

Wolves in Pioneer Iowa

Both the gray wolf and the coyote were encountered by the earliest explorers of Iowaland. On July 20, 1804, Captain William Clark "killed a verry large yellow Wolf" as the Lewis and Clark expedition ascended the Missouri along the western border of present-day Fremont County. Farther on, while passing along the border of what is now Monona County, Captain Clark recorded in his journal that "a *Prairie Wolf* come near the bank and Barked at us this evening, we made an attempt but could not git him, the animale Barkes like a large *ferce* Dog." Sixteen years later, while traveling through northwestern Iowa, Captain Stephen Watts Kearny saw some wolves near a "gang of about 200 *she elks*." Captain Kearny believed the prairie wolf was a "very near relation" to an animal he had previously seen which the Indian guide had called a Missouri fox. A few days later Captain Kearny jotted down that about one hundred pounds of their "jerked Beef" had spoiled and that they were "obliged to leave it for the wolves."

Travelers on the way to the Black Hawk Purchase encountered wolves everywhere. Morris Birkbeck found them "extremely numerous" in

Illinois, where they were "very destructive" to both hogs and sheep. Charles Fenno Hoffman enjoyed wolf-hunting in northern Illinois and in the vicinity of Prairie du Chien. On one occasion, while riding with a companion from Chicago toward the Iowa country in January of 1834, Hoffman engaged in a curious game that was quite common on the frontier.

According to Hoffman:

I was contented to wrap myself as closely as possible in my buffalo robe, and join him in a game of *prairie loo*. Lest you might search vainly in Hoyle for this pastime, I must inform you that the game consists merely in betting upon the number of wild animals seen by either party toward the side of the vehicle on which he is riding, a wolf or deer counting ten, and a grouse one. The game is a hundred; and you may judge of the abundance of these animals from our getting through several games before dinner — my companion looing me with eleven wolves. Some of these fellows would stand looking at us within half gunshot, as we rode by them.

Wolves were just as numerous in the Black Hawk Purchase. Around Burlington, wolf hunts were common during Territorial days and one of Isaac Crenshaw's dogs "single-mouthed" caught and killed three of them. Utterly fearless in their quest for food when on the verge of starvation, wolves actually entered the early frontier towns only to be shot down in their tracks. In 1841 Marshal Myron Ward received one dollar for removing a dead wolf from the streets of Muscatine.

But John Plumbe, Jr., of Dubuque, took special pains to point out in his tract advertising Iowaland that prospective settlers would not be disturbed by "ravenous beasts."

The whole country appears to be most completely freed from every thing calculated to annoy and injure man; there are no panthers, and very few wolves or foxes; there are a few prairie wolves, but they are hardly stout enough to destroy a good large sheep, let alone cattle or hogs. These animals, (wolves and foxes) will disappear as soon as the country is settled, there being no large swamps, mountains or hedges for them to take refuge in when pursued, and the country being so open, they would fall an easy prey to their pursuers.

West of the Black Hawk Purchase packs of wolves stalked the herds of deer and buffalo that roamed the prairies of Iowa. Ordinarily a deer could outrun a wolf and make its escape, but during the heavy snows of winter the deer became easy victims and large numbers of them were killed. Even during the summer the wolves, through their cunning and sagacity, often succeeded in bringing the fleet-footed deer to earth by taking turns chasing it in a circle until the frightened animal became exhausted. It was then quickly knocked down and despatched. "When a wolf has caught a deer and killed it," a traveler in the West relates, "it will not at once consume the flesh, but go to the highest hill nearby and call its comrades, by howling. When these have assembled they devour the deer together."

Even the mighty buffalo that once roamed the prairies of Iowa often succumbed to the cunning strategy of the wolf pack. Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, who spent considerable time among the Potawatomi Indians around Council Bluffs, relates in his journal how the various species of wolves would follow a buffalo herd and devour the dead or dying. When none of these was available two or three wolves would charge into a herd of buffalo, cut out one of the animals and drive it toward the spot where their companions were waiting. All would join in the chase until their exhausted quarry would stop from fatigue when the wolves would hamstring it and "devour it alive."

George Catlin has left what is probably the most graphic account of the ruthless destruction of a powerful buffalo by a pack of wolves.

But a short time since, as one of my hunting companions and myself were returning to our encampment with our horses loaded with meat, we discovered at a distance, a huge bull, encircled with a gang of white wolves; we rode up as near as we could without driving them away, and being within pistol shot, we had a remarkably good view, where I sat for a few moments and made a sketch in my note-book; after which, we rode up and gave the signal for them to disperse, which they instantly did, withdrawing themselves to the distance of fifty or sixty rods, when we found, to our great surprise, that the animal had made desperate resistance, until his eyes were entirely eaten out of his head — the grizzle of his nose was mostly gone — his tongue was half eaten off, and the skin and flesh of his

