CONTENTS

List of Illustrations, ix

Acknowledgments, xi

Introduction, 1

1 “The Wolves We Saw Them Everywhere,” 6

2 “Constant Warfare Waged against Them,” 27

3 “Economically Injurious Species of the Fauna,” 49

4 “Biologically Unsound and Exceedingly Dangerous,” 90

5 “The Fundamental Naturalness of Predation,” 132


7 “A Splendid Game Animal,” 220

Epilogue: “It’s Nice to Have Them Around,” 251

Notes, 259

Selected Bibliography, 313

Index, 331
ILLUSTRATIONS

1-1 Sioux bear dance, 9
1-2 Native Californians lassoing a bear, 11
1-3 “Poisoning Carnivorous Animals,” 21
2-1 Sheepherder’s camp in Wyoming, 32
2-2 Coyote hunters in Nebraska, 37
2-3 Soldiers with wolf pelt in Yellowstone National Park, 42
2-4 Cowboys with a roped gray wolf, 46
3-1 The Custer Wolf and government trapper, 51
3-2 Pyramid of skinned coyotes in Wyoming, 55
3-3 Mountain lions taken by government trapper in Arizona, 56
3-4 Ben Lilly and his dogs, 71
3-5 Government hunter Bud Dalrymple, 79
3-6 Ranger and wife in Yellowstone National Park, 84
4-1 Stanley P. Young and predator control map, 92
4-2 E. Raymond Hall in 1923, 105
4-3 A Wyoming husband-wife predator trapping team, 110–111
4-4 Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin, 120
5-1 Airplane coyote hunters in South Dakota, 135
5-2 Government trapper Jay S. Hammond setting coyote-getter, 139
5-3 Wildlife biologist Paul L. Errington, 143
5-4 A. Starker Leopold at the University of California–Berkeley, 151
5-5 E. Raymond Hall in 1960, 164
6-1 Reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park, 196
6-2 Mexican wolf, 202
6-3 Grizzly researchers Frank and John Craighead, 205
6-4 Grizzlies at Trout Creek dump in Yellowstone National Park, 207
7-1 A Black Hills mountain lion, 233
7-2 Grizzly bear in Glacier National Park, 236
7-3 Northern Rocky Mountains gray wolf, 246
Among the most impressive aspects of the antipredator campaigns in the West, in both general terms and for the first decades of centralized federal management (beginning in 1915), are the stupendous amounts of data and description to be found in government records. One should never underestimate the sheer tonnage of reports and statistics that bureaucrats of any historical period generate. The National Archives in College Park, Maryland, houses the bulk of the federal government’s predator control materials. In addition to six boxes of annual reports from 1916 to 1964, with attendant data sheets and progress reports, this repository holds more than ninety boxes of monthly, quarterly, and annual reports from district inspectors in all the states and regions included in the predatory animal and rodent control system, and that is just for 1915 to 1949. State game and fish wardens’ reports, personal papers of important participants, records associated with cooperating bodies such as livestock associations, newspaper and magazine stories, memoirs, and much more—considering these all together, it becomes clear that historians can only hope to create an effective narrative about western predators and predator control based on a very selective sampling of official records and additional supporting accounts. Added to that is the immense amount of information contained in decades of scientific journals and, lately, the torrent of advocacy for or against predator recovery or hunting found on web pages and blogs. It is simply staggering.

I would have been truly staggered without the help of many professionals, colleagues, friends, and family members. Staff at the following research repositories, beleaguered as they are by shrinking budgets and legislative neglect, well deserve any plaudits that come their way: the aforementioned National Archives; the Smithsonian Institution Archives in Washington, DC; the Western History Collections at the Denver Public Library; the Minnesota State Historical Society library and archives in Saint Paul; the New Mexico State Records Center and Archives in Santa Fe, particularly Melissa Salazar and Felicia Lujan; the Nebraska State Historical Society in Lincoln; the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka; Carl Hallberg and his associates at the Wyoming
State Archives in Cheyenne; the American Heritage Center in Laramie, Wyoming; and finally, just a short walk across the quad from my office, the South Dakota Collection, housed at Devereux Library on the campus of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. Colleagues at the library, especially director Patty Anderson, Dawn Jedrykowski, and interlibrary loan wizard Josh Wilkinson, have been extraordinary. Josh has been invaluable in rapidly turning my floods of requests into resources in my hands or on my computer screen.

An important contribution to securing photo prints from the National Archives for this book came from Photo Response Studio in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Others who went to great lengths to assist with images include Riche Sorensen at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC; Debra Guernsey at Yellowstone National Park's Heritage and Research Center; Reid Riner, director of the Minnilusa Pioneer Collection at the Journey Museum in Rapid City, South Dakota; Valerie Fellows with the US Fish and Wildlife Service; Becky S. Jordan with Special Collections/University Archives at Iowa State University in Ames; Letha E. Johnson with the University Archives at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas in Lawrence; David Null and Vicki L. Tobias from the University of Wisconsin–Madison Archives; Crystal Miles at the Bancroft Library at the University of California–Berkeley; and John Kanta from the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department in Rapid City.

Being surrounded by amazing colleagues on the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty is a daily blessing, and I want to thank all who, whether able to read one or all of the chapters or simply inquire into how things were proceeding, helped immeasurably with editing, comments, and encouragement: King Adkins, Al Boysen, Roger Dendinger, John Dreyer, Michael Hudgens, Sharon Kirkpatrick-Sanchez, Jim McReynolds, Deb Mitchell, Kayla Pritchard, Rod Rice, Judy Sneller, and Christy Tidwell. Kate Antonen and Sue Shirley deserve special thanks for reading and expertly editing the entire manuscript. Eternal gratitude goes out as well to Deb East and Debbie Zeidler, who tracked down answers to my questions about financial issues and other administrative details. I also want to extend my appreciation to former School of Mines provost Duane Hrncir for finding a few dollars here and there.
during tight budget regimes to help fund travel to a conference or archive. Colleagues and mentors on other campuses or in nonacademic settings gave great advice and support too, and I would like to single out David Cremean, John Egan, Jeremy Johnston, and Phil Roberts in this regard. By alerting me to a call for contributors to an interdisciplinary collection of essays on hunting and fishing traditions, John Bruni helped immeasurably in pushing me toward this project several years ago. For providing opportunities to share my research and gather feedback in public presentations, I want to commend Karen Miller, Reid Riner, and other fellow members of the Minnilusa Historical Association’s board of directors.

