

## CHAPTER XV

### PRE-COLUMBIAN TIMES

During the long period in the ancient history of Kentucky which intervened between Glacial Times and the coming of the white explorer to this region—for we assume that modern history can not properly be said to begin until the first white man appeared upon the scene to record it—many changes took place in the animal life. Probably at least fifteen or twenty thousand years elapsed between the time when the mastodon roamed the country and the days when Daniel Boone watched the buffalo wander over the same territory, and part of this time represents a long hiatus in the known faunal history of the state. During this period the typical Pleistocene animals such as the mastodons, the mammoths and the ancient horses, bears, hyenas and foxes disappeared and in their places by the slow processes of evolution came the bison, elk, panther, and the more recent kinds of wolves, bears, deer, rodents, and birds which were known to the modern Indians and which were found by the first settlers. The ice-masses had receded, the climate had modified, the configuration of the country had become greatly changed by erosion, and altogether conditions approximated in a general way what they are today, or at least what they were before the last few generations of civilized man had denuded the forests, cultivated the soil, killed off the game and destroyed most of the large forms of our wild life.

Therefore the last period of the ancient history of the animals must deal with those forms which were in existence immediately prior to the discovery of America and at a date when the American Indian was in possession of the land which is now Kentucky. Our knowledge of conditions during that period must of course be based on the accounts given by the Indians to the early white settlers, the conditions encountered by the pioneers themselves, the skeletons of the animals which may yet occasionally be found and by the bones which we have described as forming part of the kitchen-middens of early tribes. This information while not nearly as complete as we would desire is never the less probably accurate so far as it goes and gives us

a fairly correct picture of this region while it was yet in its primeval state.

We know that this part of the Mississippi Valley was densely wooded and that apparently all of what is now Kentucky was covered with forests, cane or grass. From time to time that part of the state which occupies a portion of the Southwestern Plateau seems to have been denuded of its timber from some cause or other which we can not certainly explain and reduced to an open plain. It was in such condition at the time of the arrival of the first settlers and by them it was given the name of "The Barrens" since they supposed that the region would not support plant life, an idea which was of course entirely erroneous for it is now well wooded and well suited for agriculture. Various theories have been proposed to account for the absence of timber on this tract at certain times. One theory holds that it was regularly burned over by the Indians; another is that the great herds of buffalo trampled down and ate off the vegetation and kept the saplings from developing; a third is that since this is the region of underground streams and very little surface water, it was subject to droughts and that great forest fires may have burned off the timber leaving a barren area which suggested the name.

The state as a whole, however, may be considered to have been, in the later prehistoric period, a region of great forests and a luxuriant vegetation. It must have been, indeed, well suited for many varieties of animal life and if we are to believe the traditions of the Indians and the tales of the pioneers it was a hunter's paradise, abounding in game of all descriptions. The very physiography of the state makes this probable. The rugged "mountains" were ideally suited to harbor the bear and wild-cat; the broad plains offered a splendid range for the buffalo and the deer; the dense forests provided the lair of the panther and the runway of the elk; the many beautiful rivers provided the habitat for the fish, the otter and the beaver; the caves sheltered the fox and the skunk; the cliffs gave to the buzzard and the eagle the homes which they desired.

It would be hard to find a region in which more varieties of wild life could be maintained than Kentucky a few hundreds of years ago. Undoubtedly a wide variety of life was so main-

tained but there was no pen to record it and no brush to paint it. Naturally the Indians and the pioneers were interested primarily in those animals which affected very directly their lives and such animals are the only ones they mention. They record the taking of the buffalo, the elk, the deer, the squirrel, the raccoon, the opossum, the wild duck and the wild turkey to provide food for their tables and of the bee which provided their honey; they relate the killing of the bear, the panther and the rattlesnake to protect their lives; they tell of the slaughter of the wolves and the foxes which preyed upon their domestic animals; they used the deer-skin, the buffalo-robe, the bear-skin coat and the coon-skin cap as articles of clothing; their rough cots were softened by pelts of beaver and bear and buffalo and deer. All of these had a real economic value and were for that reason known and recorded. But of the multitude of other animals which must have been all about them, we find hardly a mention.

Among the animals which we know were in this region during the period about which we are now writing, there are a few which deserve special mention chiefly because of the fact that most of them are now extinct or are no longer found in Kentucky.

The American bison, known to the early settlers as the "buffalo" should come first on such a list. That it ranged Kentucky in enormous numbers can not be doubted and even experienced hunters such as Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton were "amazed" at the immense herds which they saw. The fate of this magnificent beast in the United States is one of the great tragedies of North American animal life.

