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Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks and appreciation to Steve Rogers at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History; Colleen Curry, Anne Foster, Jessica Gerdes, Bridgette Guild, Harold Housley, Jackie Jerla, and Mariah Robertson, Yellowstone archivists and librarians; Tad Bennicoff and Mary Markey, archivists at the Smithsonian; and Steve Johnson, archivist at the Wildlife Conservation Society. Special thanks to Mary Murphy, Rob Campbell, and Michael Reidy for their ongoing support of my work, to Brett Walker for introducing me to animal histories, to Tim LeCain for his encouragement when I was writing this book, and to David Wrobel for his most helpful comments and review. Many more thanks to Kim Hogeland for seeing the possibilities of this book and sticking with it, and to H. D. Hampton for getting me started down this path in the first place.

To Bob and Helen Sheffer and Dr. Joanna Spaulding, there will never be enough ways to say thank you; I couldn’t have done any of this without you. And, of course, my daughter Hannah, who practically grew up in Yellowstone National Park; may her daughter Rose learn to love Yellowstone the way we do.

This research was supported in part by a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant (no. 0822779) and a Montana State University–Bozeman Department of History travel award.
Introduction

On March 20, 1911, D. J. Haff, president of the Board of Park Commissioners in Kansas City, Missouri, sent a check for $514.00 to Yellowstone National Park to “cover the estimated cost of capturing, delivering on board cars at Gardiner, Mont., and forwarding to Kansas City” two grizzlies and two brown bears. As a follow-up letter would clarify, the zoo was not interested in just any bears, but wanted “to obtain as nice specimens of the Grizzly bears as can be obtained from Yellowstone Park and to that end we are willing to wait until good specimens can be obtained for us.” The zoo also made it clear that it was “not especially desirous of obtaining the ordinary small black bears,” but rather “large bears or cubs that will ultimately be the large bears popularly known as the Cinnamon bears.”¹

Bears were not the only animals trapped, crated, and transported from Yellowstone National Park to zoos and other public breeding and viewing grounds. In 1910, for example, Yellowstone personnel sent two pronghorn and two mule deer to the National Zoological Park in Washington, DC, and twenty-three pronghorn to the National Bison Ranges in Montana and Oklahoma. In 1911, park personnel captured and shipped eight white pelicans to the National Zoo, and four grizzlies to the zoo in Philadelphia. By 1912, bears were being sent to zoos in Boston, Milwaukee, Saint Louis, and Memphis, with additional requests for bears not filled but carried forward to 1913, as if they were any other requisitioned product. That same year, inquiries about securing Yellowstone beaver, elk, pelicans, and other wildlife came in from as far away as Virginia and London.

As the Yellowstone “tame” bison herd grew to a total of 228 animals in 1915, these animals, too, were crated and shipped to distant locations, including Kansas City, Portland, Denver, and Corpus Christi, Texas. The Texas shipment included twenty elk. As Lieutenant Colonel Lloyd M. Brett reported at the time, elk had become so plentiful that the park routinely shipped them in carload lots to any state applying for them. Yellowstone even trapped and
transported elk to other national parks, including Wind Cave and Glacier, to serve as animal attractions and breeding stock, raising questions about the very nature of native wildlife in national parks.

Multiple inquiries also arrived from private collectors, menageries, and game farms, but Yellowstone administrators repeatedly denied those requests. In 1912, for example, a Mr. Shaw, a Gardiner, Montana, member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, requested elk from Yellowstone to display at the group’s annual convention in Portland, Oregon. The man sought permission to capture two elk, transport them by train to Portland, and, after the convention, donate them to a public park in the area to save the expense of returning them to Yellowstone. Acting Superintendent Brett dutifully forwarded the request to the secretary of the interior for approval but argued against granting it, writing that “it seems hardly in line of our ideas of the proper use of the animals of the park, and there is no certainty of a future good home for them.” The Department of the Interior’s chief clerk agreed. However, he advised that since so many elk “annually drift from the park into the abutting forest reservations, it would seem that Mr. Shaw would have but little difficulty in securing the elk he desires at some point outside of the park.” This idea that some animals belonged to Yellowstone while others did not, depending on their physical location, has plagued administrators from the park’s inception.

