

Big Bucks: Hunting in New Mexico's Gila Country 1880-2000 Provender, Predator Control, Recreation

The Mogollon Mountain-area of Catron County is New Mexico's largest county, and only seventeen percent of it is privately owned. The rest is in the hands of various branches of the federal government and the state. The population is sparse: with one half of a person per square mile.¹ This paper focuses the way market hunting, predator control, and recreational hunting have generated substantial revenue in a region whose economy is marginal.

Despite New Mexico's 121,666 square miles--with the lowest water-to-land ratio in the United States--six of the seven climatic zones from Alpine to Desert are represented.² Annual precipitation ranges from 6 to 10 inches in more arid regions. At the higher elevations the rainfall measures 30 to 40 inches per year. Nevertheless, these conditions have produced a wide variety of wildlife and the vegetation and prey to sustain it.³ The mountains and heavily forested lands, unsuitable for agriculture and stock-raising, favor game and provide it with extensive territory.

In the Gila Country's mountain and grassland complex in the state's southwest quadrant, the 3.3 million acres of the Gila National Forest sprawl over the greater part of Catron County; northern, eastern, and central portions of Grant County; and slightly overlap the borders with Sierra County to the east and Hidalgo County to the south.

The 557,873 acres of the Gila Wilderness, the first established in the country in 1924, and the 202,016 acres of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, are included within the national forest boundaries.

The Gila's rugged terrain thwarted any settlement by Spanish conquerors and their descendants, and the threat from native Apaches precluded settled development until Geronimo

was subdued in 1886. Even today, the distance from large population centers mitigates the Gila's popularity as a tourist destination. These conditions, plus abundant game populations, distinguished the Mogollons from other mountain ranges in the state.⁴ This mountain range was not as populous or long-settled as the Sangre de Cristos in the north, and the winters, with a lighter snowfall, were not as severe.⁵

Hunting in New Mexico's Gila Country has taken place for millennia, and it has always been a profitable enterprise. From the earliest pre-Columbian peoples to nineteenth century-white settlers, hunting provided food and clothing for the pithouse or crude cabin. As the area became more populous, market hunters sought deer and turkey to supply meat to growing settlements.

Predator control policies, instituted later, offered bounties for animals killing livestock and threatening deer populations. Individual ranchers or livestock associations also offered bounties, paying hunters and trappers to rid ranchlands of lions, wolves, and bears.

After New Mexico became a territory in 1850, recreational hunting enticed visitors to spend tourist dollars. In this endeavor to fill treasury coffers, territorial and state officials lured out-of-state hunters to a region whose geomorphology had created hunting conditions that are ideal.

Paleo-Indian people were hunting and gathering in the Mimbres River Valley by 10,000 B.C.E.⁶ Hunting implements and dartheads, evidence of later pre-Columbian cultures in the region, indicate that hunting supplemented small-scale agriculture.⁷ Various Native Americans also hunted in the Gila Country, traveling seasonally to the bountiful hunting grounds for supplies of meat.⁸

Beginning in 1846, United States Army troops served in the area to fight Native Americans. Later, they fought the Confederate Army during the Civil War. On reconnaissance missions during campaigns to suppress the Apaches, soldiers recognized the region's possibilities. Army scouts found mineral deposits and noted sites suitable for ranching. Some of them returned to the area after mustering out.

Small settlements, individual mining claims, and isolated homesteads multiplied with the advent of the railroad in 1878.⁹ By 1884, a spur line was laid to Magdalena in Socorro County.¹⁰ Tracks never crossed any part of Catron County, created from western Socorro County in 1921, but did extend to Silver City.

Early settlers appreciated and depended on the region's proliferation of game. In his book *Black Range Tales*, James A. McKenna, who hunted and prospected in the Mogollons in the 1880s, recalled the "immense number of wild animals that water in the mountain streams and feed on the mast," and he also cites bear, fox, cougar, wildcat, Gambel quail, and Merriam turkey.¹¹ Besides those species he catalogued, elk, deer, antelope, rabbit, and squirrels abounded.

