BY DAN FLORES

IN LATE SUMMER THREE YEARS AGO, on one of those dawns I long ago began calling a “blanket of heaven” daybreak, I loaded my dog into our Jeep and headed out through the Northern New Mexico morning. High pressure had built in, clouds from the previous afternoon had dispersed and the air was so calm that windmills along the Turquoise Trail seemed still asleep. It looked to be a terrific day to see a part of the West that for two centuries had made Santa Fe a final destination in an epic journey.

We had slipped out of the house early to see the sunrise sweep across Santa Fe and the flanks of the Sangre de Cristos, so we were past I-25’s wide swing around Hermits Peak and Las Vegas while morning color still lingered on the plains. Pronghorns danced in the raking light near Fort Union, and a golden eagle swung over the highway. Kodi and I pressed on. We were bound for a place I’d been reading about and now wanted to see: Dry Cimarron Scenic Byway, the original route of the Santa Fe Trail across northeastern New Mexico.

WHEN NEW MEXICO WAS PART OF THE AMERICAN SERENGETI

WHY that remote part of the state? I’d been working on a book, soon to go off to its publisher, that I was calling American Serengeti. Its topic was the story of western wildlife, unfortunately not an especially happy tale. But if many of the animals were no longer here, at least the settings remained. And since I’d been reading so many accounts of wildlife encounters on the Santa Fe Trail, I’d resolved to at least witness the settings of what had for tens of thousands of years been one of the world’s great wildlife spectacles.

So many drives across New Mexico net close modern observers a few pronghorns perhaps, maybe an eagle or a coyote or two, but no buffalo, no thundering herds of colorful wild horses, certainly no wolves or grizzlies and usually not even a prairie dog town. But this mostly blank slate is not how this country looked once upon a time.

Let me offer up an initial example, just to reset the mind. Michael Steck, a physician who traveled the Santa Fe Trail to New Mexico in the early 1850s, offers us an initial glimpse of our North American equivalent of the African Serengeti. Like many other travelers, Steck and his party found that any time they got among the bison herds, their days and nights
filled with the bellowing of thousands of animals and the sight and songs of rivers of bison slowly parting to allow travelers to pass. But that was only the beginning. Large gray and white wolves also became astonishingly numerous. Indeed, wolves were such a feature of the Santa Fe Trail that Stock wrote: “We see immense numbers of them. A common thing [is] to see 50 at a sight. In the daytime [we are] never out of sight of them, see [them] in dozens in a day.”

Almost exactly 200 years ago, New Mexico and the Southwest were being attached to the United States via an economic ribbon, the new trail between Missouri and Santa Fe. Until they got to Santa Fe, Taos and Albuquerque, traders traveling this commercial highway found themselves in the abode of wild animals, which American and European travelers pronounced one of the wonders of the world. As Kodi and I drove past the vast plains carpet turned eastward toward the velvety grass carpet of the graceful landforms of Capulin Volcano National Monument, I thought of the emergence, 12,000 years ago of a booming, agriculture-based Indian population up and down the Rio Grande. Because of these farmers, for the past 1,000 years, the largest concentrations of wildlife were mostly farther west. Hence the famous “mutualistic” trade between Pueblo farmers and plains hunters, such as Plains Apaches and Comanches, as captured vividly in the visitors center mural at Pecos National Historical Park. Plains hunters and Pueblo people long met at villages such as Pecos, Galisteo and Picuris and exchanged vegetables (carbohydrates) and meat products (protein) in a trade that allowed both farmers and hunters to avoid nutritional bottlenecks.

The American Serengeti truly was Africa-like. It featured the poetry and spectacle of thronging bison playing the role of thronging African wildebeests, pronghorns assuming the role of antelopes and gazelles, wolves filling the niche of wild dogs and coyotes doing an almost exact impression of jackals. While Africa had its lions and elephants, hyenas and cheetahs (we lost our versions of those to the Pleistocene extinctions of 100,000 years ago), the historic American Serengeti had another kind of kings, the grizzly, which played a godlike, lionlike role on the prairies.