For providing research support, I am indebted to the American Heritage Center on the campus of the University of Wyoming for a travel grant in 2006; Stella Hughes and the William and Stella Hughes Faculty Research Award, offered through the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology Foundation in 2011–2012; and a John Topham and Susan Redd Butler Faculty Research Award, provided by the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies at Brigham Young University, for 2013–2014.

It has been immensely rewarding to work with the University Press of Kansas again. I am truly thankful to former acquisitions editor Ranjit Arab and former director Fred Woodward for advocating on behalf of an admittedly inchoate idea that I hoped to turn into a coherent and readable book. Thanks too to new acquisitions editor Kim Hogeland for patiently and skillfully guiding me in for a smooth landing, along with all the accomplished staff who have assisted in transforming manuscript into book. I am grateful as well for the critical readings of my proposal and wise guidance from Michael J. Robinson and an anonymous reader.

Finally, I must extend my great love and appreciation to my wife, Janet, and daughter, Maya, for years of patience and backing as I pecked away in the second-floor office of our home, for accompanying me on two road trip/research junkets, and for tolerating my distractedness and very occasional (I hope) grumpiness. Thank you too to my late parents and uncle, all of whose passing coincided with my research and writing. They and their enthusiastic engagement with all of our endeavors over many years are much missed. Maya, Rob Dewan, and James Van Nuys
allowed me some occasional distraction with music. My guitar playing is not what it once was (and it wasn’t much then), but I am grateful for those opportunities.

Readers and reviewers will undoubtedly discover much with which to find fault here—emphases left unemphasized, sources neglected, conclusions missed, and interpretive threads unexploited. Rather than strive to be definitive or absolutely comprehensive, I have merely sought to cover a complex subject as thoroughly as I could and hope others may be inspired to explore some element of the history of western predators in greater depth. I have tried to take as much care as possible to be accurate and fair. Any errors of fact or interpretation that appear in the pages to follow are my responsibility entirely.
INTRODUCTION

My interest in writing a book about predators, predator control, and the American West was initially piqued by a local controversy. A compelling debate concerning the possibility of state-regulated mountain lion hunting in the Black Hills of western South Dakota, where I live, began around 2003. As a generalist in the history of the West, I had always been vaguely cognizant of much of the lore about wild carnivores and fuzzily aware of government predator control programs as a key ancillary to the economic and political potency of livestock interests. My family and I lived in Wyoming during the height of the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction controversies, so I knew there existed a deeper history of predators and development of the region. It took the turmoil surrounding the mountain lion issue, however, to fully awaken me to the magnitude of the predators’ hold on so many western people’s psyches. Powerful emotions, beliefs, and assumptions drove the discussions, while all sides—prolion and prohunting and many in between—argued that science underwrote their positions and disproved the unsubstantiated charges of their opponents. In short, I was fascinated, and the arguments in the newspaper prodded me into wanting to study the animals and how humans have interacted with and sought to manage them over a longer period of time.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, as she has with a multitude of historical themes impacting the region, summed up the motivations behind predator control about as succinctly as one can. “If the goal was the preservation of game animals, the predators—wolves, coyotes, mountain lions—were enemies and competitors,” Limerick wrote in Legacy of Conquest (1987). “Not only that, predators had also adapted to the new opportunities for getting protein in the form of domestic livestock, especially sheep. Ranchers joined hunters in condemning the nonhuman carnivores, and government rallied to the cause—trapping, poisoning, and shooting.” Clearly, then, predators have served as foils for desirable game animals and livestock, hunters and ranchers, and governments determined to stop them.
Any study of western predators has to account for those fundamental dynamics, and this work is no exception. First of all, though, what predators are we talking about? In this book, the focus will be on four: wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions plus grizzly bears, who engage in predatory behavior as circumstances warrant and were targeted as such frequently enough to deserve inclusion. I am not a mammalogist, so I will avoid lengthy descriptions of taxonomy, life histories, social structures, breeding practices, hunting techniques, and other minutiae best left to the scientists. I will instead present very brief surveys of each species in this introduction, with some reference to variant subspecies, historical range, prey, and if possible historical population estimates for North America.

The gray wolf (Canis lupus) at one time ranged over practically all of the continent. Before European colonization began, it is possible that somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 wolves roamed North America; perhaps 200,000 lived on the prairies of what would become the United States in the early 1800s. Sometimes referred to as a timber wolf, among other names, the adult male gray wolf averages around 100 pounds, with the female being 20 to 25 pounds lighter. Elk, moose, caribou, deer, bighorn sheep, and bison comprise most of the gray wolf’s natural prey, although smaller animals and carrion supplement its diet. Mammalogists once recognized twenty-three subspecies of gray wolf in North America, but that number was eventually whittled down to five: C. l. occidentalis (northwestern wolf), C. l. nubilus (Great Plains wolf), C. l. arctos (Arctic wolf), C. l. baileyi (Mexican wolf), and C. l. lycaon (eastern wolf). Taxonomic disagreements continue to rumble through zoology, but for our purposes, references will be generically simplified to wolves or gray wolves and, occasionally, Mexican or Mexican gray wolves.

Native to North America, the ubiquitous and versatile coyote (Canis latrans) is the only one of our western predators whose range has actually expanded over time. Filling the void created by the escalating destruction of wolves, coyotes expanded north and west from northern and central Mexico, the American Southwest, and the plains of Canada and the United States from the nineteenth century on. Weighing in at between 15 and 40 pounds, the coyote eats practically anything,
preying on rabbits, rodents, birds, lizards, snakes, and insects as well as scavenging carcasses of larger ungulates and even consuming fruits and vegetables. The animal’s devotion to attacking domestic sheep has earned it the enduring enmity of livestock growers in the West. There are presently nineteen recognized subspecies, a taxonomic situation that is too complicated to dwell on in this work.4

The historical range of the cougar or mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), known too as the puma, panther, painter, and catamount, encompasses most of both continents in the Western Hemisphere. The big cats have a proven ability to adapt well to virtually any type of habitat, although they seem to prefer areas with dense undergrowth and rocky terrain, such as the Black Hills, the Rockies, or the Sierra Nevada in California. Males vary widely in size but average about 135 pounds, with females at roughly 90 pounds. Cougars subsist primarily on deer, but they also prey on other ungulates and a few smaller species such as porcupines and beavers. Taxonomists now recognize five South American subspecies, but all North American varieties, with the uncertain exception of endangered Florida panthers, are lumped together as *P. c. couguar.*5

