THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB

The Founding Fathers of Wildlife Conservation in America

By Doug Painter
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Boone & Crockett Club.

Founded January 18

Boone and Crockett Club House exhibit on the island at the 1893 World's Fair held in Chicago, Illinois. Theodore Roosevelt was responsible for securing the exhibit. He personally hired William Hofer, a well-known guide, to take care of the exhibit.

The tall prairie grass bent and swayed against the wind, creating a ripple effect like surging waves on a vast sea rolling onward to an ever-distant horizon.

The bison was the unrivaled lord of these vast western grasslands that spread from the Mississippi Valley to the Rocky Mountains and from western Canada through Texas and into northern Mexico. Farther west, between the Rockies and Cascades, vast tracts of grasses and parklands served as home to bison as well. It is estimated that original bison numbers were between 40 and 60 million with regional herds, each numbering in the millions themselves, migrating in a roughly circular path of some thousand miles or more. Noted wildlife scientist and historian James B. Trefethen reminds us that, "The pattern and timing of their movements assured the regeneration, before they returned, of the depleted grazing lands left in their wakes."

It was a lesson somehow understood by the bison but not, during the years of America's westward expansion, by man.

It is perhaps understandable that western pioneers believed that the vast landscape that lay before them held an inexhaustible bounty of natural riches. Beyond the great herds of bison, the land teemed with an extraordinary variety of wildlife, from elk and mule deer to wolves and grizzly bears, beaver, and wild sheep. Pronghorn antelope alone, it is believed, rivaled the bison in their millions of numbers. It was not just big game: John J. Audubon's 1813 diary reports a flight of passenger pigeons eclipsing the sun passing over him during a 55-mile trip over a two-day period. How could such huge populations of animals be depleted let alone driven to the brink of extinction?

In the fall of 1883, 24-year-old Theodore Roosevelt, a recent Harvard graduate and already a member of the New York State Legislature, travelled to North Dakota to explore cattle ranching opportunities and to fulfill a boyhood dream of hunting bison, still seen as the iconic big game trophy of western lore and legend.

The habitat that supported this wildlife was also a treasure unto itself: Millions of acres of rich sod that could be converted into farms and grasslands that could support huge herds of cattle. In the higher country, there were tracts of majestic trees that seemed to stretch forever and, to top it off, there was also "gold in them thar hills." All in all, it was a grab bag of natural resources of unprecedented size and, seemingly, one with no bottom. And, in an era of free-wheeling opportunity, it was all there for the taking by those who had the pluck, ingenuity and, often, the greed to do so.

Around the mid-point of the 19th century, western settlement was in full swing and the onslaught on the region's natural resources took on alarming proportions. "Pristine America's vast virgin forests," wrote wildlife scientists George B. Ward and Richard E. McCabe, "were cut, prairies were plowed, and wetlands were filled or drained. Minerals were rapaciously siphoned or sifted from streambeds and hillsides. Topsoils were leached of nutrients or allowed to erode at rates far exceeding replacement. Beavers, deer, bison, elk, wolves, bears, passenger pigeons, pronghorns, wild turkeys, bighorn sheep, plumed birds, and other wildlife were killed to extinction or nearly so for subsistence, market, or as imagined obstacles to "progress." Train tracks and telegraph lines now dissected the landscape, pragmatically reducing the country in time and space. In 1852, there were five miles of rail west of the Mississippi; by 1890, rail lines wended more than 72,000 miles in the West."

