

# Why Alaska?

FEBRUARY 1933

Violent Congressional protest greeted the purchase of Alaska for \$7,200,000 in 1867 — the whole region was condemned as a land of perpetual ice and snow, and a worthless, uninhabitable waste. It has proven a land productive of great wealth in fish, minerals, furs, and even capable of supporting a limited agricultural population. Just so, the sportsmen of this country are still inclined in their ignorance to minimize the game resources of Alaska. They still do not realize that in this attic of our continent exist the greatest game fields in North America.

Across the broad land bridge that formerly joined northeastern Asia and Alaska, came the ancestors of most of our big game. Our musk ox, bison, mountain sheep, mountain goat, and wapiti can be definitely traced to Asiatic or possibly Eurasiatic

origin. Our moose and caribou are Eurasiatic or boreal. After this migration a great subsidence of land occurred, and Bering Strait was formed. Those animals which are now found in Alaska are the closest relatives of the living Asiatic species.

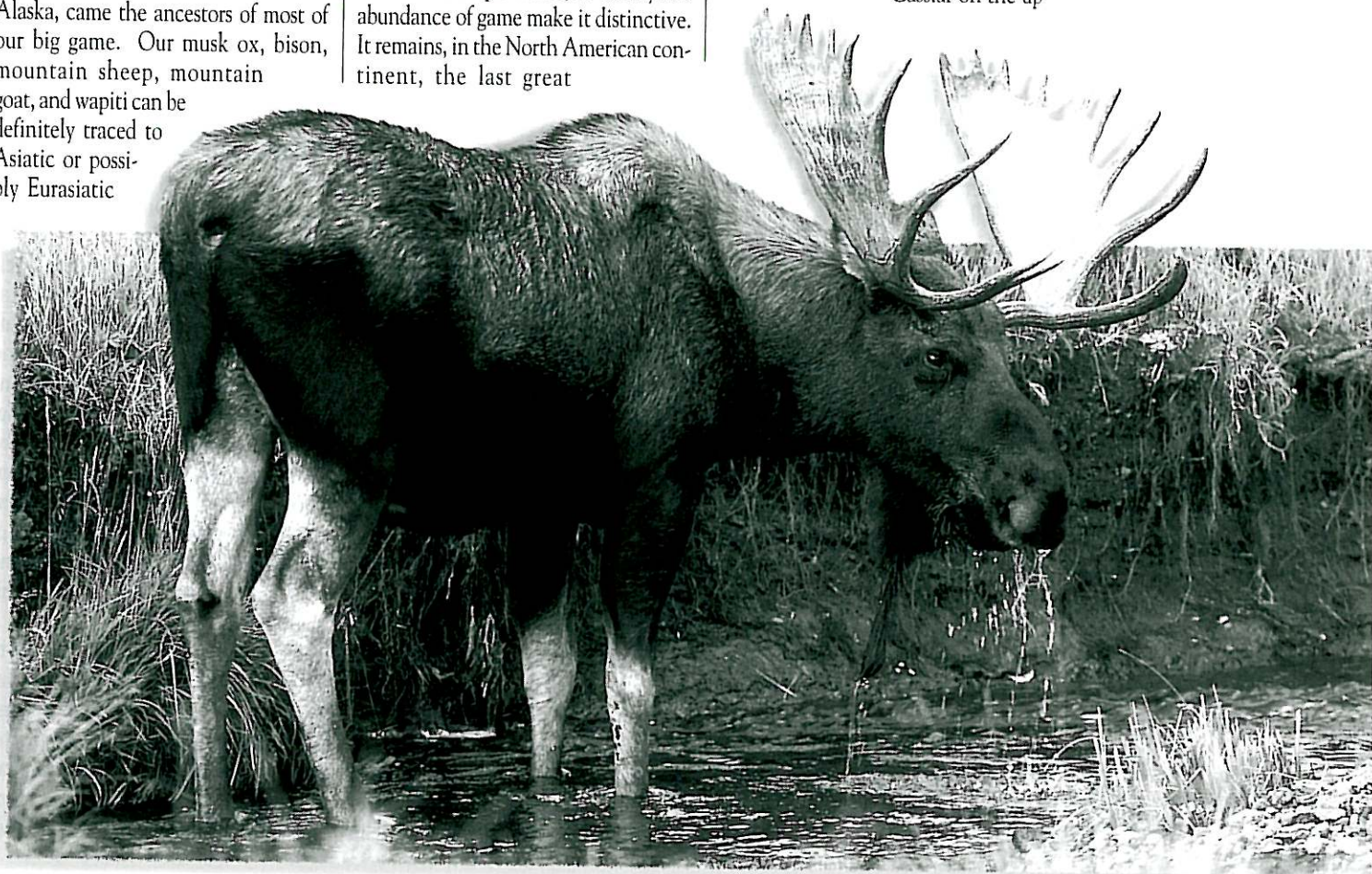
It is almost impossible to generalize about Alaska, for it embraces an area larger than nine Middle Western States, and extends east and west farther than from New York to San Francisco. Its northernmost and southernmost points are nearly as far apart as the Mexican and Canadian boundaries of the United States.