And there was this: a specific event of New Mexico history would actually add a creature that had been missing from the American biodiversity for at least 10,000 years. The first inkling that the West held anything like a grizzly bear. The bear was known to exist in the American West as far back as the 19th century, when explorer Zebulon Pike sent a pair of grizzly cubs from the unknown West to President Thomas Jefferson. In 1820 a famous encounter with a grizzly, a story told and retold on the frontier, took place upon the Canadian River in New Mexico. The numbers of pronghorns, wild horses had been lodged with the large gray wolf.”

In years of good rainfall, the Great Plains could become the scene of a slaughterhouse. From the 1820s to the 1920s, this American Serengeti experienced the largest wholesale destruction of animal life discoverable in modern history. In years of good rainfall, the Great Plains could support 30 million bison. By the 1880s, only about 1,000 remained. But the global market’s insatiable appetite for wildlife wasn’t confined to just bison. Pronghorns and antelope, wolves had probably reached 15 million. We drew them down to a mere 13,000 before we decided we’d killed enough of them. Grizzly bears once had a population explosion given the fact that one would fancy a score of them at hand.” On pronghorns, Pueblo survivors that had actually outlived their extinct cheetah predators, Stock wrote: “That species of gazelle known as the antelope is very numerous upon the high plains...and is most remarkable for its fleetness, not bounding like the deer but skimming over the ground as though upon skates.” And gray wolves? “Although the buffaloes is the largest,” Gregg wrote, “it has by no means the control among the prairie animals, the sceptre of authority has been lodged with the large gray wolf.”

Grizzlies may never have been as numerous in the southern West as they were farther north, but originally their range covered almost all of New Mexico. Like elk, grizzlies were originally common on the plains, scavenging on the bison carcasses. southeastern grizzlies first attracted international attention in 1807, when explorer Zebulon Pike sent a pair of grizzly cubs from the unknown West to President Thomas Jefferson. As for bison, fascinated accountswatch across the centuries, from the Comanches to the Colonel Richard Dodge’s famous posting from the Santa Fe Trail in 1871: “The whole country appeared one mass of the expanse of the plains within a century. Since horses had evolved on the North American continent and were being attached to the United States via an economic ribbon, the new trail between Missouri and Santa Fe. Until they got to Santa Fe, Taos and Albuquerque, traders traveling this commercial highway found themselves in the abode of wild animals, which American and European travelers pronounced one of the wonders of the world. As Kodi and I drove past the vast plains carpet, turned eastward toward the velvety grass carpet of the graceful landforms of Capulin Volcano National Monument, I thought of the emergence, 12,000 years ago of a booming, agriculture-based Indian population up and down the Rio Grande. Because of these farmers, for the past 1,000 years, the largest concentrations of wildlife were mostly farther west. Hence the famous “mutualistic” trade between Pueblo farmers and plains hunters, such as Plains Apaches and Comanches, as captured vividly in the visitors center mural at Pecos National Historical Park. Plains hunters and Pueblo people long met at villages such as Pecos, Galisteo and Picuris and exchanged vegetables (carbohydrates) and meat products (protein) in a trade that allowed both farmers and hunters to avoid nutritional bottlenecks.

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WHERE THE WILD THINGS WERE

Dan Flores held the A.B. Hammond Chair in Western History at the University of Montana in Missoula from 1992 until he retired to his home outside Santa Fe in the spring of 2014. Alternately described as a “historian of the West,” a “humanist historian,” or a “humanist historian of the West,” Flores has written on the history of the American frontier in his native state of Montana, as well as on the history of the West in general, and the culture of the American West in particular. His most recent works are *American Serengeti: A Natural and Supernatural History*, published in 2016. American Serengeti (University Press of Kansas) took both the 2017 Stubbendieck Great Plains Distinguished Book Prize and the 2017 Wrangler Award for best nonfiction book from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Coyote America (Basic Books) won the 2017 Sigma F. Olson Nature Writing Award and was a finalist for the 2017 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award.

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

About American Serengeti:

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

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

About Coyote America:

“Legends don’t come closer to capturing the incredible story of the coyote. In the face of centuries of campaigns of annihilation employing gases, helicopters, and engineered epidemics, coyotes didn’t just survive, they thrived, expanding across the continent from Alaska to New York. In the war between humankind and coyotes, coyotes have won, hands-down. Coyote America is the illuminating five-million-year biography of this extraordinary animal, from its origins to its apotheosis. It is one of the great epics of our time.”

— University of Kansas

— Basic Books

— Wall Street Journal

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