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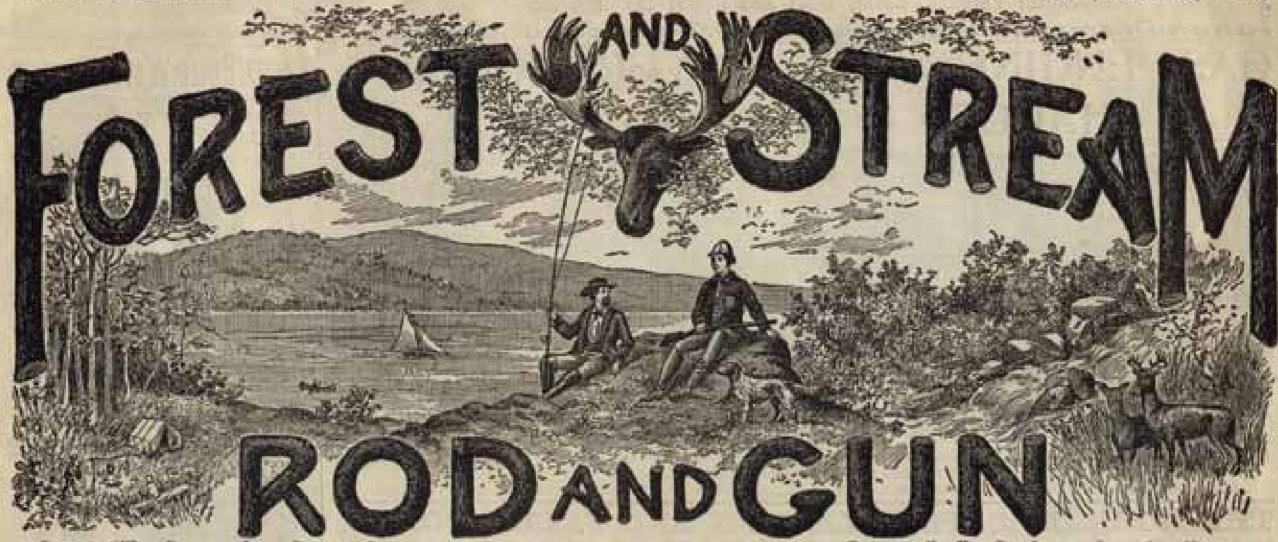
The badlands of the Dakota territories were believed to be the last stronghold of the "northern herd" of bison yet, by the time Roosevelt arrived, the herd had been decimated. Only scattered and small groups of survivors remained.

After a strenuous hunt, young Roosevelt finally shot his bison, and before heading back East, he also purchased a cattle ranch—a symbolic transition, if you will, from one era to the next. By the end of the decade, bison had been virtually eliminated throughout their historic range.

In the following years, trips back to his ranch and hunts for antelope, elk, and grizzly endeared Roosevelt to the West but also opened his eyes to the devastating effects of unbridled exploitation of the region. "In the young man



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ROD AND GUN

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George Bird Grinnell was editor of *Forest and Stream* magazine from 1880 to 1911 (founded in 1873 and today, *Field & Stream* magazine) Grinnell had a national platform to crusade for the conservation of wildlife, for an end to market hunting, and for the establishment of game laws.

who came west to hunt buffalo," wrote Trefethen, "conservation was to find its most vocal, most colorful, and most influential leader at a time when it needed leadership most."

In an era when game was viewed with little regard beyond what price it could bring in the market, Roosevelt, an avid naturalist, instead believed that wildlife held an intrinsic value that, together with America's wilderness areas, should be regarded as a treasured legacy. As a dedicated and respectful hunter, he deplored the wanton killing of game, whether for commerce or sport. To Roosevelt, hunting was a noble venture, a true test between hunter and the hunted. Hunting was, in his view, a uniquely American experience epitomized by early frontiersmen whose woodcraft, skill with a rifle, and rugged individualism were at the heart of the nation's pioneering spirit. In the confluence of these two notions was born the sportsman-conservationist.

Author, naturalist, and sportsman George Bird Grinnell first travelled out West in 1870, and over subsequent trips, like Roosevelt, became deeply concerned over the unrestrained pillage of the West's natural resources. As editor from 1880 to 1911 of *Forest and Stream* magazine (founded in 1873 and today, *Field & Stream* magazine) Grinnell had a national platform to crusade for the conservation of wildlife, for an end to market hunting and for the establishment of game laws.

In 1885, Grinnell wrote a review in *Forest and Stream* of Theodore Roosevelt's book *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*. While generally favorable, Roosevelt was pricked by some of the criticism in the review and set out to meet Grinnell face to face. Fortunately, that meeting turned cordial and prompted a long and very productive friendship between the two. As wildlife historians Ward and McCabe point out, "With the younger Roosevelt, Grinnell shared his understanding and perspectives on the serious and fragile stature of American wildlife. In Roosevelt, Grinnell found an aggressive and politically mobile ally for his conservation crusade." Grinnell and Roosevelt would soon become the dynamic-duo of America's nascent conservation movement.

In the late 1800s, there was a small but growing voice in the country decrying the perilous condition of the nation's wildlife.

