

EVERY LAST BLADE OF GRASS

PREDATORY PRAIRIE DOGS TURN THE LAND TO DUST.

STORY & PHOTOS BY CARRIE LONGWOOD

Scott Cuny says he didn't see a blade of grass until he was 18 years old. His family has ranched on the Pine Ridge Reservation near Buffalo Gap, South Dakota since the late 1800s. "There were easily 250,000 acres of nothing but dust and prairie dogs," Cuny says of the reservation in the 1980s.

Range-destroying, disease-carrying, invasive, resilient prairie dogs led Cuny's father and other ranchers to form a group called the "Pied Pipers" to rid the land of the rodents. The federal government recognized the



© BRIAN PARKER, TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES

The prairie dog is a relentless rodent which likes a huge view—to protect himself from predators. This usually leaves bare ground around a "dog town" and an unhealthy landscape.

COURTESY "VARMINTS," HIGH PLAINS FILMS



RIGHT: On good pasture land, the dogs destroy meadows, tear up the resource, leave dangerous holes and nothing to eat for livestock and other wildlife.

TOP LEFT: U.S. Department of Agriculture used to fight rodents with a vengeance with poisons, pistols and predation. Times have changed.



destruction and funded an extensive control program. After the Pied Pipers were unsuccessful at initial attempts at control they turned to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) for help.

When BIA finally realized the level of damage that the prairie dogs had caused, they took steps to remedy the problem. According to Ken Knuppe, a rancher and neighbor to Scott Cuny, controlling prairie dogs is an ongoing battle, not a one-time effort. "They poisoned every year for five or six years, trying to salvage the acres overrun by prairie dogs," he says. "But now we're trying to control them ourselves again, and they are getting out of hand just like they were in the early



South Dakota Stockgrowers Assn. members Ken Knuppe (left) and Scott Cuny, along with many others, have spent their lives fighting prairie dogs and have seen limited success.

'80s. We simply can't keep up with them."

Although some "experts" would like the public to believe that prairie dogs are beneficial, Scott Cuny knows better. "Neighbors of ours have gone broke because of the defoliation the rodents have caused on their rangelands."

The Pied Pipers have recently regrouped

(Continued on page ESA 39)



The predator and his prey.



RUNNING WILD in Yellowstone

THE MAGNIFICENT ELK HERDS OF MONTANA ARE DIMINISHING DUE TO FLOURISHING FLESH-TEARING PREDATORS. SOMETHING'S GOT TO CHANGE. BY BOB FANNING

I live on a horse ranch in the foothills of the Absaroka Mountains 25 miles north of Yellowstone National Park. I ride in the mountains every day, year-round, observing and participating in nature with the eye of a big game hunter and biology major. When I received my degree from the University of Notre Dame back in the early 1970s, ecology was a science. Now it has become a religion.

I've noticed a change in those mountains over the past seven years and I'm certain that if the American people had any idea what was going on in Yellowstone and the surrounding area, they would be appalled and angry.

Prior to wolf introduction in 1995, there were 19,500 elk in the northern Yellowstone herd, over 300 bighorn sheep in the 10 square miles around Gardiner, Mont., and abundant moose, antelope and mule deer. Now we have

fewer than 10,000 elk and 40 bighorn sheep. Montana state moose biologist Kurt Alt says the moose are all but wiped out. The National Academy of Sciences in its March 2002 report writes that the antelope population is a small fraction of what it was. Montana's game warden north of Yellowstone Park says, "the mule deer population is in real trouble."

Wolf introduction has become big business. Defenders of Wildlife (DOW) alone raises over \$16 million a year tax free. They send letters that show crosshairs on a wolf puppy, urging urban soccer moms to send money to save wolves from being poisoned and wolf babies from being clubbed to death in their dens by mean old ranchers. They never mention that the mean old rancher could be convicted of a felony, face a \$100,000 fine and a year in federal prison for violating the Endangered Species Act.

Wolf recovery is also big business for biologists. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) has created a huge bureaucracy. Originally intended to introduce 78 to 100 wolves in Yellowstone Park, it has now expanded to put wolves into any rural area in America where there is an agricultural or hunting culture.