legs torn almost literally into strings. In this tattered and torn condition, the poor old veteran stood bracing up in the midst of his devourers, who had ceased hostilities for a few minutes, to enjoy a sort of parley, recovering strength and preparing to resume the attack in a few moments again. In this group, some were reclining, to gain breath, whilst others were sneaking about and licking their chops in anxiety for a renewal of the attack; and others, less lucky, had been crushed to death by the feet or the horns of the bull. I rode nearer to the pitiable object as he stood bleeding and trembling before me, and said to him, "Now is your time, old fellow, and you had better be off." Though blind and nearly destroyed, there seemed evidently to be a recognition of a friend in me, as he straightened up, and, trembling with excitement, dashed off at full speed upon the prairie, in a straight line. We turned our horses and resumed our march, and when we had advanced a mile or more, we looked back, and on our left, where we saw again the ill-fated animal surrounded by his tormentors, to whose insatiable voracity he unquestionably soon fell a victim.

Whilst the herd is together, the wolves never attack them, as they instantly gather for combined resistance, which they effectually make. But when the herds are travelling, it often happens that an aged or wounded one, lingers at a distance behind, and when fairly out of sight of the herd, is set upon by these voracious hunters, which often gather to the number of fifty or more and are sure at last to torture him to death, and use him up at a meal. The buffalo, however, is a huge and furious animal, and when his retreat is cut off, makes desperate and deadly resistance, contending to the last moment for the right of life — and oftentimes deals death by wholesale, to his canine assailants, which he is tossing into the air or stamping to death under his feet.

The howl of the wolf left an indelible impression on the Iowa pioneers. Many county historians agree with the following description left by a Madison County writer: "Music of the natural order was not wanting and every night the pioneers were lulled to rest by the screeching of panthers and the howling of wolves." Few there were whose blood did not tingle as the wail of the wolf rose out of the eerie blackness of the night to be answered directly by an echoing chorus in ever-increasing crescendo. "We went to sleep many winter nights with the wolves howling around," an early settler of Taylor County recalls. "There was plenty of wild game, such as deer and some wild turkey. I have seen Uncle Ben stand in the door and shoot deer, and quite often he would get a wild turkey."

Many Fremont County pioneers recalled that "the howling of the wolves made night hideous" for the early settlers. In Appanoose County an old-timer described the wolf packs as the "most troublesome and altogether vicious enemies" of the log cabin settlers.

These pests would not only howl around the lonely cabin all night, but were always ravenous and ready to pounce upon an unguarded calf, pig, sheep or chicken that they could get at, and the settlers were obliged to build pens against their cabins in which to keep their small stock. Chickens were frequently taken into the house to preserve them from the attacks of wolves, polecats and weasels."

The pioneers of Page County were sometimes compelled to go as far as St. Joseph, Missouri, to trade and lay in their supplies. Even if a closer trading point was frequented, the journey by ox teams sometimes took a week. On such occasions the wife and children were forced to stay alone at home, with their nearest neighbor in many instances from three to five miles off.

The anxiety on the part of the father for his wife and children during one of these voyages must indeed have been great, but nothing in comparison to that of the wife and mother, who, at the approach of nightfall, and as she heard the cry of the panther, or the howl of the wolf around the lonely and isolated cabin, gathered her cherished loved ones about her and fervently prayed that the giver of all would watch over and guard herself and family from all harm.

A pioneer of Cedar Rapids recalls the depredations of wolves in that area. In one cabin the children were placed in the narrow upper berths "as a precautionary measure against the encroachments of the numerous wolves and wild cats and other beasts of prey which often prowled about of nights in search of something to satisfy their hunger." The prairie wolves were so numerous, this same early settler asserts, that "their nightly serenades, if not so musical, were at least full of weird interest to us new denizens of the wild West. One reason why the wolves seemed to like us so well and to favor us with such frequent visits and in such great numbers, was the fact that three

of our cows died the first winter, and their carcasses furnished an attraction altogether too strong for their wolfships to resist; and it is not to be wondered at that all the music in them was brought into requisition, in their jubilant demonstrations on account of the abundant winter provisions."

These howling wolves did not always remain at a distance. Mrs. Holcomb, who came to Marshall County in 1856, had no cellar in which to store her supplies. In this "age of wolves" it was customary for Mrs. Holcomb to suspend the family supply of smoked hams and shoulders from the outside eaves of her log cabin, a practice not uncommon among the pioneers. The wolves would congregate around the Holcomb cabin at night and practice "light gymnastics there in rows, leaping up to reach the coveted plunder." Not infrequently, when the dogs ventured too far out from the cabins at night, they would be driven back by the wolves, who chased them up to the very cabin door.

Such savage onslaughts on their canine cousins were not limited to the era before the Civil War. Hungry wolves continued to attack dogs in eastern Iowa up to the opening of the twentieth century. "Wolves are said to be unusually plentiful in the northern part of the county," declared the *Independence Bulletin-Journal* of January 7, 1892. "They are reported to be remarkably bold in their

depredations, coming into the farm yards, fighting with the dogs where the latter have the courage to dispute the ground with them, and robbing the hen roosts. They are believed to have come down from Minnesota in large numbers, where lack of food forced them to emigrate. They are gaunt in appearance, and driven by hunger will do much damage in the county unless steps are taken to exterminate them."