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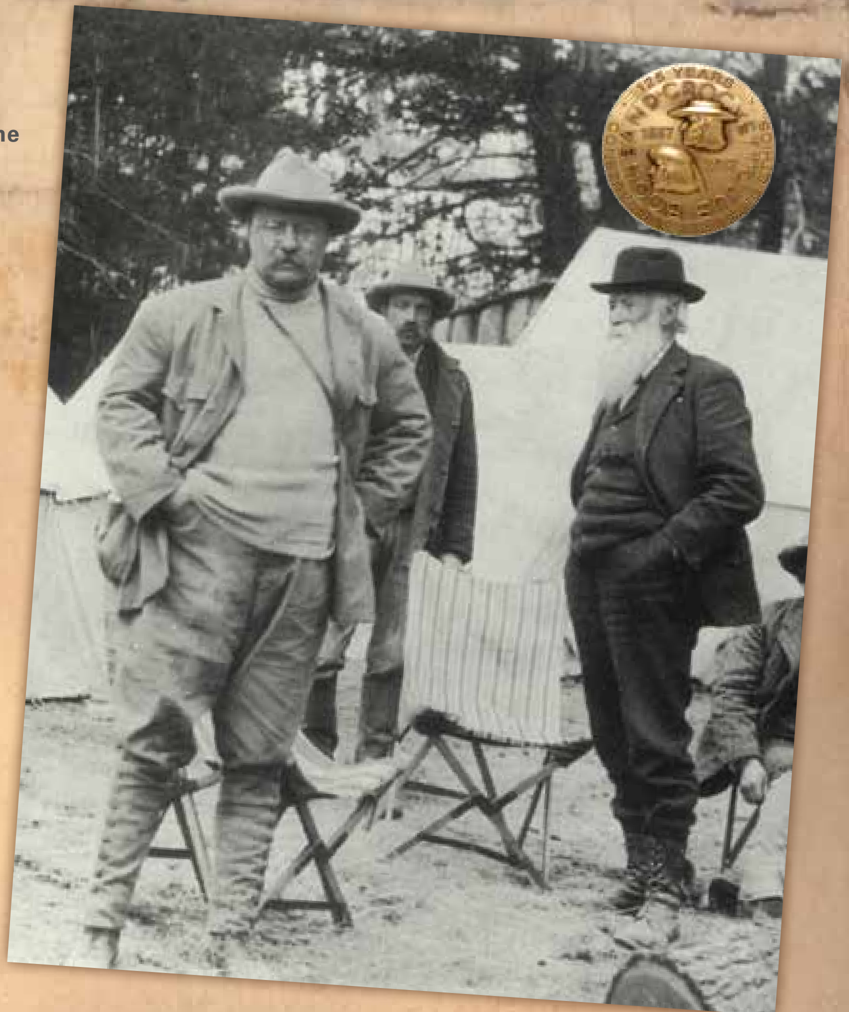
Roosevelt and Grinnell, however, were not content to simply add to the clamor. They were determined to move forward, to seek the enactment and implementation of broad-based policies that would serve to protect big game, and in so doing, preserve America's hunting heritage.

As the first step, Roosevelt, conferring with Grinnell, invited a small but highly influential group of men to dinner at his home in New York City in December of 1887. The common thread among these guests was that they were all avid big game hunters. From that dinner, these men would form the core of what is today the oldest wildlife conservation organization in the country, the Boone and Crockett Club.

"Although the Club," explained Trefethen, "was a small group, limited to one hundred regular members, it numbered in its ranks some of the most powerful men of their time—Senator Henry Cabot Lodge; Francis Parkman; Carl Schurz, former secretary of the Interior and owner and publisher of a chain of leading newspapers; Owen Wister, the novelist; Alfred Bierstadt, one of the nation's leading painters; and General William Tecumseh Sherman."

For the name of the new Club, the members reached back into America's past selecting two men who symbolized the essence



Theodore Roosevelt at Yellowstone with John Burroughs, 1903.

of the original frontier character, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. Rugged and self-reliant, both were true woodsmen and skilled hunters as well as men of courage and bold action—traits, not surprisingly, that would later well describe Roosevelt's presidency.

The Club's first initiative was to enlarge and seek effective protection of Yellowstone National Park. Created as America's first National Park in 1872, Yellowstone, with minimal protection in place, remained vulnerable to rampant poaching as well as mining and timber exploitation. By the end of 1883, the Northern Pacific Railway had arrived at the Park's northern entrance, posing a new threat to Yellowstone's wilderness status.

With strong editorial support provided by Grinnell in *Forest and Stream* and a strong push in Congress by Boone and Crockett Club members, the Yellowstone Park Protection Act was passed in 1894. It not only added more than three thousand square miles to the park, but for the first time, provided park administrators with real "teeth" in enforcing park regulations. The act prohibited the killing or trafficking of wildlife as well as the removal of timber or mineral deposits within the park boundaries. It also took the critical next step by placing a representative of the United States Circuit Court in the park itself, together with U.S. marshals on hand to arrest violators.

The Boone and Crockett Club's crusade to preserve Yellowstone set the stage for America's early conservation movement. Spearheaded by Grinnell's editorializing on the perils faced by Yellowstone's handful of remaining bison, efforts to save dwindling

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game populations gained, for the first time, not only widespread public awareness, but also public support. As important as was the advocacy of the Club's prominent members, so too was the voice of the people.