Lawyers love wolves too. Environmental organizations like DOW, the Sierra Club, and National Wildlife Federation have legal departments that rival IBM and GM in size. They are motivated to sue over ESA issues because—win or lose—the federal government must pay their legal fees.

Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd, Inc., the organization I formed in 1999, has 3,742 members, most of whom live in the area just north of Yellowstone. We have been calling attention to the total annihilation of our game herds for four years now. We were roundly criticized as alarmists and extremists as the wolf recovery team assured the public through the dutiful press that the elk herd, which acts as a buffer between predators and our cattle, was in fine shape.

Eventually our cries for help were heard. This year, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Montana House Fish and Wildlife Committee, senior lawmakers Dan Fuchs and Joe

Balyeat, accuse the wolf bureaucracy of a cover-up. They came down to count the ratios of cow-to-calf elk themselves. We went into the field and discovered a ratio of cow elk to last year's surviving calves of 12 per hundred. The 23-year average, preceeding wolf recovery, was 33 calves per hundred cows. Subsequently, when the fur started flying in our state legislature and in the Montana press, a study came to light done by Carrie Schaeffer of Michigan Tech University, working under Dr. Rolf Peterson in 1998-99. Schaeffer's huge scientific sampling counted 4,600 head of elk and concluded that the cow-to-calf ratio was 0-to-10 per hundred. That confirmed our assertions that a biological crisis of catastrophic proportions had been going on. The government had known of the study, withheld the information in order to protect their wolf bureaucracy, and intentionally lied to the press for four years. The decision to suppress scientific information was made at the top by Glenn Plumb, Yellowstone's supervisory biologist.

When wolf recovery was proposed in 1988, Congress appropriated monies to study the experiment. Members instructed those who made the request to introduce wolves that hunting should not be hurt, the local economy should not be hurt, and the grizzly bear should not be impacted. A team of 15 Ph.D.s who specialized in predator/prey biology published in 1991, "Wolves for Yellowstone? A Report to Congress and the Department of Interior Vol. 1." They said the 250 square miles in and around Yellowstone could hold 78-100 wolves at full capacity if the reintroduction was over a 10- to 20-year period. This esteemed body of scientists insisted in 1991, and again in September 1995, that because no one knew for sure what impact a new keystone predator would have on the unadapted prey species, intensive monitoring of the prey should be done. Otherwise, the Yellowstone ecosystem would be forever and irreparably harmed. These studies were not done.

A July '89 report to Yellowstone Park and the Dept. of Interior warned of the potential for major conflict arising from wolf introduction. It called for thoughtful interaction among scientists, wildlife managers (state and



© JEFF FOOTI, TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES

federal) and resource users (ranchers and hunters). It concluded that "to introduce wolves before adaptive management has reached maturity and consensus would be irresponsible."

These warnings and recommendations not only went unheeded, but anyone who was not in the wolf introduction camp—livestock interests, state legislatures, fish and game authorities, outside scientists with a different opinion, or hunting interests—was systematically excluded from the process and routinely lied to.

The FWS Wolf Project coordinator, Ed Bangs, admits that there are 560 wolves and 150 pups this year with anywhere between 34 to 46 breeding pairs, depending on the definition of breeding pair. Even Bangs says, "There are too many wolves." Despite intense public pressure to delist and control wolves, the outlook for delisting in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming is bleak.

FWS now wants to hold us hostage until Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado get a good healthy dose of wolves.

This predator breeds at a 34-percent-per-year rate. Each wolf can eat a biomass of up to 25 elk per year; not counting the surplus killing of elk calves. Our area now has at least 720 wolves. In three years we could easily be at 1,500. This means 37,500 elk per year are going to be fed to wolves without any new replacement calves. Since Montana, according to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, only

has 130,000 elk, it won't be long before the wolf turns its attention to beef cattle in numbers much larger than are already occurring.

