

American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains

Brad D. Lookingbill
Columbia College of Missouri

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2017 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Lookingbill, Brad D. "American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 114-115.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12352>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Book Reviews and Notices

American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains, by Dan Flores. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. 213 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Brad D. Lookingbill is professor of history at Columbia College of Missouri. Among his research and writing interests are the history of the Great Plains, environmental history, and military history.

My family and I drove across the Great Plains this summer. We paused at a popular restaurant called Simon's Catch near Elk City, Oklahoma. Its walls were decorated with animal trophies, including the heads of a pronghorn, a bear, and a buffalo. Although seldom seen in the region today, these creatures and many others dominated the North American interior a long time ago.

Dan Flores insists that the wildlife of the Great Plains once rivaled the Serengeti of Africa. Offering personal observations mixed with "big history," he studies the species native to the grasslands from West Texas to the Upper Missouri River. He recalls Walter Prescott Webb's classic *The Great Plains* (1931), which contained only a brief section on animals. However, Flores meditates on something other than a Darwinian struggle on the western frontier. Critical of American attitudes toward the great beasts, he posits that "our slaughterhouse on the Great Plains was profoundly immoral" (8).

Flores begins by discussing the prehistoric megafauna of the Great Plains, such as lions, mammoths, cougars, saber-toothed cats, giant sloths, dire wolves, and wild horses. He devotes most of his attention to the pronghorn, coyote, wolf, grizzly, and bison, who survived what paleobiologist Paul Martin called "Blitzkrieg Overkill" between 8,000 and 13,000 years ago. A fine chapter on the nineteenth-century horse trade features reports from military expeditions as well as the correspondence of President Thomas Jefferson. Throughout the book, Flores's approach to source material is selective yet compelling.

Flores is at the top of his game when analyzing the bison ecology. He contemplates competing narratives about the demise of the bison, giving special recognition to traditional Native American stories of culture heroes. Under optimum conditions, he estimates, the bison numbered in the range of 25 million during the first half of the 1800s. Unfortunately, a study conducted in 1886 indicated that only 1,073 still lived.

While debunking the famous legend that the U.S. military conspired with the federal government to eradicate the herds, Flores highlights the oft-cited words attributed to General Philip Sheridan about “destroying the Indian’s commissary” and traces them to a fabrication by a Texas hide hunter named John Cook. In fact, the army officer actually declared, “I consider it important that this wholesale slaughter of the Buffalo should be stopped” (131). Beset with environmental changes, exotic diseases, and unregulated hunting, the bison barely escaped extinction.

With a lyrical flourish, Flores concludes the book with a sentimental call to “re-wild” the Great Plains. Like many naturalists, he acknowledges that the prairie is as sublime as canyons, mountains, and forests. He touts the ongoing efforts to create parks and preserves, although most have fallen short of artist George Catlin’s vision of 1832. Anyone who has driven across this vast country sees its emptiness, encountering many places in the grasslands that remind the author of “a dustier Iowa, with more than a hint of ammonia, feedlots, and hog farms” (162). Flores hopes that future visitors will encounter a more romantic landscape, where large animals and human beings might play.

My only disappointment in Flores’s book stems from the absence of endnotes, footnotes, or other forms of citation. His bibliography lists 12 pages of published materials but gives no record of archives and collections for further research on the last big animals. Such additions to the book would have made his passionate plea on behalf of this lost world even more noteworthy.

Frontier Democracy: Constitutional Conventions in the Old Northwest, by Silvana R. Siddali. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xv, 392 pp. Illustrations, tables, maps, notes, index. \$120 hardcover.

Reviewer John Dinan is professor of politics and international affairs at Wake Forest University. He is the author of *The American State Constitutional Tradition* (2006) and *Keeping the People’s Liberties: Legislators, Citizens, and Judges as Guardians of Rights* (1998).

Scholars have recently begun paying long overdue attention to the more than 230 state constitutional conventions held since 1776. Although no conventions have been called during the past 30 years, the longest such gap in American history, they were once held regularly to frame inaugural state constitutions or revise existing constitutions, albeit more often in some states than others. In fact, 14 state constitutions currently require that referenda on whether to call a convention be held at periodic intervals, as in Iowa where a referendum is considered every ten years, most recently in 2010.