The elk, which is really the wapiti and closely related to the famous stag of Europe, was another of the noblest of the animals which provided meat and leather for the Indians and the pioneers. It was generally regarded as *par excellence* the game animal of the United States.

The deer must have been very plentiful during the period of which we speak and persisted longer than most of the other wild animals. In fact, there are still a few wild deer in the state. We have already noted the fact that it was probably the commonest form of animal food for prehistoric man.

The panther, the largest of the North American cats, was much feared by the Indians and by the first settlers. Although it was a cowardly beast and although many of the blood-curdling stories concerning it were probably greatly exaggerated, it was large and powerful with dangerous teeth and claws and its stealthy habits made it a beast to be dreaded.

The wild-cat is still to be found in Kentucky and was once very abundant. Like the panther its nocturnal life and bloodthirsty habits made it a terror of the forests.

The bear, which is also still occasionally found in the state, was likewise very common in early days. Even after the coming of the white man it proved itself no mean antagonist of the pioneer hunter who was dependant on the old "muzzle-loader" and the sheath-knife for weapons. The size, strength and endurance of this animal, and its speed in action despite its apparent clumsiness and lumbering gait, made it a savage foe and enabled it to hold its own against its enemies.

The wolf was apparently not greatly feared by the Indians nor the white man and is generally spoken of by both in terms of disdain—"cowardly, skulking beasts"—which lived in the timber and preyed on weaker animals.

Two foxes, the red and the gray, were abundant in Kentucky at this time and both are still to be found in considerable numbers in the state. The Indians knew them well and often referred to them.

The beaver was also well known to the Kentucky Indians who greatly admired its industry and patience. Its fur was excellent and its skin served as currency.

The rattlesnake and copperhead were common in the uplands and the cotton-mouth moccasin was found along the southern streams and in the Reel-foot Lake region. Doubtless many other snakes were abundant but since they were harmless they were unnoticed or at least unrecorded.

The wild-turkey and the grouse were the outstanding game birds of early days and are closely associated with the pioneers. Unfortunately both of these birds are now very rare in Kentucky and in fact are probably doomed to extinction in the near future.

One of the greatest tragedies in the bird world has been the extinction of the passenger pigeon or "wild pigeon" of the

Indian and early residents of the state. At one time this was probably the most abundant bird in Kentucky but now so far as we know there is not a living specimen on earth. It is hard to believe the stories, which are undoubtedly true, told by Audubon and Wilson of the multitudes of these birds which roosted and fed in Kentucky even as late as their times—how they flew overhead in such vast numbers as to darken the sun for hours at a time; how the weight of their bodies broke down the timber in their roosting places; how their dung fell like snow flakes and covered the ground for a depth of several inches in their nesting-sites. The Indians knew these birds well and they were doubtless here in countless thousands before the coming of the white man.

All the above animals are now getting scarce if they are not already extinct and perhaps in another generation or two we shall know them no more. It is most unfortunate that the slaughter of our wild life goes on so ruthlessly and that we can already foresee the end of so many of our most valuable species.

In addition to the above, there were of course present in the period which we are discussing most of the other wild animals which are still with us—the raccoon, the skunk, the opossum, the native rodents, our wild birds and our fish—which had appeared long before this period and were doubtless very numerous. Also the host of smaller animals—the protozoans, worms, molluscs, insects and the rest of the invertebrates—which are not mentioned and in many cases were perhaps not even known by early man. Of the higher forms of animal life, we have now in Kentucky probably 150 species of fish, twenty-five or thirty amphibians, ten turtles, six lizards, twenty-five different kinds of snakes, about 275 species of birds and about forty-five mammals. We assume that all of these were present just before the historic period began and doubtless most of them were far more abundant than they are now.

These, however, are not the groups in which the zoologist is most interested. Our present interests center around the lower forms of great economic importance, such as the insects, the worms, and the protozoans, particularly those which threaten man's existence. It is unfortunate that we have small means of knowing which of these were present and abundant in

late prehistoric times, but of course in this field of research our data are very limited.

We can only suppose that the animal life in this period was abundant and varied; that our present animals were then in existence in large numbers and that many forms which are now extinct were in those days in the height of their ascendancy. And this condition pertained until the first white man arrived and brought the ancient history of Kentucky to a close.