In addition, the US Cavalry supervised the shipment of representative wildlife into the park and, in some instances, back out again. In 1896, boat operator and concessionaire E. C. Waters received permission to import bison and other representative wildlife for a private menagerie on Dot Island in Yellowstone Lake. The park released the surviving animals into Yellowstone in 1907 after receiving multiple complaints from visitors about the animals’ treatment. And in 1902, the national park imported bison from private collectors when Yellowstone’s free-roaming bison herd had declined to only a few animals. Before long, this “tame herd” had grown large enough to include a surplus of bulls, so the park started selling them to private buyers.

This routine shipment of animals to zoos, museums, game reserves, and other national parks did not develop out of a vacuum. Even before its founding as a national park, the Yellowstone region served as a source of specimens for the scientists centered in Washington, DC, with government expeditions sending boxes of artifacts, rocks, skins, skulls, and skeletons to the Smithsonian Institution for research and display. In 1871, for example, geologist
Ferdinand Hayden shipped forty-five boxes of specimens to Washington. Congressional instructions establishing the Smithsonian mandated that the new institution receive all specimens collected in the field, but Spencer Baird asked Hayden to search out even more. He specifically wanted “all kinds” of skulls and skeletons of any animals found, twenty of each if possible, and “any perfect bison head” that Hayden could find.3

Thus, from the earliest government-sponsored exploration of the region, the Smithsonian Institution looked to what would become known as Yellowstone National Park for specimens to help grow its natural history collections. As the Smithsonian grew, it continued to look to Yellowstone not only for new and unique specimens for research but also for surplus specimens to be used like commodities as part of its network of national and international exchange. Thus, when the Smithsonian collected living specimens for its National Zoo, it was only natural that it turned to Yellowstone to establish a special relationship for a source of animals for it as well.

French sociologist Bruno Latour has argued that knowledge is created by cycles of accumulation, in which explorers send back data—maps, artifacts, specimens—to a centralized location or “centre of calculation” where a “tiny number of scientists is more than balanced by the large number of resources they are able to muster.”4 From its founding, the Smithsonian created just such a national center, and expanded its resources and international influence through a system of knowledge creation and exchange. Starting in the early 1870s, the Smithsonian drew the Yellowstone region into its network, with the park becoming a significant source of specimens, living and dead. In the process, Yellowstone itself became a center of specimen preservation, display, and ultimately even exchange.

While much has been written about the history of Yellowstone National Park and its wildlife, from Aubrey Haines’s in-depth two-volume history to the formative studies by historians H. D. Hampton and Alfred Runte, few scholars have explored the story of how the cavalry transformed the park into a centralized source for museum and zoo animals and developed its own system of trapping, displaying, and shipping wildlife around the country and even around the world. Moreover, when the history of Yellowstone and other national park wildlife management practices has been written about, most historians, with the exception of Hampton, have focused on practices after the establishment of the National Park Service, with only introductory
chapters addressing the period before 1916 (see, for example, the work of Alice Wondrak Biel, James Pritchard, and Richard West Sellars).

More recently, leading environmental historians such as Karl Jacoby, Louis Warren, and Mark David Spence have written about the creation of early western national parks (i.e., Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite) from the perspective of those living in or near the new protected areas, including Native peoples who lost traditional hunting grounds when lands were set aside by the government. These race-, class-, and gender-based critiques tend to focus on the inherent conflicts and power relationships surrounding the establishment of national parks, and thus view the creation of these nationalized public spaces in a more negative light.

