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In the summer of 1843, four years after dazzling the world by completing a gigantic book that presented 435 American birds gloriously painted life size, the now world-famous artist John James Audubon was traveling up the Missouri River for an ambitious new project. An American raconteur, Audubon had just done a book tour of Europe dressed in buckskins, his hair cascading about his shoulders. Now he and his sons, Victor and John Woodhouse, had resolved to portray the continent’s mammals in the same manner that Audubon had done with its birds. Because the genius behind The Birds of America was intimate, first-hand observation of his subjects in their natural state, Audubon knew he could not produce a grand book on mammals with paintings done from specimens. So it was authenticity that brought one of world’s premier nature artists to the American Great Plains aboard the steam vessel Omega.

Here was a man who had spent almost his entire life in the wilds of America, closely observing nature, contemplating its moods, beauty, and meaning. He had read the great books on the West, including Lewis and Clark’s account from three decades before, and fellow artist George Catlin’s much more recent book, which irked Audubon and aroused his jealousy. Yet he was in no way prepared for what unfolded in front of them as the Omega made its way past the ruins of the Mandan and Arikara villages, destroyed by smallpox six years earlier, and chugged up the narrowing river, bound for Fort Union at the confluence of the Yellowstone and the Missouri, in the heart of the wild American Great Plains.
It was the animals that stunned him. Audubon had spent his life surrounded by wild creatures, but this was something different. Watching the country unwind in front of them from the prow of their vessel, the plains almost appeared to vibrate with life, so many animals of so many different kinds that the renowned bird painter simply could not believe what his eyes were seeing. In one stretch, two weeks downstream from Fort Union near the eastern border of today’s Montana, this condensation from the journal he was keeping—I’ve excised some of his other commentary—lets us into his mind to experience what he felt about this American Eden:

We passed some beautiful scenery and almost opposite had the pleasure of seeing five Mountain Rams, or Bighorns, on the summit of a hill. We saw what we supposed to be three Grizzly Bears, but could not be sure. We saw a Wolf attempting to climb a very steep bank of clay. On the opposite shore another Wolf was lying down on a sand-bar, like a dog. I forgot to say that last evening we saw a large herd of Buffaloes, with many calves among them; they were grazing quietly on a fine bit of prairie. They stared, and then started at a handsome canter producing a beautiful picturesque view. We have seen many Elks swimming the river. These animals are abundant beyond belief hereabouts. If ever there was a country where Wolves are surpassingly abundant, it is the one we now are in.

“In fact,” Audubon wrote, “it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals that exist even now, and feed on these ocean-like prairies.” He closed a letter to his wife that summer with this sentence: “My head is actually swimming with excitement, and I cannot write any more.”

In the phrase of the nineteenth century, Audubon had gone west and seen the elephant. What one of the country’s premier artists was privileged to witness, and in truth what had him in such a state of euphoria, was no less than the American version of the wildlife-rich Serengeti Plain of East Africa. Not even two centuries back in the continent’s past, it was one of the natural spectacles of the world, equaled only by places like the Serengeti, the Masai Mara, or the veld of South Africa. These landscapes were all similar, immense open grasslands extending to the curve of the earth, which was part of the appeal. But it was not just the settings, not only the vast opalescent distances, the blue pyramidal forms of mountains on distant horizons, the intersecting planes of horizontal, yellowed grasslands. It was presence of so much sheer life, the marvelous aggregations of big grazers and their predators, all of which you
could clearly see interacting in the clean light and vast spaces of all these landscapes, including the interior grasslands of North America.

