

JACK WARD  
THOMAS

B&C EMERITUS MEMBER  
An excerpt from his new  
book, *Forks in the Trail*

**A**fter graduating in 1957 from Texas A&M with a degree in wildlife management, I found gainful employment with what was then known as the Texas Game Department (TGD). My first assignment was as an assistant project leader for game management in the small town of Sonora in Sutton County, located where the western edge of the Edwards Plateau meets the Chihuahuan Desert. My first wildlife management district—Sutton, Edwards, and Crockett counties—was a perfect place at a most opportune time for a “newbie” wildlife biologist, arriving on the scene just when wildlife management was coming into its own, to learn and help invent what was to be my lifelong profession.

During my second year of drawing a paycheck as a genuine professional wildlife biologist, I was charged with operating a check station where hunters who had killed antlerless deer (usually does and fawns of both sexes) were required to appear with their kills. That check station was located in Edwards County, just east a mile or so outside of the county seat of Rocksprings, at a wide spot beside a road where gravel and crushed limestone were routinely stockpiled. Clouds of caliche dust rose in clouds when a vehicle entered or left the area.

The hunting season for antlerless deer was the last two weeks of a forty-five-day deer season at the end of the calendar year. The hours were 8 a.m. until 9 p.m.—a long, largely uneventful, thirteen-hour day for anyone manning one of those check stations. In 1959 hunting for antlerless deer was

a first-time event for Edwards County and had not yet been widely accepted by most landowners and hunters.

In the early afternoon of a sunny day in the last week of December, an old Ford pickup, with rusted-through fenders rattling, slid to a stop in a billowing cloud of dust next to my TGD pickup. I was seated on the tailgate “just spitting and whittling” to pass the time. As my level of irritation settled along with the cloud of caliche dust, the driver dismounted, slammed his pickup door, and walked toward me. I was not a happy camper but met him halfway with an extended hand and something of a forced smile.

The grizzled old-timer had a wad of Day’s Work chewing tobacco stuffed in his cheek. The color of his remaining teeth gave evidence of his lifelong habit of dipping snoose and chewing tobacco. He leaned over and spat a stream of tobacco juice and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Are you the TGD biologist?” The word “biologist” came out with an intonation that led me to believe that no respect was implied.

I stood up. “Yes, sir, my name is Jack Thomas. Can I help you?” I extended my hand.

He shook my hand with a stronger grip than was warranted—I could feel the calluses. “Son, I want to know just one damned thing. What’s y’all gonna do about the bear that’s gettin’ into my angora goats?” It was more

challenge—maybe a demand—than an inquiry.

I was a bit taken aback. “Sir, black bears were extirpated in this area somewhere around about 1910.”

He spat again; the impact in the dust was getting closer to my boots. His eyes were flashing black under bushy, dusty gray eyebrows. He stepped closer. I didn’t step back. “Okay, you government smartass, just what the hell does ‘extirpated’ mean?”

It seemed wise to take my hands out of my pockets, raise them waist high, and take a deep breath. “Well, sir, ‘extirpated’ means that a species is locally extinct.”

The old rancher squinted. “Species? Locally extinct?”

I struggled to be respectful while extracting my size 12 boot from my mouth. “Well, sir, ‘extirpated’ means ‘local extinction.’ In other words, there are a lot of black bears in the United States—even a few in East Texas, south of us in Mexico, and in far West Texas. But because black bears were killed out in this part of Texas by the early 1900s, we say that they are ‘extirpated’—they were here once but not now.”

The old rancher turned his head and relieved himself of another mouthful of tobacco juice—even closer to my boots. I was beginning to believe that there was some message in this behavior. He wiped his mouth with the frayed sleeve of his faded denim jacket. “So, let me get this straight. Y’all are telling



# EXTIRPATED?

NEVER SAY NEVER





Jack weighing a buck at a checkstation. He worked for the Texas Game Department from 1957 until 1966 when he took a position with the U.S. Forest Service in West Virginia.

me that it ain't no bears gettin' into my goats?"

"Well, sir, I'm not saying you don't have a predator problem, but it's highly unlikely that it would be a bear. I'll call the local game warden, Ellis Martin, on my two-way radio and ask him to be in touch with you. He can arrange with the TGD trapper to give you some help."

I wrote down the fellow's name and telephone number. He assured me that Ellis knew him and where he lived. And there was no use in anybody trying to call, as the phone line from the county road to his house was down and had been for a couple of weeks. With that, my new friend spat again, about six inches ahead of the toe of my boot, and walked to his truck. His scuffed boots, spurs attached, raised puffs of dust

with each step. His old Ford pickup started up after several grinding attempts. He was off—literally in a significant cloud of dust. It seemed to me that he spun the tires to provide emphasis to his disdain.

I dug around in the gear box in the bed of my ancient truck for my copy of *Hunting, Trapping, and Fishing Laws of the State of Texas*. The section related to black bears, obviously enacted long after extirpation had occurred, prohibited, at the risk of significant penalties, any attempt by any means by any person to take, kill, harm, harass, etc., etc., a hair upon the head, or ass, of any black bear that might exist in the western two-thirds of the sovereign state of Texas.