Mike Phillips, the movie-star handsome, media-savvy biologist who introduced the wolf into Yellowstone Park in '95, spoke to a group of 600 people from 44 states and 24 countries in Duluth, Minn., on February 24, 2000. He said the goal of wolf introduction was to drive 30,000 ranchers from public lands. His presentation was videotaped by the University of Minnesota and the International Wolf Center. Now, fully realizing the implication of these remarks, Phillips vehemently denies them. Phillips and former Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Mike Findley now work for Ted Turner's Endangered Species Fund, an organization that vigorously promotes wolves.

John Paul Hubbard, whose ranch borders Yellowstone Park, estimates that since wolves were introduced in '95, his ranch has lost in excess of \$100,000, but the figures can't be proven. Montana Stock Growers believe that wolf depredation of livestock in Montana is 500 to 700 percent more than what the wolf recovery people admit. Again, losses cannot be proven. It is a violation of the Fifth Amendment and its "takings" clause to turn these uncontrolled predators on a rancher's stock without compensation. Cowboys go to bed wondering how many cattle they will lose to night-predating wolves. ■

This article is excerpted from a document presented to Senator Conrad Burns (R-Mont.) on June 6, 2002. To benefit the elk, Robert T. Fanning, Jr. and Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd are presenting the "Save Our Western Heritage" rough stock rodeo in Livingston, Mont. on September 7, 2002. For more information call 406-333-4144.



© MICHAEL MCKINNEY

Thanks to reintroduced wolves, elk cow-to-calf ratios have catastrophically dropped, causing a biological crisis. Too many wolves need lunch.

Movin' On, Movin' Out

JOE AND EV HIGBEE HAVE RANCHED IN SOUTHERN NEVADA FOR MOST OF SEVEN DECADES. THEIR RANCH HAS BEEN TAKEN FOR BOMBING, MUSTANGS, CHUB AND DESERT TORTOISE AND THE GOVERNMENT ISN'T READY TO QUIT. BY CONNIE SIMKINS

Joe Higbee has spent a lifetime in the canyons and valleys surrounding his home in Pahranaagat Valley, Nev. He still lives in the house where he was born some 70 years ago. Not even the Endangered Species Act can drive Joe off his land. He talks with pride of his heritage, seven generations strong in Alamo: "We've been here since 1869."

As he and his wife Evelyn Youngdell Higbee look back over their married life in southern Nevada, they count up the times the government has tried to move them off their property.

In the 1940s it was the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). They needed Higbee's sheep allotment west of Alamo for a bombing range and test site. In the 1960s it was the U.S. Forest Service that grabbed the grazing from Joe's Cherry Creek allotment. In the 1970s the Higbees became concerned that FWS would control the life-giving water from Ash Springs to protect the "endangered Pahranaagat Valley chub," a two-inch carp-type fish. Higbee once asked FWS officials what the difference was in the several different chubs listed as endangered in southern Nevada.

"They told me they could not tell by looking at them. They had to kill the chubs and look at the color of their meat and that was the only difference. Well, any idiot knows the color of the meat is connected to what the fish eat."

About 1985, the Higbees watched in horror as mustangs ate locoweed and died an extended and horrible death on their Oreana Spring allotment. The Nevada Department of Fish & Game (now NDOW) bought the Murphy Meadows area and soon 600 head of mustangs moved in.

"The horses were raising hell, so NDOW fenced them out of their place," Joe says. "That drove the horses over the hill into our Coal Valley range and they ate us out bad. That locoweed is the saddest thing on earth. The horses ate it because it was the only plant left and we were in a bad drought."

Evelyn remembers it too well. "It was just awful," she says. "They go round and round and dig and dig. We would have gone to jail had we done anything about it." The law wouldn't allow the Higbees to put the sick

animals out of their misery.

"So the mustangs took care of themselves by dying," Joe says, "because of the locoweed. All our reservoirs dried up. The horses either choked to death or loco-ed. NDOW and the Bureau of Land Management did nothing about it. In the meantime, it hurt our range. And do you know what the BLM said? They told us 'We can't move the horses, but we can move you.'"