The grizzly bear (*Ursos arctos horribilis*) is one of several subspecies of North American brown bear; the two other surviving subspecies are the Kodiak bear (*U. a. middendorffii*) and the peninsular grizzly (*U. a. gyas*) found in Alaska. Grizzlies once ranged across all of western North America, from the Arctic Circle into north-central Mexico. Although reports of the extinct California grizzly (*U. a. californicus*) described an immense beast that could reach 2,000 pounds, male grizzlies average between 450 and 800 pounds; females weigh between 300 and 450 pounds. Like their smaller and more numerous cousins, the black bears (*Ursos americanus*), grizzlies are omnivores, preying on all manner of mammals, birds, fish, and insects; consuming tubers, nuts, and plants; and scavenging carrion or, to the delight of thousands of mid-twentieth-century national park visitors, garbage.6

In the early 1900s, federal officials and conservationists took the lead in controlling and even eradicating these four charismatic predatory mammals, as well as bobcats, lynxes, foxes, wolverines, hawks, eagles, and other carnivores throughout the West. They did so in collaboration with state game managers, backed by politically powerful livestock in-
terests and generally broad public approbation. They benefited as well from a scientific consensus that predator control enhanced prospects for the “good” animals, such as caribou, elk, deer, and moose, that the American people wanted to see or hunt. At that time, a state game and fish department report might boast a photo montage of “Game’s Worst Enemies,” featuring a mountain lion, a fox, a coyote, a lynx, and a forlorn trapped wolf. By the 1920s, a few critics, mostly within scientific organizations, had begun openly questioning the wisdom of wholesale predator elimination. Gradually, the early consensus on trapping and poisoning as many predators as possible to save livestock and game eroded, replaced by ultimately unsatisfying efforts to split the difference between ecologically sound wildlife management practices and western economic and political realities.

As storied regions go, the American West may be one of the most agonizingly complex and contradictory—an amalgam of possibility and failure, progress and destruction, tolerance and violence. The conflicted history of predators in the West exemplifies the messiness of its past. The advance of American settlement and institutions across the West dealt with Native Americans, immigrants, minorities, workers, and other marginal and vulnerable groups in consistent patterns premised on establishing order and clearing a path for capitalist economic success. Predatory animals wound up on the receiving end of similar impulses. The blanket slaughter of predators in the West was as vital to the region’s incorporation into the American mainstream of ideologies, economics, politics, and culture as any other phenomenon.

The past may have been messy, but in terms of our subject, the past also boasted widespread agreement about the general uselessness of a certain class of animals, a fundamental accord that has long since been abandoned. With the erosion of that consensus over the last century or so, disagreements over managing predators and their habitats in the West have become increasingly politicized and polarized. The bitter arguments over western carnivores in recent decades are, on one hand, a product of changing attitudes and demographics in the West itself. Movements to protect and restore predator populations, rooted in ecological theories about interdependence in nature, enjoy support from many westerners, primarily in urban areas. On the other hand, predator
recovery plans have elicited far more support from outside of the region, fueling familiar refrains concerning meddlesome (but conveniently distant) eastern do-gooders who dismiss the practical needs and livelihoods of rural westerners as unworthy of preservation. The strident rhetoric and lawsuits constantly issuing from all sides can give less engaged observers a disheartening sense of futility.

Attempting to control that which, by its nature, desires freedom to do what it is biologically designed to do also seems the very definition of a futile endeavor. As conservation writer Rick Bass wrote in the aftermath of wolf reintroduction in the 1990s, “There are no neat stories in nature, no tidy closures with beginning, middle, and end; no epiphanies.” The oxymoronic phrase wildlife management exemplifies that point impeccably. In nature, Bass concluded, “there is on-going process, continuous struggle.”8 The same can be said of our attempts to coexist with predators, now more commonly perceived as vital regulators of ecosystems, deserving of extraordinary efforts to aid them.

This is a story, then, of process and struggle, of an uneven passage from times blessed in a way by a coherent set of beliefs and practices in relation to predators to an increasingly complex present beset by clashing interests and ideologies, in which disputes over the value of these animals get sucked into the vortex of sound bites and toxicity. Perhaps the repetitive nastiness that permeates our political discourse about environmental problems will one day be recalled as just a phase, part of the harrowing process of coming to terms with our species’ sad record of ecological damage. More than likely, though, warring over nature and the creatures that most symbolize its “tooth and claw” verities comes as naturally to us as digging a winter den does to a grizzly bear or stalking deer does to a cougar. As long as there remain predators to protect or hunt or argue about, then we will have not failed completely.
“The Wolves We Saw Them Everywhere”

“In the summer of 1824, a young Missourian named James Ohio Pattie accompanied his father, Sylvester, as he led a large trade caravan toward Santa Fe, New Mexico, from the vicinity of what is now Omaha, Nebraska. On the night of August 6, the party, which had been working its way along the Platte River, arrived “at a village of Pawnee Loups,” with whom they remained for several days. In the midst of the visit, a band of warriors returned from a successful foray against a rival tribe. “A day or two after their arrival, they painted themselves for a celebration of their victory, with great labor and care,” Pattie wrote. “The chiefs were dressed in skins of wild animals, with the hair on. These skins were principally those of the bear, wolf, panther, and spotted or ring tailed panther. They wore necklaces of bear’s and panther’s claws.” Clearly impressed by the Pawnees’ ornamentation, Pattie would soon have occasion to collect skins and claws of his own. He would spend much of the next six years as a hunter and trapper in the Southwest and have numerous tense moments with grizzly bears. Whether the young man could fully appreciate the deeper spiritual meanings of the Pawnees’ accoutrements is impossible to know.

Pattie was in the vanguard of American westward expansion, during which bears, wolves, and “panthers” would be defined primarily in economic terms, as sources of profit in some cases and as obstacles to profit by most. Culturally, Americans of Pattie’s era and for generations to come perceived wild carnivores within a fearful context of difference.
For Native Americans such as the Pawnees with whom Pattie camped, similarities, rather than differences, defined their relationships with predators. Wolves, bears, and cougars, along with deer, elk, moose, and other animals, functioned as totems for special societies, clans, and tribes. They were typically understood as “people” in their own right and as relatives. The predator served western tribes and clans in a variety of roles, including that of a guide in the process of learning essential skills in hunting and warfare. At least some of the “Pawnee Loups” James Pattie witnessed celebrating their victory were possibly members of an elite society of warriors known as Wolves (loup being French for “wolf”; the Loup River system drains into the Platte River in eastern Nebraska). These distinguished Pawnees exemplified the endurance and furtiveness of the animal. Pawnee scouts or horse thieves imitated wolves by covering themselves in white blankets, moving about on all fours, and sitting on their haunches. Neighboring Plains tribes, occasionally the victims of the “Wolf People,” claimed that from a distance, they were unable to distinguish Pawnee raiders from real wolves.