Later in the afternoon, the game warden showed up.

**But then I thought, 'Naw, that couldn't be! After all, black bears have been *extirpated* from these parts for nigh onto sixty years. Must be true—the biologist told me so. Heck, everybody knows how smart those guys are!'"**

He poured himself a cup of the cowboy coffee I had simmering on the Coleman stove on the tailgate of my pickup. I passed on the report that the old rancher had given me.

Ellis saw some humor in my explanation of "extirpation" to the old-timer. He cautioned me that such fancy language was one of the reasons some locals thought wildlife biologists were a little strange—and a bit on the smartass side. He smiled as he asked me if I knew what "extirpation" meant before I "done went to college." I blushed and admitted that I didn't. He promised he would call on the rancher and, if necessary, arrange for a TGD trapper to give him some help.

Three days later, the rancher's old truck roared into the check station, a tad too fast and raising a huge cloud of dust. I interpreted that as some sort of statement. I had just finished collecting required data from a hunter and certifying his antlerless deer as legally taken. That hunter and his partner were toasting their backsides at my fire of mesquite logs. With some trepidation, I walked through the settling cloud of dust to greet the driver.

The rancher had walked around to the back of his truck and dropped the tailgate with a bang. Just as I

walked up, he reached into the truck's bed and tugged something toward him. I heard a heavy thud and saw a plume of dust rise as a very dead yearling black bear hit the ground.

I stood there slack-jawed. With a flourish, the old-timer slammed the tailgate back into its upright position and latched the chains. The ensuing dramatic pause allowed him time to relish the stunned look on my face. Then he drew himself upright and spat just in front of the toes of my boots—the closest yet! That flourish, however well executed, was beginning to irritate me.

"Don't worry, sonny boy, it ain't what you think. I have to admit the sonofabitch fooled me too at first. I thought for a second there, it for damned certain was a gawd-damned bear. But then I thought, 'Naw, that couldn't be! After all, black bears have been *extirpated* from these parts for nigh onto sixty years. Must be true—the biologist told me so. Heck, everybody knows how smart those guys are!'"

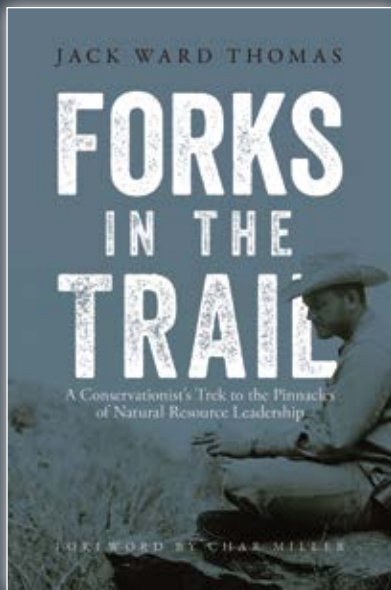
He climbed back into the old truck, slammed the door, ground the engine to a reluctant start, and spun the tires in the caliche dust all the way to the pavement. He had his hand out the window waving gleefully as he drove away. I guess I should have been grateful that he wasn't waving his middle finger. I figured I would hear this story for years to come.

Right then, I pledged to never ever say "never"—and sure as hell not to say "extirpated" except to another wildlife biologist. Lesson learned. ■

Read more from Jack Ward Thomas in his new trilogy featuring *Forks in the Trail*, *Wilderness Journals*, and *Hunting Around the World*.

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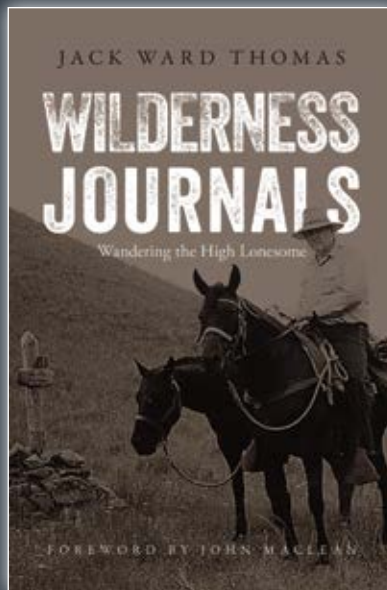
# THE JACK WARD THOMAS TRILOGY



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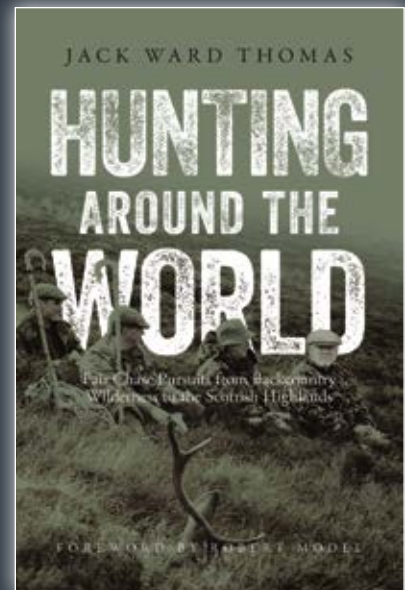
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