The human inhabitants of Kentucky in pre-Columbian days were of course the American Indians of whom various tribes are known to have been in this state at different times. As to the origin and ancestry of these tribes we know little. They may or may not have been the descendents of some of the prehistoric groups which we have discussed; they may or may not represent a distinct ethnological race; they may have been the culmination of a more primitive culture or they may illustrate a stage in the decline of a higher type of civilization. But whoever they were, whatever their origin, whatever their ancestry or whatever milepost they had reached on the great highway of human evolution, they were here when the first European reached the borders of that wonderful wilderness which "was called Kentucke."

The subject of the American Indian is of course entirely too pretentious to be discussed in this brief report. It forms a great and fascinating part of the literature of early American history and has furnished the material for many voluminous and scholarly dissertations. Despite the research which has been done on the subject, however, it is still appreciated far too little by the average student and is sadly neglected in most of the histories of our country. If the average student in school or college is asked regarding any of the important tribes—the Shawnee, the Cherokee, the Blackfeet, the Cheyenne, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, the Seminoles, the Creeks, the Utes, the Piutes, the Hopi, the Navahoe, the Winnebago, the Omaha, the Osages, the Crow, the Iowa, the Cree, the Delawares, the Mohicans, the Kickapoos, the Miami, the Mohawks or the Hurons—he usually has only the vaguest of ideas; if he is asked to tell something of the habitat of such tribes or their tribal customs or methods of living, he generally admits entire ignorance.

To many persons "an Indian is an Indian;" he is vaguely visualized as a "savage" or a "redskin;" he is dismissed with a gesture that we may egotistically devote our attention to the achievements of the invading European. And yet the subject represents one of the most interesting phases of American history. Not that the Indian should be considered as a hero, or a martyr, or a superman, or the noble representative of a wonderful race—he was probably none of these. Doubtless most of the tales which portray him as a splendid figure in romantic settings, as a marvelous athlete of unequalled prowess, or as a crafty statesman of inscrutable mien, are greatly exaggerated, but nevertheless, as a representative of a race of great ethnological importance, the American Indian is deserving of our most careful study.

It is a mistake, of course, to think of all of the American Indians as belonging to a common, closely related group as is so often suggested by careless historians. To be sure, the different tribes lived upon the same continent, but so do many peoples in Europe who are far removed in origin and ancestry. Such important Indian stocks as the Iroquois, the Muskoki, the Catawbas; the Algonquin, the Sioux, the Pawnee, the Yuma, the Pueblo and the Athabascan may indeed represent very different origins as they certainly represent different linguistic, cultural and religious development.

The problem presented to the archaeologist and ethnologist by the various stocks and the subdivisions of these stocks into tribes is a most difficult one and may never be solved. Indeed, in the absence of written records it bids fair to prove unsolvable. Such meager information as is furnished by some of the supposed original records as, for example, the famous *Walum Olum* or "painted sticks" record which is thought by some to be the history of the Lanapes as compiled by a Tallegwi slave or captive seems to add to the confusion rather than to throw light on the subject.

Never the less we must recognize that at the time of the first recorded visits of the white man to America there was on this continent a considerable population of human beings living over a wide area and representing a long occupancy. They were hunters and trappers, they were agriculturists and artisans,

they were boatmen and fishermen, they were warriors and travelers, and in many cases they had wandered far from former lodges. Most important of all from the standpoint of the historian, they had kept no record of their wanderings save that most unreliable of all records—traditions handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

We know fairly well what tribes were in Kentucky in comparatively recent times but on the whole this territory seems to have been a "no man's land" so far as permanent occupancy by anyone tribe in immediate pre-colonial days was concerned. Apparently the region which is now Kentucky was a favorite hunting ground for a number of tribes and was jealously guarded by all of them against any who might desire to claim it as their own. In earlier days prehistoric man had undoubtedly lived here either in large numbers or for a long time—but not the more recent American Indian. He came upon the scene later and found it to his liking. It was rich in game and easy of access; it was beautiful in appearance and salubrious in climate; it contained few lodges of his enemies and was apparently favored of the Great Spirit; and so he guided his canoe along its peaceful streams and wandered through its forest trails.

And so his happy life continued until one eventful day—exactly when and where we can not be sure—he met a stranger on his path, a stranger very different from any that he had ever heard of before—a white man! Gabriel Arthur, a young Virginian, has been shown to have been the first man of European descent and undoubted record to have crossed the boundary of this Commonwealth his entry having been made in 1674 as an Indian captive. But others had surely preceded him though they left naught to tell of their exploration in the great wilderness. As their voices resounded through virgin forest and stream-bound meadow, the ancient history of Kentucky ended and modern history began.