The guidance provided by a top predator had significant practical benefits for people dependent on the hunt and in stiff competition for territory and resources with rivals. On a symbolic level as well, predators assumed enormously consequential meanings for individuals, clans, and tribes. In much Plains Indian cosmology, the four cardinal directions were represented by Bear (west), Mountain Lion (north), Wolf (east), and Wildcat (south). The Pueblos likewise associated “Beast Gods” with the four cardinal directions as well as the worlds situated above (zenith) and below (nadir). Wolf guarded the east door—where time began—imparting hunting skills, curing illness, and protecting the prey animals upon which the people relied. Mountain lion shrines constructed between 500 and 800 years ago in present-day New Mexico demonstrate the importance of the big cat as a totem for the Pueblos as well.

Generally, the powers and personae of bears, mountain lions, and wolves reflected the respectful attitudes Native Americans had toward these animals. Killing predators, for whatever purpose, required reverence for the hunted. A different and complex relationship applied
to coyotes, which appear as trickster figures in a multitude of Native American tales. By turns creator, culture hero, coward, cheat, fool, seducer, shape-shifter, and thief, among other guises, Coyote figures embodied the complex and dualistic nature of human character in much western tribal mythology. Coyote stories entertained but also taught a people about their origins and identity; they provided lessons about proper behavior and decorum through the mirror image of a flawed but vital character. Despite all of his foibles, principally unrestrained desires for power, food, and sexual gratification, Coyote created the Indian people according to many emergence stories.\(^5\)

When addressing how the indigenous peoples of the American West perceived and treated predators—in either mythological or historical terms—we need to be as cautious as hunters approaching a grizzly bear’s den. Conditioned by animated Disney features and other one-dimensional portrayals, we may be tempted to settle into romanticizing all Native Americans at all times as uniquely attuned to the natural world, as brothers and sisters to the four-legged creatures that sustained them both spiritually and physically.\(^6\) It is not as simple as that, but it is accurate to generalize that American Indians coexisted rather comfortably with predators. Appreciation, honor, and respect typified their responses to bears, cougars, and wolves. Yet fear remained as a genuine and reasonable reaction to what were indeed potential threats to any individual’s livelihood and even survival. Entwined as they were with predators—and with all animals and, in fact, all products of creation—in a unified world, the first peoples of the West possessed little apparent desire to “control” these animals.\(^7\)

For Europeans and their American descendants who entered the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the need to control those animals commonly derided as “varmints” was not up for debate. In the millennia leading up to contact with the New World, Europeans had also developed complex relationships to predators, as evocative and rich in mythological and ceremonial import as anything found among Native Americans. Yet the more salutary views concerning predators had largely disappeared in Europe by the time settlement in North America began. The transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and livestock herding, starting between 10,000 and 13,000 years ago
in the Fertile Crescent and gradually spreading west, altered human relationships with predatory animals in a fundamental sense. By necessity, caring for domestic animals dictated a hardening of attitudes toward carnivores. Western societies developed a wary perspective on nature and wild animals, which were increasingly seen as opposing forces to be confronted and controlled rather than as integral parts of an organic whole inclusive of human activities.\(^8\)

Agricultural and pastoral societies’ ambivalence about nature and wilderness was further reinforced by the spread of Christianity. In short, biblical sanction for humans’ dominion over beasts clashed with an alternative Western tradition of the wilderness as a sanctuary for the soul, a retreat from sin and temptation. Generally, Europeans lived in a religious culture that associated the wilderness and carnivorous animals with demonic forces intent on pulling souls away from God. In broadest terms, the Europeans who ventured to North America had long since abandoned an organic view of interdependence with nature, steeped in
myth and ritual, in favor of a more confrontational approach based on economic forces and religious belief.9

For predatory animals, then, European entry into the New World would launch five centuries of constant struggle to adjust and survive against a determined competitor conditioned to destroy them on sight. In the first English colonies, a belief in human superiority and dominion over animals as both natural and divinely mandated trumped older folkloric traditions that, like Native American beliefs, might have attributed spiritual powers to animals. Key to the European colonists’ conflicts with predators as well as Native Americans were the competition for game, especially deer, and the vulnerability of roaming livestock due to declining numbers of game animals. Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted the first bounties on wolves in 1630. Then, as later, the bounty system was rife with complications and opportunities for deception and fraud, and it was often thwarted by the wolves’ ability to adapt, survive, and recover lost population. Ultimately, however, the English colonies—or their successor American states after 1776—exterminated wolves and did their best to wipe out bears and panthers.10

The first encounters between Europeans and predators in the West were recorded by Spanish explorers. The chronicler of Francisco Vásquez de Coronado’s expedition into New Mexico in the early 1540s referred to sightings of “large numbers of bears,” cougars, and wildcats. Coronado’s massive train of men, horses, and livestock also surged into present-day Kansas, wherein, according to the travelers, “there are very great numbers of wolves on these plains, which go around with the cows [bison]. They have white skins.”11 A priest chronicling Sebastian Vizcaíno’s expedition to Monterey Bay in the winter of 1602–1603 noted grizzly bears feeding on a whale carcass. When Spanish authorities extended settlement and mission building to California more than 150 years later, additional information about the province’s bears entered the historical record.12

Problems with bears and mountain lions preoccupied California’s ranchos, which were the products of a few extensive land grants given to the colonial elite by the Spanish crown. An even more generous dispensation of ranchos after establishment of the Mexican Republic in 1821 added to the pressure on regional fauna. The introduction of free-
ranging cattle had the predictable effect of causing bears to shift their diet from wild game, and large ranchos reported hundreds of cattle lost to bears each year. Multiple sources reported that some grizzlies would actually lure tragically curious cattle by lying on their backs in tall grass, rolling about and waving their paws in the air. Spanish authorities even dispatched soldiers from nearby presidios on preemptive campaigns against bears to further protect mission and rancho herds, typically to no avail. Grizzly populations, thriving on an abundance of livestock and undeterred by the relatively small human population, actually soared in California during the Spanish and Mexican periods. Rancheros and their hired hands, the vaqueros, developed a heart-pounding sport of lassoing bears from horseback with rawhide lariats, known as *reatas*. Once captured, many California grizzlies became participants in gory public spectacles pitting them against wild bulls.¹³
To the north, French Canadian, English, and Russian trappers in the eighteenth century had the occasional dangerous encounter with carnivores, and they procured a few wolf and bear hides to supplement profits from beavers and other furbearers. American awareness of the West’s extraordinary fauna officially arrived with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s Corps of Discovery expedition between May 1804 and September 1806. In addition to antelope, bison, elk, prairie dogs, grouse, rattlesnakes, and other unique animals, the captains and some of the rank-and-file members of the corps noted the seemingly constant presence of wolves and coyotes. Expedition hunters, as recounted by Clark, bagged “a Small wolf with a large bushey tail” north of present-day Chamberlain, South Dakota, on September 17, 1804. This was the Americans’ first experience with a coyote, referred to in subsequent Clark journal entries as a “prairie wolf.” “The large wolves are verry numourous,” Clark also noted, and a few weeks later near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, he again wrote of “great numbers of wolves” that “follow the baffalow and devour, those that die or are Killed, and those too fat or pore to Keep up with the gangue.” For the most part, the expedition had few serious confrontations with the furtive wolves and coyotes, although at one point, Lewis commented on the persistent threat of wolves to the corps’ meat supply.  