A population explosion ensued with a twenty-seven percent increase in Socorro County between 1890 and 1900.¹² Settlers poured into the area to claim more homesteads, prospect for silver and gold, and graze huge herds of Texas cattle. Game animals, abundantly available, met the demand of a subsistence lifestyle; hunting was a necessity.¹³

Pioneer Ben Kemp, describing the Beaver Creek area in 1897, wrote that travelers would see a herd of deer or flock of turkeys at nearly every turn of the creek.¹⁴

When market hunters moved into the area by the 1880s, they harvested thousands of deer from Mogollon Mountain valleys.¹⁵ Ready buyers for meat were found in mining camps, large settlements, and army forts. So much market hunting was carried out in the Mogollon area that a

group of mountains, a canyon, and a spring are named for the process of preserving the meat of elk and deer. The Jerky Mountains, Canyon, and Spring are located fifteen miles northwest of the Gila Cliff Dwellings.¹⁶

In 1867, according to state game warden Elliott Barker's history of the game and fish department, a predator bounty law was passed. Payments of \$0.50 were awarded for coyotes and wildcats; \$1.00 for lynx; \$5.00 for bear or panther and \$5.00 for mountain lions. (Barker also noted that the legislators didn't know that a panther and a mountain lion were one and the same.)¹⁷ The state paid a \$20-bounty for black and grizzly bears, then classed as predators, between 1889 and 1908.¹⁸

Aldo Leopold, a twenty-two year old Yale graduate working for the Forest Service, arrived in the Gila area in 1909. In the early nineteen-teens, reflecting the prevailing opinion of the times, he endorsed the eradication of all wolves and mountain lions in the West. By the time he produced his landmark *Game Management* in 1933, however; he was rethinking the issue.¹⁹

To enforce this extermination policy, in 1921 the state legislature recommended employing men to trap predators and act as deputy game wardens.²⁰

Both of the Gila Country's most famous bounty hunters were legendary. Ben Lilly's reputation was known nationally through the biography Texas folklorist and author J. Frank Dobie wrote. The reputation of Nat Straw, on the other hand, was not that widely known, but he too commanded a biography in 2004 (*Mogollon Mountain Man* by Carolyn O'Bagy Davis).

In 1925, Lilly was hired to kill panthers and bears for the owner of the GOS ranch, north of Silver City. "I will never feel right until we get [the bear]," he wrote.²¹ Lilly is generally

credited with extirpating grizzlies in the region, but Dobie deflates the hyperbole attached to Lilly's kill rate, holding the number to no more than a 1000 lions and bears combined.²²

Straw would approach cowmen who would contribute ten to twenty dollars each toward a reward and was paid a bounty of fifty dollars, after bringing in the scalp of the animal he had killed.²³ Catching a jaguar at the headwaters of the Gila River, which was unheard of, further enhanced Straw's reputation.²⁴ (This occurred in 1902.) He sold the hide for \$200.²⁵

In 1967, the Game and Fish Department maintained that predatory animals should be controlled to protect relict species, and if predators curtailed the production of young game species, or killed both young and adult so that a desired species was unable to sustain itself.²⁶

Contract hunters and trappers killed 82 lions in four desert bighorn sheep ranges in New Mexico between 1999 and 2007. A report evaluating the eight-year mountain lion removal program notes that wages were paid for working an 80-hour month, plus fees ranging from \$2,000 and \$2,300 per lion killed to \$4,500, plus a \$50-per diem. The varying fees depended on the range where predation was highest.

The big ticket value of bighorn sheep is readily apparent by contemplating the price for these scarce tags at auction. Their price averaged \$121,808 between 1995 and 2007, the report added.²⁷

Stokely Ligon, a biologist for the U. S. Biological Survey, argued for the commodification of the state's wildlife back in 1927. He declared that revenue from game for the individual and the state could exceed monies collected from grazing domestic animals on public land.