For the sportsman, its variety and abundance of game make it distinctive. It remains, in the North American continent, the last great

wilderness where there are still untrodden ways, unpoled streams, and unexplored mountain ranges, where countless thousands of caribou migrate across the great barrens, where the giant moose grow the largest antlers, and sheep dot the grassy slopes of the higher ranges, white goats cling to precipitous cliffs, and in the forest areas black-tailed deer abound. For the more adventurous, the icy northern coasts produce polar bear and walrus.

In considering the game fields of Alaska, it is proper to include those in adjacent Canadian territory, which are entered through Alaska, such as the Cassiar on the up

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per Stikine River. They offer certain subspecies of game that are interesting, and which should be included in a sportsman's trophy list. Together, Alaska and Yukon Territory offer the answer to the big game hunter's inquiry, "Where shall I go on this continent for the finest trophy, or to see the greatest number of animals?"

C. Hart Merriam has stated that, "All the bears known from all other parts of the world fall far short of the number in this continent. And here, the greatest bears center, both as to species and individuals, is an area in the Northwest embracing Alaska, Yukon, and British Columbia."

The coastal islands of southeastern Alaska, such as Admiralty and Chichagof, afford the most accessible hunting grounds, especially during the summer, when the salmon are running up the streams. Here can be seen numerous "big browns" and grizzlies along the streams, although the hides make poor trophies at this time of year, and the hunting should properly be done only with a camera. Later in the year, these islands and many others offer splendid shooting grounds.

Early spring hunting to the westward on the Alaskan Peninsula is likely to be a cold, damp, and uncomfortable business, but it is productive of splendid sport with the largest carnivorous animal in the world as a trophy. Some magnificent animals have been taken on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula, and while the record skull length of nineteen inches is not likely to be attained often, numerous animals with a skull length of sixteen inches have fallen in recent years. Hide measurements are a most untrustworthy indication of the animal's size, because the fresh hide can be so easily stretched, and the tanned hide shrinks so greatly. However, a bear with a sixteen-inch skull may be figured to have a nine-foot hide, unstretched.

Hunting grizzlies in the interior during the late fall is exciting and interesting sport. The bears have then moved away from the streams and are topping off their summer fish diet with berries and a few marmots and squirrels, before seeking the shelter of their dens for the long winter hibernation. The awe-inspiring scenery of their range

above timberline, the element of danger which, despite the assertions of many modern writers, is present in all bear hunting, make this one of the most interesting sports in our country.

Black bear are so common in certain forested areas that their hunt is robbed of the interest generally attached to it in the eastern part of the United States, or even the Rockies. I have counted forty-five black bears in eight days on the Kenai Peninsula, all of which we could have killed. There were just too many bears to make the hunt interesting. However, there are some varieties of the black bear, such as the blue or glacier bear, that are found around Yakutat Bay, which are interesting specimens, and are rare enough so that the hide is a real trophy.

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The coastal forests of southeastern Alaska abound with black-tailed deer. So numerous are they that thousands of hides formerly were shipped each year from Alaska, and it is doubtful if even this commercial slaughter did more than take care of their natural increase. Today they are a common sight from the deck of the steamers that ply the inside passage, and their hunt is looked on more as a means of providing camp meat than a sport. This deer is a subspecies (*Odocoileus columbianus sitkensis*) of the Columbia blacktail, and does not carry as fine horns as its southern relatives.

The white sheep (*Ovis dalli*) and its subspecies, the Stone's sheep, afford the most fascinating trophies in the northland. Back from the coastal plain

among the higher ranges, the chase leads into some of the most magnificent scenery of the continent. These sheep occupy a great area of Alaska, yet they were unknown to our scientists and sportsmen until the late 'seventies. In most of their Alaskan range their fresh fall pelage is snowy white except for occasional black hairs on the tips of their tails. To the east and south in Yukon Territory, the black hairs increase until many sheep have nearly black tails, and often black showing on the front of their legs. Still farther south, in the Cassiar district of British Columbia, the dark hairs have spread over their entire bodies and they merge into the subspecies known as Stone's sheep.