Expedition members had far more concern for life and limb when encountering grizzly bears, an animal theretofore unknown to American naturalists. The first direct contact with a grizzly was on October 20, 1804, near Bismarck, when Private Pierre Cruzatte wounded one and then dropped his gun while running away, an experience that would be repeated by corps members with some frequency. Lewis shot, wounded, and then killed a young male grizzly bear, which he referred to as a “yellow or brown bear,” in April 1805 while the expedition worked its way up the Missouri after spending the previous winter with the Mandan tribe. Lewis contrasted grizzlies to black bears, with which he and other expedition members were more familiar, finding them a “much more furious and formidable animal [that] will frequently pursue the hunter when wounded. . . . It is astonishing to see the wounds they will bear before they can be put to death.” A week later, Clark and one of the men killed a much larger bear, and Lewis marveled at the tenacity
with which it fought for its life despite absorbing ten musket balls. The portion of the river east of Great Falls, Montana, seemed to be crawling with grizzlies, and as the adventures piled up, Lewis noted that “the curiosity of our party is pretty well satisfied with respect to this animal . . . the difficulty with which they die when even shot through the vital parts, has staggered the resolution [of] several of them, others however seem keen for action with the bear.”

On balance, the Lewis and Clark expedition was harder on bears than the bears were on any of the men running frantically from those they shot. The journals demonstrate a reflexive response at nearly every sighting of a grizzly: take gun in hand and give chase. In practical terms, successfully hunting bears resulted in additional meat for the expedition as well as valuable oil and hides. In part, prudence also dictated an aggressive stance, for the bears seemed to be everywhere along the Missouri and came close to mauling several of the men. As the corps toiled in preparation for an arduous portage around the Great Falls two weeks after his close call, Lewis complained that “the White bear have become so troublesome to us that I do not think it prudent to send one man alone on an errand of any kind, particularly where he has to pass through the brush.” Not all grizzlies were a nuisance or posed a distinct threat to the expedition, but many unoffending bears still wound up dead.

The Corps of Discovery’s responses to bears, wolves, and western fauna in general set the bar for thousands of sojourners yet to come as American expansion unfolded over the next decades. Much classic lore about predators in the Far West came from fur traders in the early nineteenth century. Trappers had periodic encounters with wolves and mountain lions, but the grizzly bears inflicted the most damage. Once the market for beaver pelts collapsed, many veterans of the trade stayed relevant by guiding the swelling masses of men, women, and children coursing the dusty overland trails to California and Oregon. Of the surviving firsthand accounts written by those travelers, a significant number refer to encounters with predators, most often the ubiquitous wolves and coyotes. William Richard Brown, part of a California-bound wagon train in 1853, was struck by the frequent sightings of wolves while crossing Nebraska. “Saw buffalo, antelope and wolves in the distance and the wolves we saw them everywhere that we could look, these and numbers
of them all along the route,” he noted in one of several journal entries devoted to the animals.19

A remarkable account of an emigrant challenged and frustrated by a seemingly endless parade of wolves and coyotes is found in the diary of Thomas Flint. His overland journey in 1853 from Iowa to Los Angeles was a business venture that began with nearly 1,900 sheep—a mobile wolf feast if ever there was one. “Camped for the Sabbath and a good rest,” Flint noted while in eastern Nebraska, where he stumbled upon macabre evidence of the animals’ activities. “The ground had been dug up about there and I picked up the bones of a human foot and other parts of a skeleton which wolves had cleared of the flesh. Did not report the find for fear some of the boys might feel superstitious about it.” In early July, Flint reported wolves as “numerous and bold” and “troublesome,” one of which, on Independence Day, “beat the boys and got away with a sheep for his 4th.” The wolves continued to accompany Flint and the army of sheep as they labored along the Platte River in western Nebraska and past Fort Laramie in eastern Wyoming. “Wolves numerous,” he wrote on July 19. “They follow on our trail to pick up whatever there may be left when we camp. They watch the birds and when one flies down to the place we have vacated, the wolves immediately bounce in to divide the crumbs or fragments with their winged pilots.” Bears, too, found Flint’s mutton brigade irresistible, as the company discovered while resting and feeding the livestock in Utah.20

Seemingly, all those who kept journals of their trips commented on their visceral reactions to the alarming sounds made by wolves and coyotes.21 In a well-known gold rush diary, J. Goldsborough Bruff described in colorful detail “a very distinct serenade” along the Lassen Trail in the Sierra Nevada: “The performance was 3 staves, of a long howl each, with all the variations and intonations peculiar to such music.” A few years later, another California-bound gold seeker complained about the “owls and wild cats” that “kept us awake all night by their hideous howling.” Near the Blue River crossing in Kansas, an Oregon Trail emigrant concluded a diary entry by noting, “The day closed with cold rain and a tremendous concert by the Wolves.”22

Too many sleepless nights on a 2,000-mile overland trek could have prompted even the most ardent admirer of wolves and coyotes to snap.
A considerable number of predators likely met their demise at the hands of emigrants conditioned to see them as threats. Yet for the most part, travelers spared their ammunition, knowing they were but sojourners through the treeless plains. The impulses of conquest as they pertained to predators would assume more tangible shape once the emigrants arrived in the valleys of Oregon, California, or Utah. Settlement would come to the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains as well, so whatever respite predators in the West may have enjoyed during the trails period would soon end.

