



— Photo by Shawn Perich

## HORNADAY'S CONSERVATION LEGACY

By Michael A. Schroeder and Leslie A. Robb

William T. Hornaday was the chief taxidermist of the United States National Museum (now known as the Smithsonian). After a long pursuit, Hornaday, brought the bull down with a shot from 950 yards away. It was undoubtedly one of the last bison killed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Wrote Hornaday, "In our eagerness to succeed in our task, the sad fact that we were hunting the last representatives of a mighty race was for the time being lost sight of."

*"We had gone three miles or so, and were leisurely riding up the bed of a grassy hollow that had very steep sides, when we suddenly rounded a little point and came upon a huge old buffalo bull. The instant he saw us he heeled and dashed out of sight behind another point two hundred yards away. We galloped after him pell mell, and got to the head of the hollow just in time to see his hump disappear on the further side of a ridge."*

—William T. Hornaday

*"In our eagerness to succeed in our task, the sad fact that we were hunting the last representatives of a mighty race was for the time being lost sight of."*

The year 1886 was a turning point for conservation of wildlife in North America, though it wasn't recognized as such at the time. The bison, a symbol of the American West, was virtually extinct. About 25 million bison existed in 1800, by 1886 only 800 remained. Most of these were found in Canada near the Great Slave Lake, but 250 animals were scattered in small populations in Texas, Colorado, and Montana. Hornaday was convinced that the bison was doomed to imminent extinction.

In May, he traveled from Washington D.C. to the western plains to look for bison to collect for the National Museum, hopefully before it was too late. While heading west, Hornaday began to hear reports that the bison were already gone and that his trip would be a waste. The speed and devastation of the bison's demise was starkly evident as Hornaday rode through Montana to an area northwest of Miles City. This was where the Blackfoot Indians had their last bison hunt in 1879, though the devastation Hornaday witnessed was the work of white "buffalo hunters."

As Hornaday and his crew traveled in the highlands between the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers he wrote that they "were seldom out of sight of bleaching skeletons, and often forty or fifty were in sight at one time. The skinners always left the heads of the bulls unskinned... Many of these heads were so perfectly preserved... that the slaughter of the millions was brought right down to the present, and seemed to have been the work of yesterday." With great effort, Hornaday found and collected the bison he wanted for the museum. As far as he knew, the remaining part of that population was extinct within a year.

In 1886, the prospects for bison

looked grim. Today, the population of bison numbers about 350,000 animals. Hornaday played a key role in this reversal of fortune. Some of the animals he collected were mounted for public display; one of the large bulls became the model for the 'buffalo' nickel. Hornaday also captured a bison calf that became a popular attraction in Washington D.C. Although the calf did not live long, its popularity sparked public interest in conserving wildlife, especially the bison.

Hornaday was an avid outdoorsman and hunter. His prolific writing encouraged an entire generation of conservationists. In that effort, he was a prominent member of the Boone and Crockett Club and a large supporter of conservation programs within the Boy Scouts of America. Today, the highest award for conservation in the Boy Scouts is the William T. Hornaday Award.

So, what does the story of Hornaday and bison have to do with grouse? While in Montana in 1886, Hornaday's crew collected seven sharp-tailed grouse and 12 greater sage-grouse. At one of their bison-collecting camps, "an immense flock of sage grouse flew down to drink at the pool, and in stupid wonder settled within gunshot of the tent. We could have killed twenty, I know, and, if the truth must be told, we did kill twelve, and took their skeletons. Perhaps this proceeding was unsportsmanlike, but it was very necessary, for we wanted twenty sagecock [sage grouse] skeletons."

Hornaday addressed the decline of sage grouse as early as 1916 and predicted that they would eventually be extinct without positive efforts to improve their situation. He witnessed firsthand the rapid decline of the bison, a decline that occurred faster than anyone could have imagined, and he was clearly concerned

that sage grouse could follow a similar path. The fact that sage grouse are still an important part of western ecosystems is largely because people like Hornaday demanded positive action.

Despite the continued existence of sage grouse, there are still reasons for concern. The most important currency for conservation is habitat. The rapid expansion of people throughout the West, and the increasing demands for resources, are putting a strain on the habitats that support sage grouse. How much remaining habitat can we alter before sage grouse disappear from the landscape?

It has been more than 90 years since Hornaday wrote about saving sage grouse from extinction, but his warning that healthy wildlife populations cannot be taken for granted is still relevant. "There is much information that could be given about the distribution of sage grouse, and other grouse, and quail, in the various states; their habits, and their history; but what is the use? We are not writing academic bird-lore. We are trying to bring about the salvage of species that are on the toboggan slide and going with lightning speed toward oblivion. We are trying to point out the cold fact that in these destructive times a species can be completely exterminated in a horribly short period."

Since Hornaday's time we have slowed the toboggan of species decline and, in some instances, pushed it back up the slope. But wildlife conservation is a task that is never finished. If we ever stop pushing the toboggan, it will slide over us and on to oblivion.