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Things That Growl In The Night

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COYOTE
Wade Parsons

Things That Grow In The Night

You cannot say this about a lot of the Great Plains, but the Flint Hills of today bear a strong resemblance to what they looked like before European colonization, and that is one of their many charms.



Traveling through this unique landform you will see - just as you would have in the mid-1800s - grand vistas of green, rolling, treeless hills with clear, spring-fed streams trickling off their shoulders and large grazing animals ambling across their broad backs. What is seen on the surface can be misleading, however.

Back in the day, those large grazers would have included bison, pronghorn, elk and deer. Today they are almost exclusively cattle, although deer are occasionally seen, especially around dawn or dusk. Keeping check on all those large grazers was formerly a suite

of large predators: wolves, cougars and grizzly bears.

European settlement brought about sweeping changes here, as elsewhere in North America. Although the Flint Hills could not be plowed for agriculture, the aboriginal megafauna were quite literally blown away in a hail of bullets. Edible species (the grazers) were mowed down by subsistence and market hunters. The predators were killed out of fear and because people just thought all predators were evil - a prejudice that persists today. Grizzly bears were the first to go. They were probably exterminated in Kansas by 1870, followed by wolves and cougars

about 30 years later.

Making such immense changes in the prairie ecosystem caused a great rebalancing of the Web of Life here. Nature abhors a vacuum, as the old saying goes, and as the niches previously

Prior to 2007, the last confirmed sighting of a cougar in Kansas was in 1904.

occupied by the megafauna became available, other species grasped the opportunity. Consider: large predators don't just eat grazers. They also eat smaller predators. Wolves are predators on coyotes, for example. In the absence of their predators, coyotes have vastly expanded their range and numbers over the last 150 years. The Song Dog of the Prairie now serenades the suburbs in the Ohio valley too. Coyotes currently hold the title of largest predator in the Flint Hills.

Well, that's not entirely true if you

include people in the equation. We are bigger than coyotes and function as a part-time predator. We have replaced the bison, pronghorns and elk with cattle, and we cull that population on a regular basis. But we are not doing an adequate job on deer control. Fords, Buicks, Peterbilts and hunters don't seem to be able to keep up with the natural rate of increase of deer, and this is an indication of an ongoing imbalance in the tallgrass prairie ecosystem. An over-abundance of deer is a problem, not only for us (crop damage, car collisions, etc.) but for the habitat and ultimately the deer themselves.

Is the Flint Hills region a complete ecosystem without large predators? Without being able to turn back the clock a couple of hundred years, this would seem to be a moot point, but is it?

Prior to 2007, the last confirmed sighting of a cougar in Kansas was in 1904. Public reports of cougars have been a regular occurrence in recent years, but no firm proof was available



COUGAR
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until November 2007, when a young male cougar was shot near the town of Medicine Lodge, close to the Oklahoma border. Then in October of last year (2009) a cougar was photographed near Wakeeney in the northwestern part of the state. So now they are officially “here,” but their numbers are considered extremely low and not expected to increase substantially.

The favorite food of cougars is deer; and deer are present here in greater numbers than ever before. It stands to reason the predator would follow its food supply, but food is only part of the equation. The recolonization of Kansas by cougars is not due to lack of food, but lack of den sites and sufficient seclusion from people. This would probably be true for wolves also, even if we tried to bring them back. No, for top-level predators the Flint Hills ecosystem will just have to make do with bobcats, foxes and coyotes for now - plus the occasional cougar perhaps - and the hand of man.

Our relationship with predators is

complex. We idolize them on the one hand and fear them on the other. Ask kids what dinosaur they would like to be and the answer is almost always T-Rex or Velociraptor, not Stegosaurus or Triceratops. Examine the names we give to automobiles and fighter jets and you won't find an herbivore in the bunch. On the other hand, our genetic memory holds a gut-level recognition of large predators as creatures that just might kill and eat us. But they are an essential part of the Web of Life, and it's important that “our” predators still live on the continent. Someday, if time and circumstances present the opportunity, they may come back and reassert their position at the top of the food chain, and the Flint Hills would not only look like, but also *be*, what it once was.

Jim Mason is a lifelong resident of Kansas. He earned a B.S. in Biology from the University of Kansas in 1975. He has worked for the Wichita Park Department since 1978 and currently is a staff Naturalist at the Great Plains Nature Center.

NOTES

SWITCHGRASS
Wade Parsons

