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ITHACA, N. Y.

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

Edited by William Heidt, Jr.

1960

Printed for the
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ITHACA, N. Y.

Preface

Hunting by the pioneer was engaged in less as a sporting event than as a source of food. Early records seldom fail to tell how one or another family in a new settlement was saved from starvation by a flintlock rifle in the hands of an experienced hunter. Bear, deer, lesser game and birds and fish were important food sources, especially during the first hard year or two in the wilderness.

Not only for the flesh were these animals hunted. They yielded pelts, oils and bones, all articles of commerce in the pioneer economy that, deficient in capital funds, depended upon frugality and barter as means of production and trade. Hunting wolves, foxes, wildcats, squirrels and other predators was pursued under triple motivation; their extirpation was essential to the protection of young farm animals; their pelts had a market, and the bounties paid were a source of limited money income. Among birds, crows were hunted as predators, but wild turkeys, passenger pigeons, ducks, geese and lesser species were a not inconsequential source of food.

Whether bird or beast was hunted for food or market, little thought was given to the exhaustion of the supply, except for that of the predators whose early

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

extinction was vigorously pursued. Nevertheless, most species were brought to the point of extinction before the State began its extensive program of conservation.

To recall the early-day hunters and their game, this volume is offered as an introduction to one phase of pioneer life.

W.H.Jr.

Ithaca, N. Y., Sept. 1, 1960

Bona, the Deerslayer

Adapted from the writings of
JOHN A. MINARD, Caneadea, Allegany County

Closely following the Seneca Indians, who had sold their title to the Caneadea Reservation in Allegany County, New York, and most of them gone to the Buffalo, Tonawanda, Cattaraugus and Allegany Reservations, came a class of hardy adventurers. Many of them were enamored of frontier life and much given to the chase. They were born children of the woods, brought up with rifles in their hands and acquainted with nature and the habits of all species of game which then populated the big woods of Western New York.

The days of the wolf and bear had passed and the fleet deer, so plentiful in the days of Bill Bennett and the Indian hunters of old Caneadea, had become scarcer and increasingly more wary of their stealthy foes. This called for more patience and a higher degree of skill on the part of the hunter to get a shot at the timid creatures. In turn, this development contributed considerably to the excitement of the chase and gave to it a fascination scarcely known

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

to the earliest deerslayers and added correspondingly to the fame of the successful hunter.

Especially was this the condition along the valley of the Upper Genesee, and the veteran hunters, like the Kingsleys, Cooleys, Butlers, Van Nostrands, Bullocks and old George Parker, who had tracked the deer over hills and valleys, over crags and precipices even, had been forced into retirement by the infirmities of age. They were no longer able to endure the long-distance chase.

At this juncture came the DeRocks, fresh from among the hills of Delaware County, where they were born and raised. They were a strange mixture of blood. Of Spanish, French and Indian ancestry, they inherited many of the characteristics and peculiarities of their commingled strains. The family had originally descended from the French. There were a number of DeRocks, but Reuben, born 1821, and Cyrus, born 1815, were the most marked of the hunters. Cyrus would hardly be known by that name as he was always called "Bona," a name which his father bestowed upon him in admiration of Napoleon Bonaparte. Cyrus made it still more appropriate in choosing his first wife whose name was Josephine.

Rube and Bona were remarkably good

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

shots, and it was not long after their appearance in Caneadea before they knew and were thoroughly acquainted with all the features of hill and dale, of mountain and valley, of stream and gorge in the Upped Genesee country for many miles in all directions. They were fleet of foot and excelled in endurance. Their exploits soon became the talk of the day and excited the admiration and, in some instances, the envy of the few veteran devotees of the chase who still lingered in the territory of old Caneadea.

One of Bona's first adventures in the Allegany woods happened one morning when he shot a deer which the old hunter Parker had started. Bona dressed it and hid the carcass under the trunk of a fallen tree. Parker, following, found where it had been killed but failed to find his venison, though sitting for a while to rest on the trunk of the self-same tree.

One time Rube shot a deer which fell dead, scarcely leaving his tracks. Upon examination no mark of the ball could be found, but the post-mortem revealed the ball lodged between the shoulders, having pierced the heart which it penetrated from the rear. The deer has persisted in standing with his head away from the hunter who, tired of waiting

for a better exposure, let drive with remarkable result.

For many years a large buck roamed the woods of the Upper Genesee. He was known to all the hunters far and near; his fame indeed spread from Portage Falls to the wilds of Pennsylvania. He seemed to lead a charmed life, for many had pursued him at a long distance, had followed his tracks and even had fired at him, but to no avail. There could be no mistake as to his identity, for his track was exceptionally large as one of his hoofs had been injured or broken, a defect that was plainly shown by its imprint in the snow. The injury caused a preceptible limp or lameness. However, the buck was very fleet and exceedingly wary, and the old hunters claimed that his having a young doe at his side was more for safety than for society. A young doe's senses of sight and hearing are extremely acute.

By whom he was named is not known, but this famous buck came in time to be called Old Golden. Old Golden in his day had been favored with the attention of such hunters as the Van Nostrands, Bullocks, Kingsleys, Parker and Butler, who had followed his tracks, each hoping to win the glory of dropping him and thus add another feather to his hunting cap. But it was left to Reuben

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

DeRock to speed the ball that put a stop forever to the ramblings of Old Golden.