The Higbees could see the writing on the wall, so they sold their summer range and moved to central Idaho. But bitter cold winters and family ties soon brought them home to "The Valley."



Most recently, their troubles centered around the designation of the desert tortoise as an endangered species. Several years ago the BLM agreed to stand with the Forest Service to keep the tortoises from extinction. They made a plan that says these animals live anywhere that

the temperature stays above 40 degrees at night. Joe pointed out that Pahranaagat Valley is warm in the summer, but often freezes for days at a time in the winter months.

He had never seen tortoises on his grazing land around Alamo. Not until, he hastened to add, they were planted there. The family found several on their grazing land that had obviously been marked with white powder. "By the government's own studies, they say the cows don't hurt the tortoise," Joe says. "It is the predators—the coyotes, foxes and the ravens mostly."

The wilderness study act has put his land in limbo for the past 20 years. This put an enormous burden on his family cattle operation because the government prevented him from fixing his spring and the road into the area. "It is all these different things added together that get us," Joe says. "Each one of them has their own agenda and they hit at you day after day. Someone is always whacking at you."

Running cattle on his Pahranaagat Valley allotment in desert tortoise country has meant Joe and Evelyn must make a six-mile water haul to four different places. "The government has an imaginary line out there where the turtles breed and have babies at a certain altitude" (4,000 feet or lower).

Three years ago they suffered a fire on their Mary's River range and had to rest the area for the next two years. "We tried to get the BLM to re-seed the burn, but they told us they had no money," Joe says. So he and Eve-



Joe Higbee says, "The government has an imaginary line out there where the turtles breed and have babies at a certain altitude" (4,000 feet or lower). The government says desert tortoise can live anywhere that the temperature stays above 40 degrees at night, "but it often freezes for days at a time around here in winter."

© JEFF FOOTT, TOM STACK & ASSOCIATES

lyn, both in their 70s, spent a summer camped at 9,000 feet herding their cows away from the burn, riding many 16-hour days in the saddle to stay in compliance with their grazing permit.

“We have spent a lifetime getting this place together. Ev, here, has been right along with me. We went without. We struggled. Now we got a pretty good thing and we can fix what we have left for our family. We have two sons and their families who work with us on the ranch. We enjoy working with our sons and grandsons. And to have those little great-grandkids around is something. We sure as hell don’t stay in it for the money. All these different things and government buggers have their own agenda, and it is all about moving us off the land.”

The Higbees now have summer grazing in northeastern Nevada near Wells in Elko County and they still worry about how much



The cougar is an elusive creature by nature, but with today’s high degree of protection they have become bolder. More encounters between man and lion are taking place. Just leaving its comfortable den, this lion is probably headed out in search of prey.

The Big Track of the Cat

MOUNTAIN LIONS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK. BY THOMAS C. TABOR

The cougar is this continent’s most awesome, cunning and effective predator. It is the largest nonspotted member of the cat family in North America, second only in size to the jaguar, and capable of killing a full-grown elk. Consequently, it has no trouble bringing down a cow, sheep, horse or particularly susceptible buck mule deer.

A cougar, also known as mountain lion, usually makes a kill about once or twice per week which results in extensive damage to other wildlife species. Predators are said to kill only what they eat. This is untrue in the case of the cougar, which is an opportunist.

Man viewed this animal as a competitor and persecuted it. Just like the grizzly, wolf and other large predators, in the past cougars were often shot on sight, resulting in significant reduction in population. Because of hunting pressure, cougars moved deeper into remote and inaccessible areas.

Today people view predators differently. The big cats are protected under the Endangered Species Act and their numbers are high. Some say “extreme.” While game management controls can take some credit for this trend, a preservationist attitude has had an even greater influence on what is becoming a serious problem. Few people have seen a cougar in the wild; even so, they actively try to stop man’s attempts to control the problem of overpopulation.

I cherish each and every time I encounter cougar spore or have the pleasure of observing these magnificent animals in the wild. However, lack of management by game department officials, politicians and preservationists have made the cougar significantly more bold and fearless. To maintain a balance, man needs to supervise and regulate the species through hunting and wildlife management programs.

