IN LATE SUMMER THREE YEARS AGO, on one of those dawns I long ago began calling a "blanket of heaven" daybreak, I loaded my dog into our Jeep and headed out through the Northern New Mexico morning. High pressure had built in, clouds from the previous afternoon had dispersed and the air was so calm that windmills along the Turquoise Trail seemed still asleep. It looked to be a terrific day to see a part of the West that for two centuries had made Santa Fe a final destination in an epic journey. We had slipped out of the house early to see the sunrise sweep across Santa Fe and the flanks of the Sangre de Cristos, so we were past I-25’s wide swing around Hermit’s Peak and Las Vegas while morning color still lingered on the plains. Pronghorns danced in the raking light near Fort Union, and a golden eagle swung over the highway. Kodi and I pressed on. We were bound for a place I’d been reading about and now wanted to see: Dry Cimarron Scenic Byway, the original route of the Santa Fe Trail across northeastern New Mexico.

WHEN NEW MEXICO WAS PART OF THE AMERICAN SERENGETI

BY DAN FLORES

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Why that remote part of the state? I’d been working on a book, soon to go off to its publisher, that I was calling American Serengeti. Its topic was the story of western wildlife, unfortunately not an especially happy tale. But if many of the animals were no longer here, at least the settings remained. And since I’d been reading so many accounts of wildlife encounters on the Santa Fe Trail, I’d resolved to at least witness the settings of what had for tens of thousands of years been one of the world’s great wildlife spectacles. So many drives across New Mexico net close modern observers a few pronghorns perhaps, maybe an eagle or a coyote or two, but no buffalo, no thundering herds of colorful wild horses, certainly no wolves or grizzlies and usually not even a prairie dog town. But this mostly blank slate is not how this country looked once upon a time. Let me offer up an initial example, just to reset the mind. Michael Steck, a physician who traveled the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico in the early 1850s, offers us an initial glimpse of our North American equivalent of the African Serengeti. Like many other travelers, Steck and his party found that any time they got among the bison herds, their days and nights

George Catlin
Wild Horses at Play, 1834-1837
filled with the bellowing of thousands of animals and the sight of surging rivers of bison slowly parting to allow travelers to pass. But that was only the beginning. Large gray and white wolves also became astonishingly numerous. Indeed, wolves were such a feature of the Santa Fe Trail that Steck wrote: “We see immense numbers of wolves were such a feature of the Santa Fe Trail and the sight of surging rivers of bison playing the role of thronging African cheetahs (we lost our versions of those to the Pleistocene extinctions of the plains within a century. Since horses had evolved on the North American continent 8,000 years. After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 drove the Spaniards out of New Mexico, who authored the 19th-century best accounts of this marvelous world of historical New Mexico: wild horses and bison. The artist George Catlin, who in 1834 observed wild horse herds in western Oklahoma, both painted and wrote compellingly about them. But it was Bostonian Albert Pike, a traveler in early 1820 New Mexico, who perhaps voiced the most poetic about mustangs: “Hardly a day passed without our seeing a herd of them, either quietly grazing or filling the plains with the bellowing of thousands of animals, their population explosion gave the plains a Peislostean look for the first time in millennia. It also drew Indian peoples from all over the West to what seemed like the point-source supply of wild horses. Like steers, scores of travelers left accounts of this marvellous world of about 200 years in the past. Trader Joseph Gregg, an amateur naturalist who authored the 19th-century best seller Commerce of the Prairies, is one of our best sources on New Mexico wildlife. He wrote perspectively about “prairie wolves,” which he called “the key to Santa Fe know by their ancient Arize names, coyotes.” Like vaisinquisits, a pair of these will represent a dozen Bison in New Mexico

Distinct voices in each succession — will break, chatter, yap, whine, and howl — that one would fancy a score of them at hand.” On pronghorns, Peislostec survivors that had actually outlived their extinct cheetah predators, Gregg wrote: “That species of gazelle known as the antelope is very numerous upon the plains. . . . [This] is most remarkable for its fleetness, not bounding like the deer but skimming over the ground as though upon skates.” And gray wolves? Although the buffalos is the largest. Gregg marvelled, “she has by no means the control among the prairie animals; the sceptre of authority has been lodged with the large gray wolf.”

Grizzlies may never have been as numerous in the southern West as they were farther north, but originally their range covered almost all of New Mexico. Like elk, grizzlies were originally common on the plains, scavenging on the bison carcass. Southeastern grizzlies first attracted international attention in 1807, when explorer Zebulon Pike sent a pair of grizzly cubs from the unknown West to President Thomas Jefferson. In 1821 a famous encounter with a grizzly, a story told and retold on the frontier, took place on Purgeon Creek, just beyond the present New Mexico/Colorado border. There a group of Louisianas and Missouri traders (including journalist Jacob Fowler) stumbled on a huge grizzly, likely their first innding that the West held anything like a grizzly bear. The bear was killed, but so was one of their party, who died three days after being bitten through the skull. Three decades later, in 1850, John Clemenson wrote that his emigrant party killed one “very large brown bear” and a smaller one — both likely grizzlies — near Wagon Mound. Many surviving accounts describe two other large, charismatic animals of historical New Mexico: wild horses and bison. The artist George Catlin, who in 1834 observed wild horse herds in western Oklahoma, both painted and wrote compellingly about them. But it was Bostonian Albert Pike, a traveler in early 1820 New Mexico, who perhaps voiced the most poetic about mustangs: “Hardly a day passed without our seeing a herd of them, either quietly grazing or filling the plains with the bellowing of thousands of animals, their population explosion gave the plains a Peislostean look for the first time in millennia. It also drew Indian peoples from all over the West to what seemed like the point-source supply of wild horses. Like steers, scores of travelers left accounts of this marvellous world of about 200 years in the past. Trader Joseph Gregg, an amateur naturalist who authored the 19th-century best seller Commerce of the Prairies, is one of our best sources on New Mexico wildlife. He wrote perspectively about “prairie wolves,” which he called “the key to Santa Fe know by their ancient Arize names, coyotes.” Like vaisinquisits, a pair of these will represent a dozen