In the woods one day as usual, the DeRocks came upon his tracks. They knew it in an instant and, though already somewhat wearied by a long jaunt, the sight of the famous broken-hoof track inspired them with renewed ardor, and they quickened their steps. The track of the ever-attending doe also was found.

Perceiving soon by the freshness of the tracks that the game was near at hand, Rube sent Bona over on a runway to intercept the deer in case he scared them so as not to be able to get a shot or to fell the one left in case he shot the other. Bona got to the runway just in time to hear the retreating footsteps of the doe through a bushy defile and the report of his brother's rifle. Rube had come upon them sooner than expected and fired, putting a ball through the buck's heart and laying Old Golden prostrate on the ground. He turned out to be fully up to his reputation for size, and was by far the largest deer ever known to have been killed on the Upper Genesee.

The DeRocks used to practice slaying deer at the licks. Sometimes they would fix a blind behind which they concealed themselves. When the deer came to

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

drink, the hunters would expose a strong, bright light which soon dazed or bewildered the deer with its glare. At such short range a shot was practically sure. Another way was by going to the licks in the daytime and carefully noting the tracks and places where the animals drank. After fixing the exact spot which would be occupied by the heart of the deer while drinking, the hunters lined this spot with some object to the rear. Selecting a favorable point of vantage nearby, they drove a pair of forked sticks into the ground in such a manner that when a gun barrel was laid in the crotch it pointed directly to the object chosen as the sighting point.

Returning to the lick at nightfall, fixing the guns in position and making themselves comfortable, there was nothing left for the hunters to do but patiently await events. In good time the deer would be heard coming for their accustomed ration of water with a confident step as they were unafraid in the dark. Smelling around their accustomed place, the animals soon began to suck up water through the mossy covering of the lick. Then the hunters pulled triggers, the guns roared, and the stillness of the dark forest was disrupted, and another deer was added to the victims of skill and stealth of the hunter.

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

Another stratagem that the DeRocks practiced to a degree was to chop out hollows in some spongy, fallen tree trunk and fill it with salt. The deer, fond of salt, would frequent the place to lick the log. Hiding behind a skillfully prepared blind, the hunters picked off their game with little effort and much satisfaction.

Rube once caught a young fawn and tamed it, so that the little animal became very fond of the place and the family. It came into the house at meal-time and the family fed it with what it liked from the table. It became passionately fond of apple pie, so much so as to be a real nuisance. Then it was necessary to shut the fawn up during meal-time. One day as the family was eating from a table standing near a window, the young deer appeared, looked in and, quickly discerning its favorite apple pie, took the shortest course to it—through the window and into broken glass and much confusion. Straying off too far one day, the little animal was shot by a roving hunter.

About 1860 the DeRocks made a finish of deer hunting on the Genesee. Game had become so scarce in the area that Bona for some years made it a practice to go into the Pennsylvania woods and camp out during the hunt-

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

ing season. The most wonderful shot Bona ever made was in that state.

Getting sight of a deer among some fallen trees on a hillside below him, he fired. It was a doe, and it ran, bleating like a lamb. Then it lay down and expired. Coming down to the spot where the doe stood when he fired, he found behind a large log a buck which had been crippled by the ball that had slain the doe. Bona took no honor for the double bag, but credited it to pure chance since he had not seen the buck. He bagged seven more deer that day, his biggest one-day achievement.

Bona said that he once shot six deer, barely leaving his tracks to accomplish this feat.

One time, somewhere in the neighborhood of Keating Summit, Bona and Horace Stiles hunted a week on a "strife," not a real wager. The hunter who killed the greater number of deer during the time was to have the best buck bagged by the other. Bona said Stiles was some years younger than he and was accounted an exceedingly lucky hunter, if there is such a factor as luck in hunting. Bona scored 21, Stiles 20—just as close as it could be without a tie.

Bona once had Jeff Brown of Wilcox send to the factory and get him the

barrel, lock and trimmings for a Winchester 44 caliber, 28 inches long, at a cost of more than \$35. Bona stocked and sighted it himself, using for the stock a piece of black walnut taken from the last tie that was laid when the Union Pacific railroad was completed in 1869. He had obtained the block of wood from an engineer on that road, to whom it had been given as a souvenir. The engineer sold it to Bona for \$1 after having previously refused an offer of \$50 for it. With this weapon at ten rods, Bona once placed ten balls in the same hole in a tree. Cutting the wood away revealed a ragged mass of lead welded together by the force of the impact.

Bona said the best footgear was the regular Indian-style moccasin made of real Indian-tanned deerskin. He used to make his own moccasins from deerskins that he had tanned. He acquired the art from a full-blooded Indian, called Chicken, who had married Bona's eldest sister.

When the snow adhered to the trees, it was time for Bona to pull his white hunting shirt over his other clothing and set off on the chase. With him, it was a way of life.

