technology and greater intelligence. But because there are so many humans, and our technology gives us such a dramatic advantage, we put limits on when, where, and how we can take hunt game to provide the animals a sporting chance.

It was not always this way. As I have been researching hunting in early America, I have been struck by how differently our ancestors viewed hunting: a mixture of pure survival and a belief that there were no limits to the game that they could take. There were few Indians in America when the first Europeans arrived—by most estimates, perhaps a million in all of what are now the lower 48 states. (If you have been hearing much, much higher numbers of late, that is because there is a concerted campaign by certain leftists to inflate the population of the New World for political purposes.) The Indians were spectacularly skilled with the weapons that they had—but when they saw what an advantage the gun provided for hunting, Indians switched over to the new technology with astonishing speed.

Even though both Indians and Europeans made extensive use of guns for hunting, the game populations in America were huge—and stayed that way for more than a century. Some of the hunting practices that colonists used (often borrowed from the Indians), sound unsporting to us today. To the colonists, these methods weren't unsporting, they were...efficient.

One example is a practice known as “fire-hunting.” One book that I read explained why white pines in New York, New England, and New Jersey were protected for the use of the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy needed these massive pines for the masts

of ships, and fire-hunting destroyed these great trees in vast numbers. The colonists learned about fire-hunting from the Indians (who at least had the excuse, before the white man, of lacking guns to hunt game):

“It used to be the custom for large companies to go into the woods in the winter, and to set fire to the brush and underwood in a circle of several miles. This circle gradually contracting itself, the deer, and other wild animals enclosed, naturally retired from the flames, till at length they got herded together in a very small compass.

“Then, blinded and suffocated by the smoke, and scorched by the fire, which every moment came nearer to them, they forced their way, under the greatest trepidation and dismay, through the flames. As soon as they got into the open daylight again, they were shot by the hunters, who stood without and were in readiness to fire upon them.”⁴

In addition to New York, New Jersey, and the New England colonies, there were a number of statutes of Colonial Virginia and Maryland that either directly prohibited fire-hunting with reference to guns,⁵ or that licensed hunting on the frontier in an attempt to control fire-hunting.⁶

The sheer quantities of wildlife available for the taking, at first without legal restrictions of any sort, must have seemed like paradise to Englishmen arriving on these

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⁴ Andrew Burnaby, “In the Woods” in Albert Bushnell Hart and Mabel Hill, *Camps and Firesides of the Revolution* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), 51. See also J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Johnson’s Wonder-Working Providence: 1628-1651* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1959), 85.

⁵ William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*. (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 5:62, 5:431.

William Hand Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1885), 28:348-9, 44:21, 36, 39, 173, 180-1.

Connecticut’s 1733 statute regulating “Firing the Woods” at Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, Prior to the Union with New Haven Colony* (Hartford, Conn.: Brown & Parsons, 1850) 7:456-7.

⁶ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, 3:69.

shores. In England, hunting was severely restricted, both because wildlife was scarcer, and because hunting was a traditional privilege of the upper classes. William N. Blane, an Englishman traveling through America in 1822 and 1823, described the astonishment when he informed Americans that British game laws prohibited hunting deer in public lands, and even limited hunting on one's own land to the wealthy. "Such flagrant injustice appeared to them impossible...."⁷ By comparison, when William Penn sought to encourage colonists in Pennsylvania in the seventeenth century, he repeatedly emphasized that colonists had "liberty to fowl and hunt upon the lands they hold, and all other lands therein not inclosed...."⁸

In colonial America, the vast flocks overhead must have seemed even more amazing than the liberty to hunt. Emmanuel Altham's 1623 description of Plymouth Colony described how large the flocks of overhead birds were by telling us that, "that one man at six shoots hath killed 400."⁹ John Hammond's description of 1656 Virginia tells us that "Water-fowl of all sorts are... plentiful and easy to be killed.... Deer all over the country, and in many places so many that venison is accounted a tiresome meat; wild turkeys are frequent, and so large that I have seen weigh near threescore pounds...."¹⁰

Robert Beverley's 1705 description of Virginia described how: "I am but a small Sports-man, yet with a Fowling-Piece, have kill'd above Twenty [wild fowl] at a Shot."¹¹

⁷ William N. Blane, *An Excursion through the United States and Canada, during the Years 1822-3* (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1824; reprinted New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 175.

⁸ *Pennsylvania Archives* (Philadelphia: J. Severns & Co., et al., 1852-1935), 4th series, 1:2.

⁹ Sydney V. James, Jr., *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth* (Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 1997), 28-29.

¹⁰ John Hammond, *Leah and Rachel, Or, The Two Fruitfull Sisters Virginia and Mary-land...* (London: T. Mabb, 1656), in Clayton Colman Hall, ed., *Narratives of Early Maryland: 1633-1684* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 285, 291.

¹¹ Robert Beverley, Louis B. Wright, ed., *The History and Present State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 153.

At a plantation on Chesapeake Bay, Jasper Danckaerts, a Dutchman visiting America 1679-80, expressed amazement at the number of ducks together in front of the house where he stayed one night: “There was a boy about twelve years old who took aim at them from the shore, not being able to get within good shooting distance of them, but nevertheless shot loosely before they flew away, and hit only three or four, complained of his shot, as they are accustomed to shoot from six to twelve and even eighteen or more at one shot.”¹²

Hunters today can agree with hunters then on the wondrous bounty of America. Fortunately, hunters today have a much stronger appreciation of the importance of preserving America’s wildlife for future generations.

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¹² Jasper Danckaerts, Barlett Burleigh James and J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Journal of Jasper Danckaerts: 1679-1680* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913; reprinted New York: Barnes & Noble, 1959), 123.