“The mountains, forests and wild life, collectively, are vastly more valuable to the State than is now generally appreciated,” he said.²⁸ For Ligon New Mexico’s wildlife was invaluable.²⁹

Out-of-state hunters spent \$500 for the use of a ranch house and the same amount for a guide and field equipment, he reasoned. The outfitter and guide located near game areas earned a thousand dollars or more, getting hunters in and out of the hunting territory. Additionally, the revenue to business men and other citizens along the routes of travel figured in the equation. Therefore, taking care of the land and its wildlife was paramount.³⁰ Forty years later, that attitude held firm. “Wildlife is big business in New Mexico,” Samuel Lamb wrote in *New Mexico Wild Life Management*.³¹

Montague Stevens ranks with Ben Lilly and Nat Straw in the pantheon of area hunters. While Lilly and Straw may have killed more varmints, Stevens wrote his *own* book about hunting with hounds. He was a cattle rancher in Catron County in the 1880s and appreciated the Gila Country’s wildlife. On his first trip to the United States from England, he hunted big game in Wyoming. Claiming descent from British royalty, Stevens was born in Madras, India, and graduated from Cambridge. He hunted chiefly for pleasure, though he occasionally tracked grizzly bears, preying on cattle. A cut above the usual Texas cattle baron that drove herds of cattle, thousands strong, into Gila Country, his hunting companions included General Nelson Miles, General Leonard Wood, and famed western artist Frederick Remington, whose painting “Gone Away” depicts a bear hunt with Stevens and General Miles.³²

In an interview late in his life, Stevens declared, “[The sportsmen] all wanted grizzlies. International sportsmen, I mean, rich men that don’t care what they spend, they spend \$1,000.”³³

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The sixty-three year-history of the Hulse Ranch at Canyon Creek provides a sound example of the role outfitting and guiding have played in the Gila Country's marginal economy—and in supplementing family income. This small ranch consisted of a quarter-section of land (160 acres) in the Gila National Forest on the northern border of the Gila Wilderness; it was acquired on September 25, 1933. In 1938, during the Depression, Pyeart Hulse stayed at the ranch to oversee the family's cattle and to outfit and guide for hunters and fishermen. His wife Mattie lived and worked as a shop clerk in Silver City, New Mexico, 90 miles away, where their two children attended school. Mattie kept tabs on the outfitting operation from that location, making reservations for clients and transporting needed supplies to the ranch. In one of her letters to her husband, dated June 15, 1938, she advised Pyeart about new clients that wanted a guided fishing trip into the Gila:

Try to be extra nice to these people and do see that they have a nice time-I told them the price would be 5⁰⁰ each. I think if they have a nice time they will do some very good advertising for us, and I sure would like for them to come back and say they had a good time.³⁴

Thirty years later, their son Quentin, who maintained the ranch and its outfitting business until 1997, charged \$20 per day for bear hunts. Besides the net profit for each hunt, the family also benefited from game that hunters left, which was put into sealer jars, jerked, or fed to their dogs. And for some hunts Quentin stipulated that any remaining provisions brought by clients stay at Canyon Creek after the hunt. Quentin or his father would have skinned and quartered the game, and caped it in preparation for the taxidermist. In the 1980s Quentin charged a \$1000-fee for guided lion and bear hunts.³⁵

In contrast to the Hulse mom-and-pop outfitting/ranch operation, conducted through the United States Postal Service or word-of-mouth because there was no phone, United States

Outfitters, Inc., a Taos, New Mexico-based company, offers “Quality Hunts for Quality Hunters.” It operates one of its base camps a mile east of my home in Reserve. Business is conducted via the internet, and credit cards are used. Additionally, a detailed questionnaire to assess the prospective hunter’s experience is a part of the application. Their hunts include guides, meals, accommodations, trophy care, meat care, and transportation during the hunts, which the Hulses also provided.

Prices for hunts vary by type, as with the Hulse operation. United States Outfitters considers the species to be hunted, the duration of the hunt (two to six days), and class--for trophy or world class trophy animals. Another determining factor is licensing areas: A licensed hunt as opposed to a ranch hunt. To qualify for a licensed hunt, the hunter has to apply for a tag which is awarded by a draw, not a sure thing every season. A ranch hunt differs in that it is more expensive, but the tag is guaranteed. The hunter is scheduled for a certain ranch at a certain time.

United States Outfitters charges from \$1,450 for a two-and-a-half day hunt for cow elk to a five-day World Class Firearms Elk Hunt at \$4,450. (There are other variables such as the ratio of guides to hunters and the presence of a non-hunter in the party.) Gratuities for the guide, a suggested \$400, and for the cook, a recommended \$100, are not included.³⁶

In Catron County the greatest number of tourist dollars is spent during hunting seasons by camouflage-garbed hunters who crowd the restaurants, tip waitresses, imbibe alcoholic beverages at the towns’ bars, sleep and shower at area motels, purchase supplies for their camps, replenish ammunition, fill gas tanks in their pick-up trucks--and All-Terrain-Vehicles--at the local service stations, replace blown out tires, hire local guides, and pay for meat processing and taxidermy.