Tiring of hunting in Pennsylvania where eventually game became scarce, Bona relinquished the chase and went to

the area of the Carbon coal mines in Wyoming and engaged in watching snowsheds on the Union Pacific railroad. While there he bagged two grizzlies, a number of black bears, several of the kind called "crabeaters," many antelopes and a few deer. When asked about hunting grizzlies and bear, he said it was all without particular incident. "I just shot 'em, that's all," was his terse description of the experience.

Bona reckoned he shot at least 2,000 deer, 102 in one season. He shot his last deer in 1897 when he was 82. His sight was good as was Reuben's, and both could hold a gun and sight it as well as anyone. Reuben demonstrated this when in his 80th year he was at a turkey shoot at Belfast. Live turkeys were not used then as in the older shoots, a target being used, and each contestant paid a modest fee for each shot. Reuben borrowed a gun, questioned the owner about its behavior, then fired at the target. His bullet hit the head of a nail that held the target and drove it into the tree upon which the target was fastened. A fat turkey was his reward, and he left the crowd astonished.

When Bona and Reuben were younger they made it a practice to "take in" many of these shoots, but the managers learned not to welcome the two crack-

shots. Yet under the code of the day no manager would have gathered courage enough to bar them.

Bona's reputation as a fiddler was scarcely less than that as a hunter. For more than sixty years he played his wonderful instrument. Older persons of the Upper Genesee remembered him well for they often had danced to his music at private cotillions when they were young. They remembered, too, "Four," "Pop Goes the Weasel" and other dances of a hundred years ago.

His violin was the sweet solace of many an otherwise lonesome evening while he was camping out. At 82 he could wield the bow and finger the strings with a dexterity which was surprising for an octogenarian. During the winter of 1900 he played for a private dancing party in the neighborhood of his old home. His playing was all by note, and his ear so good that he was able once that winter to play for two or three hours with a leading orchestra.

Bona not only played the violin, but he could make one. He had an instrument, the front of which was hemlock and the back of beautiful blister maple. The workmanship was skillful in this fine-toned violin.

As Allegany and Cattaraugus Counties were the hunting range of the De-

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

Rocks, a note in B. J. Dorsey's History of the Town of Leon (1958) is apropos. He writes: The last deer to visit Leon, so far as known, was about 1870, and it was shot by one Kennecut. This event was much talked about as a rarity at the time. Deer were not again seen in Leon until 1925, but have since become so plentiful that the 1957 take in Cattaraugus County totaled 2,854. In Western New York Allegany County was highest with 2,912. On a drive through Mosher Valley in the spring it is a memorable sight to observe 100 or more deer grazing in the sun.

Settlers in French Woods

By PETER DiNIO

Rock Rift, Delaware County, N. Y.

Absence of official records covering the period of Bona DeRock's birth and residence in Delaware County make it impossible to present a factual narrative. However, there are circumstances which lead to an assumption that must suffice for the time being.

DeRock is an obvious Anglicization of DeRoche, and Bona is a nickname derived from Bonaparte, a part of the name bestowed on the boy by his father, a partisan of Napoleon. Jene Baptiste Prosquene was the head of a family which settled in the French Woods, as the community has long been known. He is known to have been a veteran of Napoleon's armies, but he came fifteen years after Bona was born. This indicates the DeRocks came to America at a much earlier date, but when or where they settled remains to be determined.

Another fact that tends to support the assumption that Bona was at some time a member of the French Settlement is his being "a mighty hunter." During his youth there was no section of Dela-

ware County which could have served better as a training ground than that around this settlement. This particular area in the Upper Delaware watershed still teemed with deer, bear, wolves and an occasional panther which roamed the unbroken forest and offered a challenge to young men. Eradication of predators, supplying meat for the family table and marketing of pelts all were then a part of the pioneer's way of life.

French Woods is located on the north bank of the Delaware River, a few miles east of Hancock. There are three small but beautiful lakes in the area that were originally called ponds: Paris Pond, Homan's Pond and Sand Pond. It was here about 1820 that one Onderdonk acquired several thousand acres of land and had it surveyed into 50-acre tracts. He intended to develop a townsite, but his scheme failed and the locality early was transformed into a prosperous farm area. Later it became a well-known summer resort for New York City people.

One of the first arrivals at the Onderdonk location was Jene Baptiste Prosequene, a man who had had an unusual career in Europe. He and his family had been held captives in Russia but they escaped and he became a sailor on the Black Sea. After returning to France, he served as a bodyguard to Napoleon,

fought at Austerlitz and was a soldier in the vast army that invaded Russia. He witnessed the burning of Moscow.

In September, 1831, Prosquene and his family arrived in America and went to Brooklyn and to the DelMonicos who were responsible for their migration. DelMonico wished to form a French colony, so Prosquene, wife and daughter went to the new community in Delaware County to dwell among the three ponds, where he bought 50 acres of land from Onderdonk and built a house.

During the years of primitive existence in the wilds of the French Settlement, as originally called, and before the Erie railroad was constructed, the women members of the family each fall walked to Brooklyn to work for DelMonico. In the spring they purchased commodities to which their former mode of life had accustomed them, tied their wares in bundles and carried them into the wilderness, a distance of 150 miles and a five-day walk along forest trails.