For millions of years before Audubon stood gobsmacked on the deck of the Omega, the American Great Plains had been the setting of giants. In 1855 Ferdinand Hayden discovered the first dinosaur bones from an American site very near Fort Benton, upstream of where Audubon had been in a swoon about nineteenth-century plains wildlife the decade before. The next year, Joseph Leidy named five new dinosaurs from the confluence of the Missouri and Judith’s River, only 150 miles up the Missouri from Audubon’s epiphanies. Edwin Cope, one of Leidy’s students, came to Judith’s Landing in 1876, followed by the celebrated Yale paleontologist Othniel Marsh in 1880. Barnum Brown of the American Museum of Natural History found the first T-Rex unearthed from the plains in the early twentieth century. The Great Plains, especially its exposed badlands, became crucial locales for the fossil discoveries that took evolution from theory to fact, and have remained the primary target of the modern dinosaur hunt, at least in the United States and Canada, today.

But of course it wasn’t just dinosaurs they were finding. Up and down the plains, from West Texas to the Canadian border and beyond, the paleontologists excavated boxcars of fossil materials pointing to other giants that had lived much more recently than 65-plus million years ago. As nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientists began to re-create the world of the Late Pleistocene, they invented a term—“charismatic megafauna”—to characterize a suite of African-like animals whose bones they were unearthing. It turned out that the American Serengeti had possessed lions (Panthera, the giant steppe lion), elephants in the form of mammoths, cheetah-like cats related to modern cougars, along with saber-toothed and scimitar cats that preyed on mammoth calves, giant ground sloths, and probably huge, long-horned bison. Skeletal material showed what was a remarkably gracile short-faced bear that ambushed almost every prey species. The American Serengeti had hyenas, a fast, hunting version, and giant wolves called dire wolves, which pulled down distinctively American-evolved prey from bands of camels and the incredibly plentiful herds of wild horses. That American bestiary was the closest analogue of the creatures of the African plains and veld anywhere in the world. Teddy Roosevelt is supposed to have said of his train ride out of Nairobi in 1910 that it was a “railroad through the Pleistocene.”

Because while the African grasslands had retained most of their charismatic megafauna, North America did not, or at least not all. The most high-
drama extinction scenario in North American history since we humans have been here happened not during the lifetime of the United States, but instead between 8,000 and 14,000 years ago, when more than thirty genera of American Pleistocene animals completely vanished. There were survivors, to be sure, and across the next few thousand years evolution replaced that earlier version of the American Serengeti with a new one, the historic version that Lewis and Clark, Audubon, and many others left descriptions of from the 1530s on. Until we destroyed it, there was this other, historic version of the Serengeti on the plains, the poetry and spectacle of thronging bison playing the role of thronging wildebeests, pronghorns assuming the role of antelopes and gazelles, stallion bands of wild horses functioning ecologically much like wild bands of zebras, gray and red wolves filling the niche of wild dogs, and coyotes doing an almost exact impression of jackals. Africa might have retained its lions and elephants, hyenas and cheetahs, but the post-Pleistocene version of the American Serengeti had another king of beasts, the grizzly, which played a god-like, lion-like role on the prairies.

No wonder when certain Europeans read about the Great Plains of America in the early 1800s they thought: safari! Grand hunting adventures in the
world’s final primeval grasslands began in America at precisely the same moment they did in Africa, when British traveler Sir William Drummond Stewart commenced a luxurious, guided, high-end hunting trek into the West in the very years (it was the mid-1830s) when William Cornwallis Harris was doing the same in South Africa. Although “safari” (a Swahili word) didn’t enter English until the 1850s as a result of Sir Richard Burton’s books, all the elements of the luxurious, catered wilderness adventure were there from the beginning when elites like Stewart, the Irish nobleman Sir George Gore, and Russia’s Grand Duke Alexis went on extended, celebrated safaris on the Great Plains from the 1830s through the 1870s.

Those elements are memorable to anyone who has seen the film Out of Africa or read Hemingway’s The Snows of Kilimanjaro. Indigenous guides and “white hunters” were a core part of the experience. Stewart, who as Bernard DeVoto says “appears to have been the first wealthy British sportsman who found the West a splendid playground,” originally used trader/trappers William Sublette and Joseph Reddeford Walker as his guides. Gore hired Henry Chatillon and Jim Bridger, two other famous mountain men, as his white hunters. For Grand Duke Alexis, son of the Czar of all the Russias, Lakota war leader Spotted Tail was on hand, and his white hunters were equally impressive: Bill Cody, Philip Sheridan, and George Armstrong Custer.