The movement to ban all cougar hunting—and all hunting entirely—is a threat that must be resisted. One tactic used by extrem-

ists is the threat of lawsuits to intimidate game departments. Costly environmental impact studies and statements are demanded before a hunting season can be set. This discourages officials from doing what they know is best for the wildlife, environment, and man. In some states anti-hunting groups were successful and all cat hunting has been stopped or severely restricted.

All wildlife populations and numbers are cyclic. Some cycles are extremely complex and span several decades, but each species will naturally undergo periods of low and high numbers. I believe that throughout the West today the mountain lion is close to its cyclic population high. Couple this with heavy protection of the species and man’s continual encroachment into the cat’s once inaccessible habitat and we have a real problem.

No one has to look hard to find reports of cougar/man problems today. Lions have staked out a barn as their home, taken up residence next to an urban shopping mall, and confronted hunters as they packed out their meat. And cougars have shown no fear while prowling around houses in populated neighborhoods.

Thirty years ago, when I was studying wildlife management, my textbooks stated that there were no confirmed reports of a cougar attacking a human. Now reports from virtually every western state come in on a regular basis. In many cases these unprovoked attacks involve children.

The mountain lion is a magnificent member of our natural world. I never want to see this species wiped out, but I do not like hearing of small children being mauled. We can continue to share the world with wildlife but that means we must manage the resource and maintain a much needed balance. ■

Tom Tabor is a freelance writer in the mountains of western Montana.

HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY JOE HIGBEE



Four generations of the Higbees have ranched in Pahranaagat Valley, Nev. since 1869. Clockwise from top: Joe Higbee, Ike, Ernest and Vaughn. OPPOSITE: Joe and Ev on their wedding day.

more the BLM is going to take of their grazing there. They have already lost a two-mile swath in the Mary’s River bottom for “riparian habitat.” Now they are looking at what the sage grouse plans could do to the rest of their operation.

“We sure do know how the Indians felt,” Evelyn says about the white man coming west to this country. “The government tells us they aren’t going to take any more land away from us, but then they tell us we can’t use it.” She worries. “If they take that away from us, we are done for.” ■

Connie Simkins is editor of the Lincoln County Record in Pioche, Nev. She says, “It was a gift to spend a little time with Joe and Ev Higbee.”



The Salt Creek tiger beetle is an insect that exists only in the inland salt marshes around Lincoln, Nebraska. Down to just several hundred adults each summer, this critically endangered animal is losing habitat at a current rate that could easily make it extinct in the next few years.

Saving Species, Saving Ourselves

PRESERVING ENDANGERED SPECIES WILL SAVE US ALL.

WORDS & PHOTOS © JOEL SARTORE



Tiny and unique, the Ash Meadows milk vetch blooms near a desert spring at the Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge near Pahrump, Nevada. Isolated around the oasis that forms the heart of the refuge, several species of fish, plants and insects are found nowhere else but here. Many are endangered but in stable condition, as long as the water holds out.



Back from the brink, an adult California condor warms its wings in the sun of a San Diego breeding facility. Down to just 18 birds at one point, the condor has been bred back to more than 100 birds, with some now flying free again in both California and Arizona.

I'm a landowner. I hunt. I fish. I'm also a freelance photographer for *National Geographic* who has been to every state in the Union and several foreign countries to photograph wildlife and land use issues. In my travels, I've seen the same thing over and over—more people are alive today than ever before. Especially in developing nations, overpopulation has reached epic proportions. And don't think those problems will stay overseas. It's already started here.

These new people spread out. In the American West, this manifests itself in people fighting over water, land use, space and ways of life.

The editor of *RANGE*, a friend for many years now, asked me to write how I feel about endangered species. Instead of arguing on behalf of grizzly bears or gray wolves, I thought I'd pick the smallest, most obscure thing I could—the Salt Creek tiger beetle. Found nowhere else on earth, this is an insect

that lives in just a couple of salt marshes on the north edge of my town, Lincoln, Neb. If I can get folks to stop and think about this for a minute, maybe the big picture will fall into place as well. I hope so anyway.