Other settlers came in, all rugged people who lived close to Nature. One of these was William Lumsden, a Scottish farmer, who located beside Paris Pond. Its outlet, Gee Brook, runs four miles down a narrow valley to join the Delaware at Pea's Eddy, four miles up the stream from Hancock. Hancock was the

nearest center and it was here that the French Woods settlers went by way of the Gee Brook trail to trade.

On one of his infrequent trips to the trading post Lumsden, familiarly known as Billy, failed to return by nightfall. His wife, a stout-hearted pioneer woman, lost no sleep over his absence. Next morning Billy came home, bedraggled by his night's trials, and his understanding spouse asked, "Wh'ure did ye stay last night, Billy?" Billy answered truthfully, "In th' bracken down by the pownd." "Why didn't ye hollie?" she sympathetically inquired. "I'se so drunk I'caud na' hollie," replied sturdy Billy.

It is among these rugged people in an untamed forest that Bona may well have learned the rudiments of his enduring primitive life as "a mighty hunter."

Bears Plentiful

Scattered records left by the first settlers add up to the fact that bears were once plentiful in the central part of New York State. A region of dense forests and many lakes and streams, it was a natural habitat for the species, the small American black bear. What this animal lacked in ferocity he more than made up in mischievousness to the point where he was more of a nuisance than a danger to the early comers into the region.

Something indicative of their numbers is suggested in an historical note from Allegany County. Seth Graves settled in the Town of Willing in the early 19th century and, like many of the men who moved deep into the forests, was a skillful hunter. In his new location he found the bear population so great that he shot as many as five in a single day. While this authenticated record is of a hunter in one community, more fragmentary accounts indicate that bears were as numerous and hunters as skillful during the initial pioneering era of almost every settlement in the state.

Although this bear would furiously defend himself when assailed by man or dog, especially the female in defense of

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

of her cubs, the species was characterized by a mild temperment. Not a dangerous denizen of the forest, he was a nuisance to the struggling farmers as he prowled about a settlement. If by chance a door was left insecurely locked, a bear was almost certain to invade the cabin in search of food and leave its interior a wreck. These prowlers seemed willing to test anything that appeared to be food, even flour. Many a housewife has returned to her cabin to find its contents ransacked and her precious supply of flour scattered about. Footprints outlined in it betrayed the culprit.

The pigsty, no matter how strongly protected, was an ever-present challenge to a hungry bruin. He seemed to possess a well developed taste for tender pork that bordered on a mania and one that more often than not caused him to lose his life. One old drawing of such a raid depicts the marauder climbing over the log fence of the pen with a squealing pig in his powerful jaws. The farmer and his wife have been aroused from their bed by the terrified screams of the luckless piglet, and the cabin door has been flung open. Barefooted and in his nightclothes, the farmer has seized his rifle in one hand and is rushing into the night with a blazing fagot in the other.

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

Behind him, similarly attired, is the wife who holds another burning fagot to help light the scene of the tragedy or scare off the intruder.

A loaded flintlock and pine fagots were kept for just such an emergency, but the musket was not always dependable. With one ball in the charge, a hasty shot might be a miss and by the time the weapon was reloaded the marauder would be safely on his way. An even more effective device was the fagot, made of a bunch of pine splinters bound together at the base to form a handle. Kept near the fireplace so they were dry and could be quickly ignited in the coals, the flaming fagot and the farmer's yelling were intended to frighten off the most intrepid forager. However, if the bear became too alarmed to run and chose to fight, the rifle was relied upon for close-quarter action.

Sheep, calves and poultry were other attractions for the bear. As a means of protection against his ravages pigsties, stables, sheepfolds and chicken houses were located near the cabin. Large dogs, too, were kept as both a means of warning and an ally in case the bear turned to fight.

Honey was another source of temptation to these bears. Even though located not too distant from the cabin, the farm-

er's few hives suffered from bruin's devastating raids. Such a loss was important to the owner at the time, for honey was not only a home produced substitute for high-priced sugar but it and beeswax were commodities for which there was a market. To the loss of this product of primitive agriculture must be added that of the hives and the bees as well. His heavy coat of fine hair enabled the bear to attack domestic or wild bees with equal impunity, so it was natural to transfer his raids from hives of wild bees in the woodlands to those of the domestic species in the farmer's back yard.

On the other hand, this contest between the determined farmer and the mischievous black bear was not as one-sided as it might appear: the defenders often came out far ahead. It was at a time in our history when there was little money in the hands of the settlers and any product of farm or forest was turned to good use. Then a bear was a small windfall.

The pelts might be used in the home as rugs, bed covers, windbreaks over ill-fitting doors or as lap robes during wintry trips in sleighs. Then, too, there was a regular demand for the fine-haired pelts for dress uniforms of military companies in Europe, and many a

New York State bear's hide would up in a shako that dazzled on parade. As many as 25,000 of these pelts were exported some years.

Bear meat supplemented venison and farm-produced pork, mutton and beef. The bones were bartered at stores and then forwarded to the cities where the larger ones were converted into buttons, knife handles, hair combs and similar items of early manufacture. But this was not all: smaller bones and scraps from manufacturing processes were burned to become fertilizer.