_Criminals and Cowards_

Nearly fifty years after a hard winter on the Nebraska prairies, a former pioneer recalled her fearful experiences of wolves almost literally at the door. “It thrills me even now as I recall the terrible howling of those wolves; sometimes I was paralyzed with terror over the uproar of blood-curdling howls that made the darkness of the night a hideous nightmare. They shrieked at times like human beings in torturing agony; they would get so close it seemed they would surely come through our cabin door.”23 For explorers, trappers, and overland trail emigrants intent on pressing on, predators had fostered not only considerable anxiety and sleepless nights but also a less conscious obsession with their destruction. Once settlers arrived in the Far West or, as the reminiscence here indicates, determined to homestead on the Great Plains, they replicated the patterns of conflict that had eradicated wolves and other predatory mammals in Europe and the East.

As migrants became settlers, the transference of attitudes into action occurred rapidly. In a book based on her interviews with famed mountain man and trail guide Joseph Meek, the Oregon historian Frances Fuller Victor described how early settlers papered over political and cultural differences between French Canadians, English, and Americans to organize a territory by calling a “Wolf Meeting” in 1843. “Not a settler, owning cattle or hogs, but had been robbed more or less frequently by the wolves, bears, and panthers, which prowled unhindered in the vicinity of their herds,” she wrote. According to Victor, the Canadians were
generally opposed to forming the first provisional government in the Oregon country but nonetheless agreed to organizing the Wolf Association and setting bounties of $3.00 for a large wolf, $1.50 for a lynx, $2.00 for a bear, and $5.00 for a panther.  

The significance of livestock to the newcomers’ prospects, as the Oregon episode suggests, dictated a time-honored approach to community concerns about depredation. Marketable livestock sustained early western farmers’ investments in property; thus, predators’ assaults demanded retribution because such animals, bent on “robbing” settlers of their cattle and hogs, were considered criminals. Discussing the cougar, one observer claimed, “It kills, in fact, for the sake of killing, even when gorged with food; and this propensity causes it to be thoroughly hated and feared by the settlers.” In response, therefore, to mountain lion depredations, the “farmer generally starts in pursuit with dogs and guns, or spreads strychnine over a piece of meat and places it in a spot where it will prove most effective.” Wolves in particular were seen to exemplify a cowardly disregard for innocent domestic livestock incapable of self-defense, and robbing and murdering cowards deserved no quarter. The extremes to which Euro-Americans went in dispatching wolves underscored the enmity. New England colonists in the seventeenth century used hooks, dogs, pits, pens, “set guns,” hunters, trappers, bounties, fences, and community hunts in their long and ultimately successful war against wolves. Nineteenth-century settlers also brought these techniques to bear, along with staggering amounts of poisoned bait, in extraordinary campaigns waged to rid themselves of so-called varmints.  

In Utah, the earliest Mormon settlers displayed a typically focused and reasonably well-coordinated effort to clear their Zion of predators. In the trying years prior to their exodus to the Great Basin, the Mormon pilgrims had extensive experience in destroying predators, and they continued the practice en route, slaughtering wolves on the overland trail. Historian Jon T. Coleman argues that pioneering Mormons possessed ideals, based on founder Joseph Smith’s preaching and the Book of Mormon, that could have prompted more compassionate treatment of predators. Instead, their reliance on livestock and their harrowing experiences of leaving family members who died on the migration in graves
easily disturbed by wolves eroded any possibility that they would treat predators with a degree of tolerance.27

The Mormons’ new home was also a haven for predators, and settlers began the assault immediately. One reported killing fourteen wolves with strychnine in a single night during the Latter-day Saints’ first year in the Great Salt Lake valley, and church leaders organized a competitive hunt in 1848–1849. Brigham Young appointed two other Mormon leaders to captain the teams charged with waging war on “the wolves, wildcats, catamounts, Pole cats, mink, Bear, Panthers, Eagles, Hawks, owls, crow or Ravens & magpies.” Between Christmas Day 1848 and early March 1849, several dozen men scoured the valley and foothills, killing 783 wolves, 409 foxes, 2 bears, and 2 wildcats along with a handful of wolverines and minks and hundreds of birds. Just two years later, a wolf bounty ate up 15 percent of the territorial budget, prompting Young, who was now the governor, to urge repeal. The proficiency with which early Utah bounty hunters destroyed wolves during the territory’s early years had the unintended consequence of boosting the number of coyotes that flourished for decades with the demise of their larger competitors.28

The ardor with which Utah’s first settlers carried out their campaigns against an expansive list of animals categorized as vermin had parallels elsewhere. In California, a foretaste of what was in store for grizzlies was captured in a story related by the US Army explorer John C. Frémont. In the midst of the Mexican-American War, Frémont and some of his troops surprised a host of adult and young bears eating acorns in a thicket of oak trees in the Salinas River valley. Although the bears posed no particular threat to Frémont and the others, the Americans engaged them as if the animals were allies of the Mexicans they were actually fighting. “We drove the bears into the willows, on to the sandbars, and into the water holes, among which our men were dispersed in parties of three or four.” When the smoke cleared, twelve bears had been killed. The gold rush that followed close on the heels of the war brought the onslaught of sport and game hunting that would, in just a few decades, completely eliminate grizzlies from California. Outstanding profits available to market hunters in providing bear meat, pelts, tallow, and oil contributed to the unremitting pressure on these animals. Popular in mining towns,
San Francisco, and Sacramento, bull-and-bear fights continued into the American period, subject to state licensing laws and taxation. Various cities eventually banned the spectacles, and the fights slowly dwindled away in the face of public disgust and a declining number of grizzlies. What is also notable about the years following the American takeover is the apparent frequency with which early Californians confronted grizzlies, with ubiquitous reports of maulings and deaths. In addition, many hunters contributed to their own demise by blasting away at unsuspecting grizzlies or following wounded bears into the brush.29

Even before the Mexican-American War, the earliest Americans in California wasted no time in hunting bears for sport and profit or to protect investments in livestock. In December 1845, trapper James Clyman found himself hunting grizzly bears in northern California. A male felled by Clyman’s party withstood nine musket balls, “but owing to the greate thickness of the fat on his sides only one had passed in to his lungs he proved to be a noble animal yielding more than three Hundred pounds of oil.” With the explosion of the population and the burgeoning demand for meat during the gold rush years, ranchers and farmers turned to strychnine and even placed ground glass in the baits they used. Over the next several decades, surviving bears learned to avoid locales where they had been shot at before and gradually made their way into higher elevations. In the end, though, it did not matter. Muzzle-loading, one-shot muskets gave way to breech-loading, repeating Sharps rifles and carbines; lassos gave way to wooden box traps and enormous steel traps; and the poisoning campaigns and market hunters were relentless. California’s grizzlies, having survived centuries of harassment under Spanish and Mexican settlement, withered under a ruthless eradication effort after the American conquest.30

