

CHAPTER 11

LOOKING

AT

FISH

AND

WILDLIFE



WILDLIFE

God entrusted Arkansans with a great treasure of fish and wildlife. Accounts by early visitors agree that Arkansas was blessed with an abundance of these resources. Major big-game species including black bear, whitetail deer, elk, and woodland bison (buffalo) roamed over Arkansas. They were important sources of food for Indians and for the early settlers of Arkansas. Migratory waterfowl and other game species such as the eastern wild turkey and bob white quail were very common. Grey and fox squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and both cottontail and swamp rabbits were reported to be plentiful.

Black bear were so numerous that the state's nickname was, for a time, the "Bear State." Stories of bear-hunting adventures provided the background for many tall tales and stories. The best remembered of these is a famous work of "local color" fiction entitled "The Big Bear of Arkansas."

Other animals flourished. Mountain lions (often called "panthers" or, in the mountains, "painters") prowled the Ouachitas and Ozarks. Sometimes they journeyed into the vast forests of the lowlands. The southern red wolf is related to the timber wolf. It was common in the state and survived in the

river bottoms of the southwestern Gulf Coastal Plain until the 1900's. Smaller predators included the bobcat and fox.

Furbearers like the beaver, river otter, and mink were especially important in the early history of Arkansas. The French explorers came to this area to trade for furs with the local Indians. Arkansas Post, the first permanent settlement in Arkansas, was established largely because of this fur trade.

Settlers started early in reducing the game population. Hunting was a source of food and clothing. There were no supermarkets handy. Without wild game many people might have starved. The clearing of land for farms and the harvesting of trees for lumber reduced the available habitat. Without good habitat, game cannot survive.

Widespread wildlife destruction came with the market hunters. These people killed game for money. They slaughtered bear, deer, turkey, game birds, or anything else they could sell for meat or hides. Market hunters eliminated some species, such as the Carolina parakeet, once numbering in the millions. These were killed mainly for their feathers. Estimates are that there were once half a million deer in this state.

By the early 1900's, Arkansas wildlife resources were seriously threatened. Woodland bison (buffalo) and elk had long been extinct. Black bears, however, were never totally eliminated. They survived in small numbers even to the 1900's. They remain in the White River bottomlands and perhaps in the remotest areas of the Ouachitas and Ozarks.

Psalm 42:1 says, "As the deer panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." There are two times during which a deer develops thirst: when fleeing from danger and when in combat. In Arkansas there is always water nearby.

The re-introduction of the black bear has been one of the major restocking success stories in the nation. The state's bear population has grown to over 2,500. This is due to the planting of 200 bear in the 1950's and 1960's. Arkansas hunters and fishermen provided both volunteer help and money for big-game population increases. The financing came through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses.

Beavers have returned in such numbers that they are actually considered a nuisance by some timber owners because of the damage they do to trees. Also, some of the dams they build on streams and sloughs cause flooding. Beavers are a marvel of God's creation in their engineering feats. Men have learned much about dam building from the beaver.

An occasional "painter" (mountain lion) has been sighted. The red wolf, now extinct in Arkansas, has been replaced by its smaller cousin, the coyote. Other predators include bobcats and both grey and red foxes. Alligators are sometimes found in southern lakes and rivers.

The famous "Arkansas Razorbacks" are probably the descendants of tame hogs. They could have been introduced by De Soto's expedition in the 1700's. These have bred back into wild hogs. They are not normally considered game animals, though they are sometimes hunted by private landowners.

Arkansas is a mostly rural state with only 2% of the land in towns and cities. We are blessed with large areas of wildlife habitat. Today, more than half of Arkansas's 34 million-plus acres is in forests. Farms also provide food for wildlife.

The introduction of rice as a major commercial crop in Arkansas provides some of the finest waterfowl habitat in the United States. The Stuttgart area is famous as the "duck hunting capital of the world."

FISH

Water is one of Arkansas's most important resources. The state's river systems were probably full of fish when the Europeans first came to Arkansas. After the 1927 flood, dams were built to help control future flooding.

Native fish species include the sportsman's favorites: largemouth, smallmouth, and spotted bass. Both black and white crappie are found. There are many species of sunfish (known locally as "brim"), including bluegills, shellcrackers, rock, and warmouth bass. Chain pickerel, often called "snakes" or "jackfish," are found in the rivers, oxbows, and lakes of southern Arkansas. The bowfin, a hard-fighting species known commonly

as the "grinnel" or "grindle," abound in these waters. Other rough fish include gar, buffalo, drum, paddlefish, sturgeon, and carp. They are called "rough fish" because they are not choice eating fish.

Flathead, blue, channel, and bullhead catfish are found in most of the state's rivers and lakes. Exotic (introduced) species include striped and hybrid bass, walleye, northern pike, and brown and rainbow trout. Arkansas Game and Fish Commission is active in re-stocking native game fish and trout from their fish hatcheries.

*Wise use and continued careful management of Arkansas's game and fish habitat will insure that future generations will enjoy the abundance with which God has blessed the state.

* Consider First Corinthians 4:2.