Yet there was another and perhaps more remunerative product derived from the carcass of a bear whose inveterate prowling brought him low. In the autumn a three- or four-year-old bear weighed from 250 to 300 pounds. A fat layer, called a "blanket," on the rump was up to five inches thick and, when melted yielded bear grease which was useful in many ways and marketable.

At home bear grease was used in the place of butter, its slightly sweet taste appealed to many while its anti-rancid properties enabled the housewife to keep it fresh long before refrigeration was available. To add protection to his harnesses, boots, holsters and other leather goods, the farmer used it to keep them pliable and weather proof.

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

The housewife had still another use for bear grease. She preferred it to lard in making fried cakes because they did not grow rancid with keeping. Cooks, male or female, transferred this preference to the galleys of the canal boats in the days when there were hundreds of them on inland waters. Before starting on long trip the wife of one operator of a string of boats that plied Cayuga Lake made a supply of fried cakes which was intended to last during the round trip. Cooking them in bear grease to avoid rancidity, she filled a sugar barrel. It need not be said that she was a popular cook with the crews in a day when mass feed was in its crude beginnings.

But as a source of cash income or its equivalent, bear grease had a still more important part to play in the primitive economy. It helped to pay taxes, interest, an increment on the mortgage and, perhaps, leave enough for a tool for the farm or a few yards of cloth for the home. A fat bear slain before hibernation produced from twelve to fifteen gallons of grease worth from \$5 to \$6 a gallon. Traded in at local stores, the merchants forwarded to city markets where it was used in many products, including the base for some medicines and in hair tonics.

Game Abundant

Like other counties of Central and Western New York which the pioneers carved from the wilderness, Tompkins County harbored a variety of wildlife. Conspicuous because of size and numbers were the timid deer and the mischievous black bear. At the other end of the line were two vicious and snarling predators, the panther and the wolf. Under unrelenting attack by organized riflemen, neither the wolf nor the panther increased their numbers but steadily gave way before the advance of land clearing. When the forest disappeared, small game, upon which both preyed, retreated and wolf and panther followed in pursuit.

Among the smaller specimens of wildlife that disappeared early was the wild turkey. After restocking by the State in recent years, it was not until 1959 that there was an open season for hunting them, and then only in Allegany County where 389 were reported taken.

The varying hare, plentiful at first, almost wholly disappeared under impact of land clearing as did partridges, quails and gray squirrels. Just how difficult it was for small game to maintain itself is

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

indicated by a three-cent bounty on gray squirrels offered in the Town of Newfield as early as 1817. At a barn raising in that vicinity, when the workmen came in for dinner they were served a meat pie that contained 48 black squirrels.

Commenting on the wildlife population of Tompkins County, which was typical of that in adjacent parts of the wilderness, W. Glenn Norris, county historian, has contributed this summary.

At the time settlement of the county began in 1789, the area abounded in many kinds of game and such beasts of prey as panthers, wildcats, wolves and bears. Plentiful deer supplied the newcomers with venison, a staple meat that was supplemented by wild turkeys, passenger pigeons, quails and partridges. Streams and lakes were literally alive with native species of fish and in season they were resting stations for migrating geese and ducks.

Parties of able-bodied men from miles around frequently organized a hunt to rid the area of wild beasts, especially panthers and wolves. As late as 1827 the Town of Newfield set a bounty of \$10 for each full-grown wolf slain.

Among these men was Azariah Letts, a skillful hunter who came from New Jersey in 1801 and who left a written

record of his life in the new country. From it come these extracts:

“Was 21 days in coming; had four wagons; stayed out in the woods nights. From Great Bend, which I reached after going through the beechwoods, I came to Chenango Forks (now Binghamton). There were only a house or two to Owego. Thence to the head of Cayuga Lake, now Ithaca. There were only three or four houses.

“I settled on the farm I now own in the Updyke Settlement (Town of Ulysses). The forest was unbroken; bear, deer and panter in abundance. I got lost in the woods between (his home) and Trumansburg. During the first 15 years I killed 400 deer; that was all I counted. Since then I have killed many more. Killed one panther that measured nine feet from nose to tip of tail. Got \$10.25 for its tallow. Killed wildcats and bear aplenty.”

An early deer story from the Town of Caroline substantiates Lett's account concerning the deer population. The winter of 1835-36 was remarkable for its deep snow. Snow began falling January 1 and continued for four consecutive days; during the winter not less than ten feet fell.

There were many deer about Shandakin in that town, and a man named Gil-

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

man hunted them on snowshoes. He went to Ithaca where he contracted to deliver six or eight deer within a specified short time. Ithacans, believing that he could not fulfill the order, thought to have a good joke on him by ordering the larger number. Gilman delivered the slain deer on time and demanded his money.

As the county become more thickly settled, deer began to thin out and eventually disappeared. About a hundred years elapsed before they began to reappear in numbers to take advantage of food and shelter offered by abandoned farms. In 1940 the New York State Conservation Commission opened the first legal deer-hunting season in the county, during which 390 deer were reported taken. An annual deer season has been in effect since.

Passenger Pigeons

Early one morning in March of 1876 people living at Barnum's Station in the Town of Forestburgh, Sullivan County, New York, were surprised to see the air thick with the flight of an apparently endless flock of wild pigeons that was passing overhead. For more than a quarter of an hour the flight continued in an incessant stream, obstructing all view of the sky and giving to the surroundings that somber appearance caused by the gathering and passing of thunder clouds.