The fight to save Yellowstone also created a long-lasting model of success for the Club, setting a precedent that the protection of wildlife and wilderness areas was an appropriate issue for national law and policy. Wildlife historians point out that the Yellowstone Park Protection Act brought the federal government into the wildlife conservation arena for the first time and set forth the guiding principles which, still to this day, serve to govern the U.S. National Park system.

The protection of Yellowstone Park was an impressive start for the Boone and Crockett Club, but members realized that far more land needed to be set aside and protected if remnant populations of big game were to have a chance to recover. In addition to laying the groundwork for additional national parks, key Club members helped craft and strongly pushed for legislation that created forest reserves, the precursor to the national forest system. Working behind the scenes, but with no small measure of political influence, the Boone and Crockett Club was beginning to shape the future of America's wildlife conservation movement.

Less than a year after his election in 1900, President William McKinley was assassinated and Vice President Theodore Roosevelt assumed the nation's highest office. At the dawn of the new century, one of the founding fathers of the Boone and Crockett Club was now the 26th president of the United States. During his administration (1901-1910) a number of Club members served in his cabinet or in sub-cabinet positions significantly strengthening the hand of America's first conservation-minded leader.

"During his presidential tenure," notes author and Western expert Richard C. Rattenbury, "Roosevelt's activities on behalf of wildlife conservation and habitat preservation were unprecedented. In addition to setting aside nearly 151 million additional acres in the forest reserve system (National Forests after 1907), he established four game reserves in Arizona, Oklahoma, Montana, and Washington; created five new national parks and 18 national monuments; and authorized creation of the National Bison Range in Montana. With Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot (a Club member) and others, TR prompted the establishment and funding of bureaus at both the federal and state level that brought scientific principles to resource management. Largely influenced by Grinnell, Roosevelt truly instituted as a national policy the "wise use of natural resources," seeking their efficient, renewable administration in perpetuity."

It should be noted that the Boone and Crockett Club actively pursued the establishment of game sanctuaries within forest reserves, the outgrowth of which was the National Wildlife Refuge System. In 1903, President Roosevelt signed an order creating the first officially designated wildlife refuge, Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, to protect brown pelicans from plume hunters.

As much as this broad effort to secure and protect habitat was critical to the future of America's beleaguered wildlife, so too was the Boone and Crockett Club's stance on hunting. As Roosevelt emphasized, " … there is no objection to hunting … the encouragement of a proper hunting spirit, a proper love of the sport, instead of being incompatible with a love of nature and wild things, offers the best guaranty for the preservation of wild things."

In part, the preservation of game required a new, responsible ethos to hunting which was clearly espoused in the Club's stance on fair chase. Thanks to Grinnell's outreach in the sporting press, the concept of sportsmanship began to take hold. In the late 1800s Grinnell observed that the Club's efforts to encourage ethical hunting practices were gaining traction. "Those who used to boast of their slaughter," observed Grinnell, "are now ashamed of it, and it is

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In 1903, Major C.E. Radclyffe from Hyde Wareham Dorset, United Kingdom, took this moose hunting near Birch Creek on the Kenai peninsula, Alaska.

becoming a recognized fact that a man who *wastefully* destroys big game, whether for the market or only for heads, has nothing of the true sportsman about him."

As much as unregulated hunting for subsistence and sport contributed to the decline of game species, it paled by comparison to the slaughter brought about by market hunters. In 1894 Grinnell wrote in *Forest and Stream*, "The game supply which makes possible the general indulgence in field sports is of incalculable advantage to individuals and the nation; but a game supply which makes possible the traffic in game as a luxury has no such importance. If this is granted, public policy demands the traffic in game be abolished … We suggest this declaration, *the sale of game should be forbidden at all seasons*."

In 1897, good friend of Grinnell and also a Boone and Crockett Club member, Congressman John F. Lacey championed a bill in Congress for a federal law to ban the sale of wildlife products. Defeated that year, Lacey re-introduced the bill in 1900, and with the strong support of birding organizations and emerging sportsmen's

At Gifford Pinchot's urging, in 1909 President Roosevelt invited representatives from Canada and Mexico to the North American Conservation Conference to "consider mutual interests involved in the conservation of natural resources."

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groups, the bill passed. The legislation prohibited the interstate shipment of illegally killed wildlife. Wildlife biologists and managers consider the Lacey Act of 1900 to be the legal cornerstone of fish and wildlife conservation in the United States.