As Robert Redford’s Denys Finch-Hatton instructed us in Out of Africa, the experience needed to be high-end. Stewart was a former military officer who had fought at Waterloo, but his foppish, laundered attire, tending to white frocks and hats, shocked the mountain men. On his first trip in 1833 he brought wagons of rare liquors, fine cigars, and a companion, a handsome “young English blood.” DeVoto characterized Stewart’s few surviving letters as brimming with “mysterious longings and melancholies, romantic passions, unhappiness and frustration” and (again this is DeVoto’s razor-sharp reading) “an urgent but never quite focused unrest.” Writing in the 1940s, he passed off Stewart’s oddities to upbringing and a longing for military action. Apparently some of Stewart’s companions on safari were not so sure those were the reasons.

On his own second safari to the West, in 1854–1855, Sir George Gore wanted to focus on a specific region of the plains, the Powder River drainage of the Yellowstone in today’s Wyoming. His entourage included a staff of fifty—“secretaries, stewards, cooks, flymakers, dog tenders, hunters, servants”—along with imported foods and wines and an extensive library. En
route to the Powder, the caravan of six wagons, twenty-one carts, a dozen
yokes of oxen, fourteen dogs, and more than a hundred fine hunting horses
would string out for more than a mile across the plains. Gore’s Indian and
white guides liked the man but found themselves sitting around camp until
nearly noon while he slept in every day, then had to listen to him read from
the classics by firelight at night. Even that degree of opulence got obliterated
by Grand Duke Alexis’s safari on the Nebraska and Colorado plains in 1871–
1872, a party that included all manner of Indian and military dignitaries, more
than 500 people, even a regimental band for hunting camp entertainment.

What made a safari, either on the African Serengeti or the American ver-

tion, was not just servants, haute cuisine on fine china, or cultured com-
panions whose taste ran to (or at least could tolerate) literature and music.
Safaris were blood sports, and success was measured by body counts. To his
credit, when Stewart was pursuing grizzlies or pronghorns that “could out-
run a streak of lightning,” he tended not to be obsessive about counting up
his kills. On the Powder River in 1855, though, Gore stacked up animals like
cordwood—2,500 buffalo and 40 grizzlies alone. At least he didn’t bother
to keep tallies on all the pronghorns, elk, mule deer, and wolves he shot, but
he shot so many the Crows and Lakotas in the region grew resentful, which
ended the hunt. Short, corpulent Duke Alexis, hunting along the Republican
and North Platte rivers at a time when the impact of the market hunt was well
evident, was dissatisfied enough with the party’s kill of only 56 bison that he
made their train from Denver to Topeka stop on the Colorado-Kansas border
for a second try. This time, in a single day, they murdered another 50 buffalo,
along with 150 assorted pronghorns, elk, mule deer, wolves, and coyotes—in
short, any living creature that appeared within range. That, not natural history
or nights under the stars immersed in a 10,000-year-old ecology, made the
duke’s safari a success.

The nineteenth-century Great Plains was a slaughterhouse. In the years
from the 1820s to the 1920s, this single American region experienced the larg-
est wholesale destruction of animal life discoverable in modern history. The
largest biomass of animal life on the plains took the form of bison, which in
times of good climate reached 25–30 million and could fill the prairies to the
horizons for days on end. By 1886 a few more than 1,000 remained. But the
outright eradication wasn’t confined to bison, usually the only plains animal
you hear about in casual conversation. Pronghorn antelope numbers came
close to rivaling those of bison and in 1800 were probably 15 million strong.
Crossing the best pronghorn country in the West, the Llano Estacado plateau, Bureau of Biological Survey biologist Vernon Bailey counted thirty-two in 1899. Grizzlies, which had once ranged across the plains from Texas and Kansas to the Dakotas and had a continental population of 100,000, reached the twentieth century with a few hundred scattered bears left, all those having fled to the mountains. At the time of the Civil War somewhere between a quarter-million and a half-million wolves filled the ecological niche of dominant predator on the Great Plains. Paid federal hunters trapped and poisoned the final few scattered plains lobos in the 1920s, the same decade the last wild horses on the plains ended up bound for dog food plants in the Midwest.