Bison in New Mexico

Gray wolves under assault on the plains

Gray bears

Pronghorns in New Mexico

Tragically for our generation, the uneasy historical truth is that this American Serengeti became the scene of a slaughterhouse. From the 1820s to the 1920s, this single American region experienced the largest wholesale destruction of animal life discoverable in modern history. In years of good rainfall, the Great Plains could support 30 million bison. By the 1880s, only about 1,000 remained. But the global market’s insatiable appetite for wildlife wasn’t confined to just bison. Pronghorn antelope furs had probably reached 15 million. We drew them down to a mere 10,000 before we decided we’d killed enough of them. Grizzly bears once had a continental population in excess of 300,000. By the 20th century they were down to a few hundred scattered bears, none left on the plains. New Mexico’s very last grizzlies fell in the 1940s.

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and killed) in drive corrals, shot by cowboys as cow competition, used as carcass bait to poison wolves and coyotes, and sacrificed in European wars. But bounties and wolf hunters with strychnine baits took hundreds of thousands, and in the 1920s salaried federal hunters trapped and poisoned the last few scattered plains lobos. A final, pathetic story from the Colorado/New Mexico border tells of a legendary female wolf named Three-Toes. With no male wolf left for a partner and desperate to find a mate, she seduced a ranch collie. Federal hunters killed her collie paramour, then all their hybrid pups and finally her in the early 1920s.

Aside from these ultra-survivors, coyotes, and a carefully reconstituted population of pronghorns, we have erased this ancient plains world. And while Africa has game reserves such as Kruger National Park in South Africa, Serengeti National Park in Tanzania and Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya, conservationists in the U.S. are only now beginning to have much success, in the form of a project called the American Prairie Reserve (not in New Mexico but in Montana), creating the equivalent of those African game parks in our own grasslands.

Driving home from our day in Cimarron Canyon through strangely empty high plains grasslands in northeastern New Mexico, Kodi and I passed within a few miles of one of early America’s most historic species of the historic Great Plains … Dan Flores draws a vivid portrait of each of these animals in their glory — and tells the harrowing story of what happened to them at the hands of market hunters and ranchers and ultimately a federal killing program in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. … Far from the empty ‘flyover country’ of recent times, this landcape is alive with a complex ecology at least 20,000 years old — a continental patrimony whose wonders may not be entirely lost, as recent efforts hold out hope of partial restoration of these historic species.

About Coyote America:

“America’s Great Plains once possessed one of the grandest wildlife spectacles of the world, equalled only by such places as the Serengeti, the Masai Mara, or the veld of South Africa. Pronghorn antelope, gray wolves, bison, coyotes, wild horses, and prairie hears: less than two hundred years ago these creatures existed in such abundance that John James Audubon was moved to write, ‘it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals.’

“In a work that is at once a lyrical evocation of that lost splendor and a detailed natural history of those charismatic species of the historic Great Plains … Dan Flores draws a vivid portrait of each of these animals in their glory — and tells the harrowing story of what happened to them at the hands of market hunters and ranchers and ultimately a federal killing program in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. … Far from the empty ‘flyover country’ of recent times, this landcape is alive with a complex ecology at least 20,000 years old — a continental patrimony whose wonders may not be entirely lost, as recent efforts hold out hope of partial restoration of these historic species.”

— University of Kansas

WHERE THE WILD THINGS WERE

Dan Flores held the A.B. Hammond Chair in Western History at the University of Montana in Missoula from 1992 until he retired to his home outside Santa Fe in the spring of 2014. Alternately described as a “historian of place,” an “environmental historian” and a “master storyteller,” he is the award-winning author of 10 books and dozens of essays and articles on the environment, animals and culture of the West. His most recent works are American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains and Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History, both published in 2016. American Serengeti (University Press of Kansas) took both the 2017 Stebbins Great Bluff Distinguished Book Prize and the 2017 Wrangler Award for best nonfiction book from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Coyote America (Basic Books) won the 2017 Sigma F. Olson Nature Writing Award and was a finalist for the 2017 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award.

Flores told The Santa Fe New Mexican last fall that he plans to write a “new, updated and more impressionistic version” of the classic WildLife in America by Peter Matthiessen, continuing the saga of wildlife endangerment and the human story affecting it.

About American Serengeti:

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— Basic Books

“An extraordinary book …" Coyote America is the illuminating five-million-year biography of this extraordinary animal, from its origins to its apotheosis. It is one of the great epics of our time.”

— Wall Street Journal