The birds were too high to be shot at with any degree of success, although during the flight quite a number were killed by unusually fortunate hunters. Old woodsmen said that the pigeons were seeking nesting places, but from the altitude of their flight it was not supposed that they would rest short of the North Woods in the John Brown tract on the Beaverkill.

When this flight of pigeons came over Clinton Waters and Isaac Bennett, two barkpeelers, were in the depth of the beech woods, about five miles from Barnum's Station, selecting a site to

build a cabin for the ensuing bark-peeling season. The sun was shining brightly, not a cloud obscured the sky, when suddenly the sun was hidden as if by a dark cloud and a noise like that produced by a gale of wind or the roll of distant thunder broke on their ears. Simultaneously the woods commenced filling with wild pigeons. Tree after tree was filled with rapidity, and still the air was black with one great moving mass of birds as far as the eye could reach.

After the first excitement attending the appearance of the pigeons had subsided and it was apparent that the great body had found resting places, Waters and Bennett, true to the instinct of the human race, began to wage war against the birds. They possessed no guns, but taking each a long pole, they swooped about among the pigeons, right and left. With every blow dozens of the birds fell killed or maimed to the ground. The men slew hundreds this way.

The pigeons in a tree that they had attacked would fly at the first assault, only to seek the nearest resting place. The ruthless destruction of the birds was kept up by the two men until they were actually glutted with the kill, when they picked up fifty of the slain birds but left the ground strewn with others, dead, dying or wounded.

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

For the purpose of seeing how far the woods were occupied by the pigeons, the men walked for five miles through the forest. As far as they could see on either side the birds occupied the trees. When they stopped their walk, to turn off to the summit, they could not discover the end of the flock but it was subsequently learned that it stretched more than a dozen miles in a continuous line.

When they brought the news of the great pigeon roost to Barnum's the excitement was great among the lumbermen and others, and a dozen men started out to kill birds on the roost at night. They armed themselves with guns and clubs, and each man carried a lantern or torch made of pine knots. On reaching the roost a continuous slaughter began and lasted for two hours.

The birds, alarmed by the gunfire and lights, flew blindly among the trees, some dashing against the lanterns and others singeing themselves in the open flames of the torches. The noise made by the disturbed pigeons in flying from their roosts was terrific. It is estimated that 10,000 were killed or wounded, the most of which were left on the ground. The party returned laden with birds, which were distributed throughout the neighborhood.

At the time no one took interest

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

enough in the pigeons to ask protection of the law for them, and the next day the slaughter was commenced again. The migrating birds had chosen the beechwoods as their resting place, but the determined cruelty and barbarity of the inhabitants resulted in their again taking flight in search of safer fields. They rose from the woods at about nine o'clock the morning after the slaughter and in a short time all had disappeared. Old and experienced hunters said that it was the largest flight of wild pigeons ever known in the region. The flock was estimated by them as fully twelve miles long and four or five deep.

Two days afterward, raftsmen from the headwaters of the Beaverkill and the beechwoods of the upstream wilderness of Sullivan County brought news that those sections had been taken possession of by the wild pigeons in enormous numbers. The woods were literally swarming with pigeons that were preparing for the nesting season.

At this site law and order sportsmen, acting as individuals and for fish and game societies, at once set about taking measures to protect the birds from lawless destruction. Deputy game constables were stationed in considerable force in the wilderness. Cabins had been erected for their accommodation, and they

had orders to deal as summarily as the law permitted with all gunners and trappers who disturbed the birds.

Of course, unparalleled sport was anticipated in due time; but unfortunately for the hunters severe weather intervened, snow falling to the depth of a foot along the Beaverkill a few days after the pigeons rested. After the storm had ceased, the constables noticed a considerable stir among the birds throughout the region. Then, about noon on the fifth day of their stay they began taking flight, and in a few hours there was not a pigeon to be found in the entire territory.

They took a direction northwestward from the Beaverkill country. Later reports accounted for their progress over the counties of Sullivan and Delaware in this state and Susquehanna and Bradford in Pennsylvania. Turning eastward, the pigeons subsequently took up quarters in the beechwoods of Pike and Monroe Counties in the latter state.

Expanses of beechwoods in Southeastern New York and the adjacent area of Pennsylvania at the time comprised thousands of acres of almost primitive wilderness, invaded by only lumbermen, barkpeelers and sportsmen. In this fastness the bear roamed at will and deer found security from hunter and hound.

Commonly called "wild," the passenger pigeon was a native American species that inhabited Eastern North America from the southern states northward to Hudson Bay and westward to the Great Plains. One of the earliest references to them is that of May 1687, when the bishop of Montreal noted the destruction wrought upon the colonists' crops by this bird.

In size, the passenger pigeon compared with that of the common turtle dove, but was characterized by a long, wedge-shaped tail. Coloration made the bird distinctive. The male was of a dark-slate color above and purplish-bay underneath with violet, green and gold on the neck. Drab-colored above and dull-white beneath, the female wore only slight traces of the brilliant neck markings.