Wolfers

In terms of scope and consequences, nothing would likely match the assault on wolves carried out by hunters, trappers, and ranchers. At the height of the great buffalo hunts of the mid-nineteenth century, wolves benefited handsomely, for they were able to scavenge the multitude of
carcasses littering the plains. Skinners commented on wolves actually arriving at the sound of the hunters’ guns in anticipation of a feast. Originally a sensible adaptation by an opportunistic predator, the wolf’s accompaniment of buffalo hunters would eventually prove catastrophic. A steady rise in the value of wolf pelts prompted many hunters to augment their profits from buffalo hides. For example, the operators of a trading post and ranch situated along the Santa Fe Trail in southwestern Kansas made out handsomely from the harvest of both buffalo and wolf hides in the mid-1850s. “They would kill a buffalo and cut the meat in small pieces and scatter it about in all directions a half a mile or so from camp, and so bait the wolves for about two days,” recalled one of the participants. With the wolves thus lured, the ranchers then substituted small squares of meat laced with strychnine, wiping out sixty-four wolves in one night and accruing $4,000 in proceeds from hides for one winter’s work.

Several years later, enough wolves and coyotes remained in the same vicinity to allow Robert M. Peck and two other former soldiers to spend a lucrative winter “wolfing.” Peck’s account revealed the ease with which decent money could be made in this pursuit at that time, “gathering them [wolf pelts] in daily about as fast as we could take care of them.” When they closed their camp at the beginning of spring in 1862, the three “wolfers” had gathered about $2,600 worth of wolf, coyote, and fox skins. Active from Manitoba to northern Texas, wolfers plied their trade between November and March, when wolf pelts were in prime condition. A single buffalo carcass baited with strychnine could produce astounding results, killing “a hundred or more wolves,” according to the famous Montana rancher Granville Stuart. Other accounts confirmed the staggering toll on wolves, along with the inadvertent poisoning of badgers, bears, bobcats, coyotes, eagles, foxes, hawks, magpies, ravens, and skunks.

Global market forces and industrialization—from the alluring prices for wolf pelts to the availability of mass-produced and affordable guns, traps, and poisons—fueled the wolfing trade. The demand for pelts extended well beyond the geographic confines of the United States. In the 1860s, for instance, the Russian army purchased North American wolf pelts for soldiers’ overcoats. Furnishing a steady supply of valuable furs
to a far-flung market required what one veteran wolfer referred to as “new and more systematic ways . . . to destroy wolves” than by shooting and trapping individual animals, and strychnine was the method best suited to slaughter on an industrial scale.\footnote{34}

Strychnine is a product of the seeds of the \textit{Strychnos nux vomica} tree, native to eastern India and other parts of Southeast Asia. The use of the poison against wolves and other animals dates to the seventeenth century in Europe; strychnine was also likely used to some extent in the English colonies at that time. By the 1830s, the advent of industrial mass production and favorable shipping rates aided in the global spread of strychnine. English trappers of the Hudson’s Bay Company reportedly poisoned wolves in the Pacific Northwest, and its use by Mexican ranchers was noted by a US boundary survey report in 1849. A cargo of strychnine manufactured in Philadelphia arrived in San Francisco around the time of the gold rush, and in addition, the poison was being sold in significant quantities in Westport, Kansas, and other western trading posts by the late 1840s.\footnote{35}

Aside from its easy availability on the western plains, strychnine’s advantages centered on its relatively quick, albeit excruciating, effect on the victim. Most wolves who ingested it would not be able to stagger far from the baited carcass before collapsing, making the wolfer’s skinning of the dead animals a reasonably simple task. “Some had died with their heads on the carcass,” a former trapper recalled about a successful beginning to a wolfing season in Montana during the 1870s; “a few had got away several hundred yards before falling; the majority lay within a circle of 50 yards.” For this enterprising wolfer and his partners, a mere few months in the field garnered “900 prime wolf skins” ready for loading on the first steamer coming up the Missouri River in the spring.\footnote{36} Producing firm numbers on the wolfing trade’s overall impact is impossible, but it is probable that the wolfers killed several hundred thousand wolves over a thirty-year period (1850s to 1880s), prompting one chronicler of antiwolf campaigns to declare that wolfers caused “the greatest mass slaughter of wolves in world history.”\footnote{37}

Although they performed a job that their contemporaries believed needed to be done, the wolfers often failed to elicit much sympathy for their hard lot or respect for their hardened characters. An author
of an 1881 survey of the West summarized the conventional attitude about wolfers: “This is a profitable business, but those who engage in it undergo great privations and hardships, and they very often spend their hard-won gains in miserable debauchery.” Native Americans had a particular contempt for wolfers because of a belief that poisoned wolves’ saliva remained on the grass, leading to secondary poisoning of ponies, dogs, and game. Some wolfers reportedly were ambushed while checking baits and killed by Indians.

If not universally admired, wolfers nevertheless won some grudging appreciation for their efforts. The author of an 1878 guide on hunting and trapping thought them “brave and courageous beyond expression” to endure the ungodly winters on the northern plains. English hunter and naturalist John Mortimer Murphy was generally dismissive of the “set of reckless nomads who live on the borders of civilization,” but he acknowledged that some were “wise enough to keep their money” and leave the unsavory profession. Granville Stuart, by contrast, deemed them “brave and intrepid,” and the author of a popular mid-twentieth-century history of Montana praised the wolfers as “perhaps the toughest
lot of men the west has ever known—tougher, even, than the buffalo hunter.”

Respected or not, the most intrepid wolfers persisted because wolfing was, until the destruction of the bison herds in the early 1880s, a profitable business. Prices ranged between $2.00 and $2.50 per pelt in Montana in the 1860s and 1870s, allowing wolfers to make $1,000 to $1,500 a season on average and up to twice as much from a good winter. Whether it was considered a reputable trade or not, eliminating varmints proved remarkably lucrative for those with a little patience and a lot of strychnine.

Conclusion

Before Europeans arrived in the West, Native Americans had no incentive to abandon a relatively benign, cooperative relationship with predators. For these people, wolves, bears, cougars, and coyotes embodied positive and beneficial characteristics. They were mysterious, powerful, skillful, and wise; they could communicate in profound ways, guiding, teaching, or warning their human relations about the world they shared. Human and animal lives intertwined in complex ways. A grizzly bear could bestow sublime powers on those who belonged to its clan, even willingly giving up its life to respectful hunters seeking it. Once Europeans came crashing into the western landscape, the ramifications boded ill for the resident people and beasts who stood in their path. Lakota historian Joseph Marshall III matter-of-factly summed things up in his book on wolves and Native Americans. “The European labeled the first peoples Indians, and he carried with him an ancient, misbegotten hatred and fear of the wolf,” he wrote. “He stepped into our lands and brought with him the beginning of the end for both the first peoples and the wolf.”