Only coyotes, survivors of the Pleistocene extinctions—and now the slaughterhouse—presented America a baffling predator no amount of persecution could defeat.

We had our reasons, of course, along with our excuses and our bravado about how we were doing it for civilization. But only a handful of charismatic big species ended up left on the plains, primarily the seven whose stories I tell here (I include us in that count), plus deer and cougars. Elk, which had once ranged across the plains through half of Oklahoma, most of Kansas, even into Iowa and Minnesota, survived only in the Mountain West. We hunted bighorns to local extirpation in the Northern Plains badlands by 1906. Both species survived, and we have reintroduced them back onto the plains when and where we could, at least, a mea culpa and penance, although we know their patchy presence is but a shadow of what once was.

I have always loved that Walter Prescott Webb’s wonderful book from nearly a century ago now, *The Great Plains*, has a section about the animals of the plains, which to me meant he took them seriously rather than as some kind of lumpen fodder for the meat-grinder of history. But the march of civilization has been a meat-grinder. Much like evolution, it has been one of those processes that goes on around you whether you acknowledge it or not, or even believe in it. Commenting on the herds of bison he could see from the parapets of Fort Union in 1843, Audubon described an obvious depravity of human nature towards them, namely the sport of firing cannon shot into the distant herds when times around the fort were boring. Audubon was disgusted: “even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared.” He continued, “Surely, this should not be permitted.”

But, to let Audubon’s passive construction stand, it was permitted. We
permitted it. We stood by and allowed what happened to the Great Plains a century ago, the destruction of one of the ecological wonders of the world. In modern America we need to see this with clear eyes, and soberly, so that we understand well that the flyover country of our own time derives much of its forgetability from being a slate wiped almost clean of its original figures.

What we did to the Great Plains was not some admirable conquest. It was a myopic, chaotic, unthinking destruction, and, I think, immoral. I mean this less in reference to what we consider modern moral dicta than with respect to the origins of morality, that evolution of a sense of fair play among members of a social species, which eventually led to our religious and social codes. The evolution of fairness early on came to include a human recognition that other creatures enjoy being alive, and that depriving them of life is a very serious matter. Some philosophers have called this Biophilia, a love of organic, biological life. In terms of the origins of morality, our slaughterhouse on the Great Plains was profoundly immoral.

This is another of those moments in history when we have a chance to make things right, though. We have mostly stumbled ’til now, but in the present century we have the best chance so far to re-wild and re-create an American Serengeti of the size, and in the template, of the world’s first grand nature preserve, Yellowstone National Park. Doing so will take monumental will and
statecraft. But the bison, pronghorns, and grizzlies are still here, horses of the original Spanish type that exploded across the plains still foal in the Pryor Mountains Wild Horse Range in Montana, wolves are on their way back—as of 2015, at least to parts of the Southern Plains—and coyotes haven’t gone anywhere except into the streets of every big city in America.

Henry David Thoreau made an entry in his journal in 1857 that is appropriate for putting all of this into perspective. It’s a sentiment I’ve come back to many times in thinking about the plains. Thoreau had been reading some of the accounts of the first settlers in New England, from two centuries earlier. Writing a journal entry one morning, he put his feelings this way: “I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena of the spring, for instance, thinking that I have here the entire poem, and then, to my chagrin, I hear that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess and have read, that my ancestors have torn out many of the first leaves and grandest passages, and mutilated it in many places.”

Then he continued, in a way that anyone who drives across the plains today, but also knows something of its history, will well understand.

“I should not like to think some demigod had come before me and picked out some of the best of the stars. I wish to know an entire heaven and an entire earth.”