For local merchants this is a busy and profitable time. Catron County's median household income in 1999 was \$30,742.³⁷ For that same year the per capita money income was \$13,951.³⁸

Men and women, seasonally or sporadically employed, as well as men who moonlight, taking time off from their full-time jobs to supplement their salaries, benefit financially from hunters coming into the area. According to a survey conducted in 2006 by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, non-resident hunters contributed \$63,151,000 to New Mexico's economy, with New Mexico hunters spending \$95,879,000.³⁹ Small business owners and service staff in the Gila Country depend on their share of that.

This paper was presented at the Southwest Social Science Association meeting in Denver in 2009, and the Historical Society of New Mexico meeting Hobbs, New Mexico in 2010.

Notes

1. (<http://quickfacts.census.gov> accessed March 3, 2009)
 2. Niewmeyer and Gomez, *New Mexico: Images of a Land and Its People*, 9.
 3. Ligon, *Wildlife of New Mexico*, 11.
 4. Warren, *The Hunter's Game*, 86.
 5. *Ibid.*, 87.
 6. Davis, *Treasured Earth*, 30.
 7. Stuart, *Glimpses of an Ancient Southwest*, 44.
 8. Warren, *The Hunter's Game*, 84.
 9. Workers of the Writers' Program, *New Mexico Guide*, 77.
 10. Julyan, *The Place Names of New Mexico*, 217.
 11. McKenna, *Black Range Tales*, 15.
 12. Warren, *The Hunter's Game*, 81.
 13. Sweet, John R., "Men and Varmints," *New Mexico Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Fall 2002):373.
 14. Kemp, Ben, "Early Days," *New Mexico Conservationist*, Vol. II, No.2 (December 1928): p.9.
 15. Warren, *The Hunter's Game*, 87.
 16. Julyan, *The Place Names of New Mexico*, 178.
 17. Barker. "A History of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish." (Not uniformly paginated, not dated.)
 18. Barker, *Western Life*, 45.
 19. Sweet, John R., "Men and Varmints," *New Mexico Historical Review*, (Fall 2002):379.
 20. Barker, "History of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish," 22.
 21. Dobie, *The Ben Lilly Legend*, 160.
 22. *Ibid*, 166.
 23. McFarland, *Wilderness of the Gila*, 44.
 24. Kemp, *Cow Dust*, 177.
 25. McFarland, *Wilderness of the Gila*, 44.
 26. "New Mexico Wildlife Management, 212.
 27. "Evaluation of an 8-year mountain lion removal management action on endangered desert bighorn sheep recovery." Rominger and Goldstein, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, Santa Fe, NM.
- (www.wildlife.state.nm.gov/conservation/bighorn/documents/documents/eightyearsynopsisfinal.pdf, accessed March 25, 2009)
28. Ligon, *Wildlife of New Mexico*, 12.
 29. *Ibid.*, 33.
 30. *Ibid.*, 12.
 31. *New Mexico Wildlife Management*, 16.
 32. McFarland, *Wilderness of the Gila*, 26. Simmons, *Ranchers, Ramblers and Renegades*, 73. Bryan, *Tale Tales*, 22. See also Stevens, George. *Rambling Through the 1880s and Beyond*. Stevens, Montague. *Meet Mr. Grizzly: A Saga of the Passing of the Grizzly Bear*. Silver City: High-Lonesome Press, 2002.
 33. Lou Blachly Tapes: MSS 555 BC, Lou Blachly, Box 2 Folder 8, Reel 1.

34. Letter from Mattie Hulse to her husband Pyeart and son Quentin, June 15, 1938, in possession of the author.
35. Quentin Hulse account book, October 16, 1968, in possession of the author. Stan Rauch, e-mail message to the author, March 26, 2009.
36. (<http://www.huntuso.com>)
37. (<http://factfinder.census.gov> accessed March 26, 2009.)
38. (<http://quickfacts.census.gov> accessed March 3, 2009.)
39. Dan J. Williams, Editor, *New Mexico Wildlife*, e-mail message to the author, March 26, 2009.

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