The best Dall's heads in late years have come from the Chickaloon, the Knik River, and the Rainy Pass section, in Alaska. However, so many large areas have never been visited by sportsmen that undoubtedly record heads will be brought out for years to come.

The finest Stone's sheep heads of which we have record were killed in the past two years, although the Cassiar has been a favorite hunting ground for American sportsmen for nearly thirty years. I believe the hunter today has a better chance of bringing back a trophy than when I went down the Yukon in 1902, or hunted the Cassiar in 1904. The guides are better acquainted with the ranges of all the Alaskan big game, and can take the hunter direct to the best hunting grounds.

The white goat, like the black bear, may be considered incidental game. They are not difficult to hunt, and less difficult to find. Along the south and southeastern coastal mountains, as far west as the Kenai Peninsula, they are numerous, and can often be seen from the shoreline. However, strong legs and a level head are necessary to get within shooting distance of the white goat, for he lives up high, and selects the most precipitous cliffs as his haunt.

Many varieties of caribou are to be found in the interior of Alaska, particularly between the Yukon River and the Alaskan Range, on the headwater of the Kuskokwim River, the Alaskan Peninsula, Unimak Island, and along the slopes of the Brooks Range. They

are all of the barren-ground type; east and south, beginning about at the MacMillan River, we find the first of the woodland group in the form of the mountain caribou, which includes the Osborn caribou of the Cassiar. This is the handsomest and largest of all the caribou, carrying magnificent symmetrical heads which, however, are not on the average as long in beam as the barren ground type, nor bearing as many points as the Newfoundland type.

The antlers of the Alaskan moose exceed in mass and weight those carried by any living animal. A spread of sixty inches or better is not unusual, particularly in the Kenai Peninsula and the Rainy Pass sections. The abundance of animals seen is surprising, especially to the sportsman who has hunted moose in the woods of Quebec or the Rockies.

While the moose ranges throughout most of the interior, except the far-western peninsula and the coastal islands, it is particularly numerous in certain sections. Before 1870 it was not found in the Kenai Peninsula, which had been known as a caribou country. At about this time a great fire burned over this area, and in the succeeding years the new growth of willow and alder offered a splendid feeding ground for moose. The first moose head was brought into the village of Kenai in about 1873 by an Indian who was not sure what strange animal he had killed. Since that time, their numbers have increased to such an astonishing degree that in a short trip of only three days near Tustumena Lake I have counted seventy-eight moose, of which fifty-one were bulls.

With the natural reforestation of this area with evergreens, and the consequent decrease of moose feed in the undergrowth of willow and alder, the herds of moose appear to be decreasing. Recent reports indicate a marked decline in the fertility of the cows, and relatively few calves have been noted in the last two years by observers. Possibly this means that the Kenai Peninsula is overstocked with moose, and that nature is reducing the herds in accordance with the food supply. Possibly it will lead to a complete withdrawal of moose from this area, as they have been known to leave large

districts in the eastern provinces of Canada.

If it is camera hunting that calls the sportsman, there is no place in the world where bears, both brown and grizzlies, can be so easily photographed as on the salmon streams of Alaska during the summer. The large herds of moose which congregate each fall on the Funny River flats in the Kenai Peninsula offer wonderful opportunities for close approach with the camera, and the numbers are sufficient to provide frequent opportunities each day. White sheep and caribou on the Alaskan Range are both numerous and not so much hunted as to be difficult to approach.

Alaska is more scenic than Africa, more healthful than the jungles of Malaya or India, more accessible than the high country of central Asia. Its game species are not so numerous as those of these foreign fields, but it is within the average sportsman's range in time and cost. A week's journey from New York, three days from Seattle by train and boat (quicker by airplane), and the sportsman can watch grizzlies catching salmon in a tumbling stream, or climb out on his city-bred knees after the white goat. A few more days, and he can draw down his sights on a sixty-inch moose, or count a hundred sheep through his glasses.

EDITOR'S NOTE:  
PRENTISS N. GRAY WROTE "WHY ALASKA?" FOR THE SPORTSMAN IN 1933. FOR INFORMATION ON THE BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S NEW BOOK, FROM THE PEACE TO THE FRASER: NEWLY DISCOVERED NORTH AMERICAN HUNTING AND EXPLORATION JOURNALS, 1900 TO 1930, BY PRENTISS N. GRAY, TURN TO PAGE 13.



THE ABOVE MAP OF ALASKA WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN THE FEBRUARY 1933 ISSUE OF THE SPORTSMAN. IT ABUNDANTS WITH TRAVEL, BIG GAME AND CLIMBING INFORMATION FOR THE SPORTSMEN OF THAT TIME.