Here in Lincoln, we have just three places that have any semblance of nature. We've got a small patch of virgin prairie out by our airport, some woodlands surrounded by housing developments and highways, and a couple of salt marshes. The marshes are in the news quite a bit these days because they are home to the Salt Creek tiger beetle, now down to just 300-400 adults each summer, and it's about to be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

A while back I wrote an editorial for my local newspaper on why we should care about this bug and the last of our saline wetlands here in Nebraska. In the end, it boils down to a few simple questions. Do we respect nature? Do we show stewardship to all creatures great

and small? Is there room for 'us and them'? You decide. But you'd better hurry. Time's almost up for one species in Lincoln. The rest can't be far behind.

REASONS YOU SHOULD CARE

Save species and habitat to save ourselves

To think that humans are not tied in tightly to the natural world is pure folly. In fact, we're totally dependent on healthy, functioning ecosystems for our very survival, from the air we breathe to the food we eat to the water we drink. Notice that the frog and bird species are thinning out where you live? These things are living monitors of the health of the earth. To think that we can escape their fate over the long haul is not realistic, to say the least.

We're killing off the ark

All plants and animals, even the Salt Creek tiger beetle, are God's creatures. Who are we to purposely kill off any of these creations?



The Salt Creek tiger beetle is our local example of the massive wave of extinction now going on around the globe, all due to human activity and overpopulation.

Save it for education

Ever go on a field trip to a pond or a marsh in grade school or high school? Remember the thrill at seeing the wildlife there, from frogs and tadpoles to dragonflies to the teeming life found in a single drop of water when viewed under a microscope?

It's about more than just a beetle. Saving the saline wetlands—or any ecosystem—benefits thousands of other animals. Lincoln marsh users include migrating raptors, ducks, geese and shorebirds.

Small things lead to bigger ones

If people care enough to save something as seemingly trivial as a salt marsh and as tiny as a beetle, then they'll surely care about the environmentally big things. They'll also think more about sustainable living, such as considering the kinds and amounts of chemicals they use on their lawns and pour down their drains. These chemicals end up being consumed by people and wildlife downstream.

The last word in ignorance

As a famous biologist once noted, it is the last word in ignorance when a person asks "What good is it"? We're not even close to knowing how everything works, whether it's the

prairies, rainforest, oceans, the Arctic or even the last of the salt marshes in northern Lancaster County, Neb.

Let's save 'em because we care

The beetle is just one small part of the endangered species picture. The big issue is whether or not all of us care enough to preserve what we have left. Do we want to save species and habitats, or do we want to simply pave over and sterilize as much as we can in the name of profit? If you truly care about the environment, the last islands of natural habitat remaining are all precious, whether it's a salt marsh, a virgin prairie or a century-old cottonwood tree. To good stewards of the earth, all are equally worth saving. ■



The Attwater's prairie chicken is one of several prairie grouse species in this country. All are in decline. The heath hen, a form of greater prairie chicken, is now extinct. Attwater's could be next if people don't set aside more coastal prairie to reintroduce it. There is now only one functioning booming ground left. Also called a 'lek', it is a single cattle pasture near Texas City, Texas. Conservation efforts can work through the purchase and restoration of coastal prairie combined with the reintroduction of captive-raised birds. Besides buying land outright for the birds, conservation easements can be used to give breaks to willing landowners. Can this bird be saved? Yes, but only if enough people care to do so.



A gray wolf makes his way through the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park. A source of intense controversy at the time of reintroduction, they have turned out to be much less worrisome than many ranchers feared. Wolves that wander outside the park are monitored by wildlife officials. If they get into trouble (i.e., prey on livestock) they are killed.

An American burying beetle prepares a dead mourning dove for interment in central Nebraska. The beetle will bury the bird, then shuttle meals to feed its young in underground pockets nearby.

To see more of award-winning photographer Joel Sartore's work and purchase prints or books, go to <www.joelsartore.com> or contact Joel Sartore Photography, P.O. Box 22774, Lincoln, NE 68542-2774.