Flight of this migrant was rapid and sustained. They traveled in massive flocks from their wintering areas in Georgia and South Carolina to nesting grounds as far north as Northern Canada. In the South their principal food was rice and similar wild grains; through New York State, beechnuts were a favorite food; beyond the beechwood zone it consisted of berries and similar summer vegetation. It has been held that disappearance of the beech-

nuts contributed in a large degree to the extinction of the passenger pigeon as they were then deprived of the beech mast feeding area while on long migratory flights. Mass starvation may thus be added to mass slaughter as a cause of the sudden and complete disappearance of the bird.

Slaughter of the passenger pigeon was to obtain the small portion of meat the breast provided. Packed in salt, the carcasses were shipped to the cities in flour barrels.

Approaching extinction of this species is suggested by an item in an Ithaca newspaper of August 16, 1885: "John Walker, Jr., while hunting in the Fall Creek marshes this week, shot two wild pigeons. These birds are now rarely found in this region."

At the age of 29 years, the last known survivor died August 29, 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens. Notwithstanding years of persistent organized search for a remanent of this once-numerous species of American wild life, none was ever found. W. Glenn Norris, Tompkins County historian, in commenting on this development recalled that when he was a boy many hunters were on the alert for sighting even a single specimen.

A more human method of capturing

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

these pigeons than clubbing them was use of a large net stretched between trees. The DeWitt Historical Museum possesses one of these nets that was used in capturing pigeons in Tompkins County nearly a hundred years ago. It was donated by the late Court Bellis.

Hunting Wild Bees

Hunting wild bees was a sporting event to the pioneers. Its risks were a challenge to their daring and ingenuity, and the hunt broke the monotony of unending days of hard work. Then, too, a successful venture was a profitable one since it produced a substitute for sugar that was a high-priced commodity. A good market existed for honey and beeswax which produced cash income.

Although similar in appearance and habits to the domestic bee, the wild bee was native to the forest and indigenous to the country. Its dislike for man was evidenced by a retreat deep into the forests as interloping settlers encroached upon its domain, and ultimately hives were to be found far in the solitudes of tracts unoccupied by the habitations of man. [Hives as here used means a place inhabited by bees and not the skeps of the domestic apiary.]

For hill locations of hives, the wild bees chose an elevated site far up an unfrequented, shaded ravine and near a body of water. In flat country, the bees located near the margin of a lake or stream but in the greatest seclusion possible. Generally, the hollow of a tree of

great size was appropriated for the purpose, a small orifice affording entrance to the hive with a maximum of protection from observation and discovery.

Here a colony remained for years, inhabiting the same abode under normal conditions, untiringly accumulating honey and yearly sending forth new colonies. With difficulty and the exercise of much skill the bee hunter located these retreats and established access to the store. Not only the persevering pioneer but insects and animals, especially the bear, were the natural depredators of the wild bees.

There were men in most communities who became expert as bee hunters, but country youths went on bee hunts as a holiday sport. Hunters equipped themselves with a supply of honeycomb, strained honey and a box some six or eight inches long and four or five wide.

This box had a slide on top and one in the center, each of which moved in grooves. In the upper lid was a piece of glass, and comb honey was placed in the lower compartment. The bee hunter carried this box to an area which he had determined was visited by bees.

Professional hunters, in capturing a bee that would serve to locate the bee tree, used this box. Observing a wild plant that blooms in late October, an

aster commonly known as the frost blow, and finding a bee feeding upon it, the hunter deftly placed the box with lid drawn beneath the bee and transferred it into the box. When the lid was closed, the bee was seen through the glass which was then darkened by drawing the slide over it. The bee then settled upon the honey and began eating.

With both slides open, the trapped insect was left to its own devices. After feeding, the bee left the box, soared and flew in circles about the box as if to fix its location for a return to it. Each gyration grew wider and higher until at last the bee took off in a line for its hive. At this point in the venture, the skill and vigilance of the hunter met the severest test. He carefully watched the direction of the flight and computed the distance to the hive by the length of the absence of the bee from the feeding box. He allowed three miles to the minute for the flight and return.

After the bee had made several journeys from the feeder box to the hive, the hunter again secured it and proceeded in the direction he had determined as that of the hive. At this point somewhat of a complication entered. The captured bee communicated his find of honey in the box to other bees which came to feed from it, but they often

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

came from other hives and took differing routes back. To avoid this confusion, the hunter marked his guide bee and then confined his attention to it.

After deciding that he had the direction definitely established, the hunter moved toward the location. When he decided that he had gone far enough for a deviation in the line to manifest itself, he again released the bee from the box and, after repeating the reconnaissance, the bee made a straight line for the hive. It often occurred that the hunter had passed the tree in which the hive was located, as was indicated by the bee's doubling back on the hunter's track.

In instances where the hives had been effectively hidden it was necessary for the hunter to establish several lines in this manner. Then he would correct his line of approach by and determine the location by the point where the several lines intercepted.

As a welcome break in the daily routine of fall harvest, farmers and their sons turned bee hunters for a day, usually on a Sunday during a spell of "October's bright blue weather." Lateness of the season made the bees urgently industrious, the calm and brightness favored tracing the flights from feeding areas to the hives. A combination of these factors made it possible for this

amateur type of hunters to achieve a satisfactory degree of success even though they used a simpler method of tracing a line to the hive.