New game laws coupled with protected sanctuaries, especially for big game, helped some species begin to recover; at times, however, with unintended consequences. Created by President Roosevelt in 1906, the Grand Canyon National Game Preserve of the Kaibab Plateau provided protection for a population of a few thousand mule deer. By the early 1920s the deer population had skyrocketed; deer were literally eating themselves out of house and home. The destruction of the reserve's vegetation led to a massive die-off of the plateau's mule deer. This tragedy, however, prompted a new understanding of how wildlife needed to be managed.

The Boone and Crockett Club began measuring trophies in 1906 as a means of cataloging big game species once thought headed for extinction. Thanks in great measure to the Club's efforts, most all North American big game now exist in healthy and abundant numbers.

The Kaibab situation was closely followed by the Boone and Crockett Club and especially by one of its members, Aldo Leopold, now widely recognized as the "father" of modern wildlife management. A forester with a Master of Forestry degree from Yale, the Kaibab disaster helped him frame his ideas about the broad spectrum of interrelationships in the environment, notably the concept of the carrying capacity of any habitat in respect to the species that lived there. The need for ecological balance and the means to achieve that equilibrium evolved into the underlying thesis of modern wildlife conservation.

In keeping with the Boone and Crockett Club's focus on education and outreach, the Club published much of the literature on the emerging science of wildlife management, culminating in the President's Conference on Outdoor Recreation in 1924, the first broad-based effort to create a coordinated resource management policy at all government levels. The success of this and ensuing conferences is considered by many as one of the signature contributions of the Boone and Crockett Club to the future of conservation.

With many of the building blocks of modern wildlife management in place, and with new conservation groups being formed, the Boone and Crockett Club increasingly took on a role as a catalyst for ideas and issues as well as a coalition organization of America's conservation movement. The Club played a critical role in the formation, for example, of the National Wildlife Federation, the Wildlife Management Institute and the Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit Program, a key training source for fish and wildlife management professionals. Through the 1929 Migratory Bird Act and the 1934 Duck Stamp Act, the Club established the legislative model, and was highly influential in the passage of the 1937 Pittman-Robertson Act which called for an excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. Over the past 75 years, PR funds have been the financial backbone of wildlife conservation throughout the 50 states.

Conservation leadership continues as a mainstay of the Boone and Crockett Club. With a view toward wildlife and land-use research, the Club purchased a 6,000-acre ranch, now named the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch, in northern Montana at the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The ranch serves as a hands-on research facility for scientific analyses of how domestic livestock and wildlife interrelate when competing for common habitat; an issue that Western livestock growers have been struggling with for over a century. Today, under the umbrella of the Boone and Crockett Wildlife Conservation Program, the Club is active in a wide range of research and education efforts including a grants program for graduate students in the wildlife sciences.

The Boone and Crockett Club began keeping trophy records in 1906 as a means of cataloging big game species once thought headed for extinction. Thanks in great measure to the Club's efforts, most all North American big game now exist in healthy and abundant numbers. Today, the Boone and Crockett trophy records program provides a means for the Club to communicate the principles of fair chase to American hunters and provides wildlife biologists with an invaluable database to measure animal population trends, genetics, and nutrition as well as age and habitat characteristics. The Club began hosting public exhibitions in 1947 so that the public could see the trophies that Boone and Crockett honors as symbols of the nation's uniquely successful conservation system.

As the Boone and Crockett Club celebrates its 125th anniversary, George Bird Grinnell's words in his 1910 history of the Club still ring true today:

"It has not been the Club's practice to announce its purposes, nor to glory in what it has accomplished, but rather to move steadfastly forward, striving constantly to do whatever fell within its province which would tend to promote the country's welfare. It would have been natural and easy for the Club to have confined its activities to meetings at intervals to dine and discuss abuses and dangers, and to pass stirring resolutions about them. Instead of this, it has had a small body of intelligent men, scattered all over the country, working individually and constantly in behalf of things once laughed at or unknown, but now as familiar to the public mind as household words. The results accomplished by the Boone and Crockett Club bear testimony to the alertness and energy of its members, and to the success of the methods which they have pursued."

By the time Theodore Roosevelt travelled to the Dakota Territories in the early 1880s, the waves of tall prairie grass that once rolled to an ever-distant horizon now seemed destined to soon crash on a rocky shore.

While "manifest destiny" may have provided a high-minded rationale for Western expansion, the unrestrained exploitation of the region that accelerated in the latter half of the 19th century was not our finest hour. Nonetheless, the story of how the "Wild West" was won remains a popular and colorful chapter in our nation's history. More compelling and, certainly more uplifting, is the story of how the "Wild West" was saved. For that story, and much more in later years, we must give strong due to our friends at the Boone and Crockett Club. ■