The intertwined fates of first peoples and wolves are elementary ingredients in the more unsavory portions of the centuries-long rolling out of conquest’s ramifications for the West. Understandably, participants in these acts now receive considerable condemnation, much of it justified. Stepping back and looking at the problems predatory animals posed to those engaged in the “conquering,” however, tends to
cloud the clarity of our judgments. When Americans entered the West during the middle and late nineteenth century, they confronted an often bewildering and complex region that tested them in many real and symbolic ways. For each emigrant, the journey could have represented an ambivalent personal odyssey with perhaps as much to fear as to anticipate. Uncertain boundaries separated the travelers and settlers from new land, people, ideas, and much else, including animals known and unknown. The numbers and characteristics of western animals—from bison to pronghorn, prairie dogs to buzzards—amazed, captivated, and frequently frightened them.

No category of fauna, however, presented greater challenges to western settlers’ confidence about their endeavor than predatory animals. Their attitudes were based on previous generations’ treatment of predators as well as European attitudes of many centuries’ duration. It is more difficult to determine whether the clearly defined sense of ideological mission that we now associate with the phrase *manifest destiny* contributed at the time to the destruction of predators. Typically concerned with survival and sustenance, those settling the West generally possessed more pragmatic objectives in their approach to living in what they deemed a wilderness. For the most part, practicality, not an ideological commitment or even mere bloodlust, doomed predators in the West.

Nonetheless, the notion of manifest destiny, a hackneyed phrase that perhaps obscures as much as it clarifies, is helpful in explaining the perspectives of a significant segment of participants, observers, and analysts of westward expansion. The unrelenting slaughter of animals and the destruction of once-thriving and powerful peoples were clearly vital to “winning the West.” Crushing Native American resistance and the near extermination of the bison were, for nineteenth-century Americans, the standard symbols of the divinely sanctioned and beneficial consequences of conquest. Wiping out wolves or other varmints could easily fit into this scheme, though in a more tangential fashion if it was referenced at all. For example, General Nelson A. Miles, famous Indian fighter and big-game hunter, suggested a manifest destiny trope behind the destruction of Indians and buffalo, but he declined to attach much significance to the loss of wolves and other predators. In reminiscences published
in 1896, Miles described buffalo hunters killing dozens of wolves with a single carcass poisoned with strychnine. “In this way the large game was rapidly destroyed, together with countless numbers of wolves that had thrived only by preying upon them,” he wrote. It is instructive that Miles mentioned the loss of wolves only to drop them from his subsequent analysis: “This might seem like cruelty and wasteful extravagance, but the buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress, and the decree had gone forth that they must both give way. It was impossible to herd domestic stock in a country where they were constantly liable to be stampeded by the moving herds of wild animals.”

Another luminary of western lore writing near the end of the nineteenth century noted, with a semblance of regret, how the westward movement had decimated carnivores. In an updated edition of his Oregon Trail adventures, Francis Parkman reflected on a half century of expansion’s impact on the once-numerous predators of the West. “Those discordant serenaders, the wolves that howled at evening about the traveler’s camp-fire, have succumbed to arsenic and hushed their savage music,” he wrote. “The mountain lion shrinks from the face of man, and even grim ‘Old Ephraim,’ the grizzly bear, seeks the seclusion of his dens and caverns.” It would be a stretch to suggest that many of the mid-nineteenth-century emigrants possessed clear self-identifications as agents of manifest destiny. Most were ordinary people who had made the extraordinary decision to cross a continent in pursuit of their personal dreams. Exposure to predators on the trail did prompt quite genuine reactions, ranging from amusement to terror, but at that point no focused determination to destroy these animals wholesale. That determination came, as Parkman’s comments suggest, with settlement on farms and ranches, along with the implementation of bounties and the endeavors of wolfers. For the ranchers who gained at the expense of the Indian and the buffalo, removing the bears, the mountain lions, and especially the wolves and coyotes warranted more attention than mere collateral damage.

An obsession with fulfilling the dictates of a manifest destiny played a part in propelling the pace and scope of predator eradication, yet the logic of market imperatives ultimately contributed more significantly to
the widespread destruction of the animals. How westerners in the 1800s responded to the problems posed by predators was driven by fairly constant economic and cultural impulses. These urges to do all that was required to succeed on the land were hardly unique to American settlers bent on subduing a western wilderness. Europeans and their descendants had dispersed across other frontiers, and many carried with them manifest destiny–style certitude concerning their position as empire builders, along with new domestic animals, plants, weeds, pests, and diseases. Of more practical importance, the market-oriented agricultural systems the settlers established in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and parts of South America replicated developments in the United States. Ranching emerged as a major industry in these other “Neo-Europes” as well, and predator control took on central importance wherever settler societies formed.

Once permanent settlement took hold in the Canadian West, for instance, farmers and ranchers possessed no less motivation than their American counterparts in waging all-out war on varmints. Following the example of the wolfers in the western provinces, late nineteenth-century Canadian ranchers bought prodigious quantities of strychnine to seed cattle carcasses in the hopes of quickly laying waste to as many wolves as possible. Other outposts of European imperial expansion, though unmolested by gray wolves or grizzly bears, nonetheless confronted the age-old quandary of how to protect one’s valuable domestic stock from the wiles of native carnivores. Owners and managers of Australian sheep stations encountered a dingo threat, made seemingly more manageable with the introduction of strychnine in the 1840s. Similarly, Boer and British sheep producers in South Africa relied on the poison in their constant struggle with jackals.

The patterns of predator destruction thus displayed certain commonalities across multiple settler frontiers in the nineteenth century, including powerful market incentives and industrialized methods. In whatever portion of the European outposts they occupied, trappers and ranchers alike could kill varmints with abandon during these decades. With no ecologically minded biologists, conservationists, or politicians present to call for a halt to the killing or to reassess the value of such creatures, a grim coherence typified the treatment meted out to the animals. Dead
predators produced guilt-free economic benefits for hunters, trappers, farmers, and ranchers. The folklore that revolved around killing savage beasts in the interest of ensuring safe and prosperous communities underscored the relative lack of second-guessing for generations of settlers in the rapidly developing American West.