According to this more current analysis, setting aside public land for national parks inevitably led to conflict between the federal government and those living on the parks’ peripheries over the very resources, particularly large game animals, that Native people and nonelites living in the region needed to survive. Park regulations and national laws penalizing hunting created outlaws of local residents who relied on wildlife for food. Moreover, these new rules and laws disrupted the commons and the common good generally, undermining the natural give-and-take that locals had with the land, benefiting instead nonresident tourists and the sporting elite. According to this more current analysis, setting aside public land for national parks inevitably led to conflict between the federal government and those living on the parks’ peripheries. Jacoby in particular argues that, in Yellowstone, the use of national power to protect the park undermined more community-based conservation efforts and long-lasting and protective relationships with the land. The argument that one man’s poacher is another’s subsistence hunter has a certain appeal and yet, as this study argues, most non-Native hunters in the Yellowstone region did not hunt park wildlife for food, but rather took only an animal’s head, skin, or teeth, all of which brought high prices in urban markets. Even Jacoby admits that when hunters did kill elk in and around Yellowstone for food, they took “only the best cut of meat (the ‘saddle’)” to sell in local mining camps. But just as likely, they removed only the animals’ teeth to sell to members of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks for their “watch fobs, rings, cuff links, and hat pins.” While the two teeth of value could be collected from dead animals in the spring with nothing more than a pair of pliers, many chose to kill elk for their two “canine” teeth alone, leaving scores of dead animals behind. In 1916, for example, 257 elk were killed near Gardiner, Montana, solely for their teeth.

As the Smithsonian Institution drew Yellowstone into its network of animal display and exchange, science and conservation came into direct conflict
with these commodity hunters and American Indians living in the region. With the exception of subsistence hunters, most of the hunters living on the park’s borderlands eventually came to associate dollar amounts with each specimen captured or killed. Even the US Cavalry learned to put price tags on individual animals for the costs associated with capturing, holding, and shipping them. Much like the hunters and poachers who sold specific animal body parts into a profitable marketplace, these early Yellowstone administrators became just as expert in the wild animal trade.

This book explores the relationship that developed between Yellowstone and the Smithsonian as these two distinct organizations tried to conserve American wildlife for future generations, with each becoming more like the other. It also provides background and context to better understand many of the practices, such as animal transfers and captive breeding, pursued a century later by a new generation of conservation biologists, who believed at the time that they were “going where no one had gone before.”

By viewing Yellowstone’s history in relation to that of the Smithsonian, the National Museum, and ultimately the National Zoo, the present work sheds new light on this pre-National Park Service chapter of wildlife management and highlights the important role animals played in Yellowstone’s development. Through its relationship with these national institutions, Yellowstone helped elevate the iconic nature of representative wildlife of the American West, particularly bison, and focused national attention on the threat of the imminent demise of an animal that symbolized a concern about the equally imminent loss of the frontier.

Understanding how that came to pass can help all of us, historians and conservation biologists alike, better understand the wildlife conservation policies that followed. As James Pritchard has written, “we cannot understand the management of our parks or hope for enlightened park management if we fail to see our parks in a historical context.”

A note about terminology: Throughout, this study uses animal names as they appear in correspondence and reports, although they may not be considered scientifically accurate to modern readers. For example, most at the time referred to the American bison as “buffalo,” even though that common name does not accurately describe the animal native to the North American continent. Similarly, most Americans to this day refer to pronghorn as “antelope,” although this is not their technical name. The same is true of the black-tailed deer or mule deer, and even bears, which many at the time described by their
color (e.g., silver-tipped, cinnamon, or brown). More generally, writers at the time routinely referred to American wildlife as “game,” to suggest those animals suitable for sport or subsistence hunting even when they did not necessarily intend to kill or eat them. While early reports from Yellowstone most often used the term “wild animals,” the present work prefers the more general term wildlife to describe the wild animals of Yellowstone National Park. But, as this study makes clear, there was little wild left in the Yellowstone wildlife on display.
Part I
Center of New Knowledge

Smithsonian Institute, ca. 1860–1865. (Brady-Handy Photograph Collection, Library of Congress)