In a cleared spot on an elevated situation these less professional hunters built a small fire and heated small, flat stones. Upon these stones they burned some comb honey to attract the bees which were then fed fresh comb honey. After the bee had set off for the hive, the comb was removed from the stone and the box substituted for it. On its return to the feeding site, the bee was trapped in the box to serve as a guide for a path to its hive.

Once the tree harboring the hive was definitely located, it was felled and the whole colony of bees exterminated, commonly by burning straw. Destruction of the bees was considered necessary by the hunters to protect them against the onslaughts of the enraged insects in defense of their hoard. Likewise, these hunters defended their ruthless destruction by the necessity to eliminate the members of the hive lest absent ones lead hunters along a false line as wanderers returned to the disrupted hive. Despite this precaution, false pursuit often happened.

James M. Weston of Chesterfield, Essex County, New York, an experienced

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

bee hunter, described it in 1850 as an exciting sport that, pursued by a skillful hunter, was profitable as well. He cited a month's work by three men who gathered more than a ton of honey and 400 pounds of beeswax. The honey sold for \$15 a hundredweight and the beeswax for 20 cents a pound. These hunters located fifty-seven hives during the season, each of which produced from thirty-five to 150 pounds of honey:

Frequently the wild bees chose sites for their hives among fissures and crevices in rocks. In early days there was one such area in Essex County where a large, mountainous tract had been entirely preempted by wild bees. In season the air over the site was frequently filled with them, but attempts to blast the area to reach the honey always ended in failure. Later, a forest fire destroyed the immense colony.

Experienced bee hunters discovered early in their careers that wild bees permitted some persons to approach the hive with impunity while others were met with instinctive hostility.

Wolves Few but Dangerous

Among the dangers of the dense forests that the first settlers faced and overcame was the wolf. Their numbers were not large, but traveling in packs that were always hungry, they attacked man and beast with equal impunity. Migrating settlers were especially vulnerable to such attacks since often the party was that of a family, few in number and armed with a single flintlock. The rifle was carried more for shooting game for food than for protection, and the slow-footed oxen hauling an open sled offered no speed for defense.

Late winter was often chosen as the favorable season to move into the new country, as snow then covered the raw trail and made movement somewhat less difficult for ruts were filled and stumps hidden. But this was the harshest season for the wolves: small animals upon which they fed were difficult to procure and the predators, ravenously hungry, set upon any animal they encountered, including man. They devoured their own numbers which became lame or wounded, a vicious habit that enabled more than an occasional migrant

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

to escape from an attack. By killing or wounding one of the pack, the travelers made good their escape while the starved beasts paused to devour the carcass of a fallen fellow.

On one occasion a young couple and their small children were approaching a settlement when a wolf pack began an attack. A short time before the onset the husband had shot a deer and loaded it on their ox-drawn sled. The wolves caught the scent, followed it until they came upon the party and began their terrorizing assault. By cutting up the deer carcass and tossing bits of it to the wolves, the attack was diverted momentarily while they fought among themselves for the fresh meat. With the whole carcass of the deer fed to them, bit by bit, the hide was at last tossed to the enraged assailants, and immediately set upon by them. As the hide withstood their fangs and snarling assault upon it, the party made good its escape to the first cabin outpost of the settlement.

But exposed traveling migrants were not the only victims of these fierce attacks. After a location was reached and a semblance of habitation established constant guard against wolves was a duty of the newcomer. In erecting a cabin a small clearing only was made, so the dense forest remained but a few

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

yards away from the cabin door or that of the leanto which at first sheltered the livestock from the weather.

Lone travelers, too, were ever on the alert, especially as night approached, against a marauding wolf pack. On an occasion a settler in the Conewango region of Cattaraugus County rode horseback to summon a doctor who lived near Gowanda. On returning late in the day the messenger was set upon by a pack of wolves in Kent Swamp. Aware that darkness would hamper his defense, the rider swung from his horse into a tree where he remained all night, during which he heard the hungry animals snarling and fighting among themselves. The horse foraged nearby and fought off the wolves until dawn, when they faded into the woods and the messenger remounted and rode home.

Farmers in the same region suffered loss of large numbers of sheep that were killed by some maurauder during the summer of 1836. Hunting parties scoured the area several times until an especially large Canadian lynx was slain to put a stop to the losses.

From Sullivan County in the opposite end of the state comes a detailed report of a wolf raid on a flock of sheep. It occurred in 1826 when but a small fraction

Pioneer Hunters and Their Game

of the land there had been cleared. In moving from Colchester in Delaware County to Liberty Falls (now Ferndale) in Sullivan, Isaac Horton and party started their trek on April 4 with a large stock of cows, hogs and sheep. Before they arrived the next day, snow fell to a depth of two feet and slowed the rate of advance.

At Parksville, six miles from their destination, wolves were seen but they did not attack. Late in the day the party reached its new location and the sheep were salted. Next morning, on going in search of the flock, all twenty-two ewes were found dead, lying along a log fence just beyond the clearing where they had sought shelter from the weather. Even a lamb in a pen adjoining the house had fallen a victim to the wolves.