The Reverend George R. Carroll, a pioneer of Cedar Rapids, describes a bitter fight between his old dog "Watch" and a large wolf. One day Mr. Carroll was attracted by his dog's barking some thirty rods north of the house and he quickly went out to see the cause of this outburst. "It proved to be a wolf, and both the wolf and the dog seemed quite fatigued," Carroll relates. "For once the old dog had pretty nearly found his match; still he had no disposition to give up the struggle. The wolf would snap at the dog with such terrible fierceness that he was compelled to retreat a few steps, and then, as the wolf would turn and endeavor to make good his escape, the old dog would dart after him and grab him by the hind legs, and another battle would ensue."

"As soon as he saw me," the preacher continues, "he took fresh courage, and he pounced upon the wolf and held him to the ground, and, with a club which I found near at hand, I helped the brave fellow finish the work. For my part of

the work, in which I had considerable pride, I had the skin of the wolf as my reward. The poor old dog had nothing but a few words of approval and a few friendly pats upon the head, and the *consciousness* that he had performed a good and brave act."

Not infrequently wolves came off second best in their farmyard depredations. Witness the strange manner in which a wolf was ignominiously routed from a Johnson County farm as told by the *Iowa City Press*, quoted in the *Keokuk Weekly Gate City* for November 26, 1873. For some time, it seems, wolves had been preying upon sheep, young pigs, and fowls, to the utter consternation and despair of Johnson County farmers. Suddenly one of these prowlers met his match. "The wolf entered a pasture east of Iowa City, where were sheep, colts and mules, and selecting his sheep, separated it from the flock, got it by the wool, and was worrying it, when a mule interfered and drove the mutton-eater away from the sheep."

Fearful though the wolf was of man, he nevertheless would follow and sometimes attack him if the person were unarmed and the wolves themselves were in sufficient force. In 1856 some Tama County pioneers wished to celebrate the completion of their schoolhouse near the village of Redman. When the hour for the dance arrived the pioneers found that their one-man orchestra — Fiddlin' Jim — was missing. A party was sent

out to search for him and Fiddlin' Jim was finally found, seated on the low-swaying roof of a deserted shack, his violin under his chin and his fingers flying. His audience consisted of a half dozen wolves, squatting in a circle around the shack. The searching party rushed forward with a great shout and the wolves slunk away. "Howdy boys," cried Fiddlin' Jim, climbing down from his perch, "You came in right handy. Them wolves sure meant business, and every time I quit playin', they started movin' up. But I sure got tuned up good."

On another occasion, in 1857, a party of young folks in Hamilton County drove a four horse sleigh from Saratoga to Rose Grove for a Christmas Eve dance. Near Kamrar they were set on by a pack of a hundred prairie wolves but reached Rose Grove in safety. The perils of the wintry prairie were soon forgotten in the whirls of the dance.

Pioneers going to market, particularly when they were hauling fresh meat, often attracted a pack of wolves. A Humboldt County farmer had scarcely left his home when he heard "sundry barks" from the northeast. "I soon became aware," he recalls, "that the fresh pork was attracting attention of wolves. Judging from the bark I decided they were prairie wolves and not timber wolves, so I felt little fear."

The horrors of a lonesome walk in the dead of

night amidst howling wolves were recalled many years later by a Guthrie County pioneer. As a youth he had walked ten miles one day during the winter of 1853-1854 to see his best girl. The sixteen foot cabin where he did his courting served as a kitchen, dining room, living room, and bedroom. At midnight, when it was time to go to bed or go home, the lad was given a choice of sleeping in bed with three persons, lying on a pallet in the loft, or striking out for home over the lonesome prairie road without a single house upon it. He chose to go home.

As he trudged along, the wolves howled a reveille on every hill, their "barking and snarling" sometimes making the "hair stand up on his head." Fearfully he recalled stories his parents had told about wolves in the early Ohio settlement, where people had been chased and were forced to climb a tree or get on a cabin roof. In his own case, unfortunately, there were no friendly trees or cabins. He fervently vowed, long before he reached home, that the next time he went courting, he would "keep the girl up all night," or take "any accommodations" offered him.

In 1872 a lad of eleven underwent a terrifying experience with wolves in Fayette County. It was a Thursday evening in mid-August and Milo Brockway had started on horseback to hunt his father's cows. Crossing the Turkey River into Eden Township young Brockway had ridden only

a short distance when he came upon a pack of timber wolves. Terror-stricken, he turned to flee, riding his horse madly for his home which was only eighty rods distant. Close on his heels came the wolf pack, to the number of forty (or so it seemed to the boy), howling terribly as they sped along. With commendable presence of mind, the lad rode into the middle of Turkey River where the wolves refused to follow. Quick thinking undoubtedly saved his life.

In 1876 Captain Willard Glazier was riding on horseback to Anita in Cass County when night overtook him. His horse, Paul, finally led him to a haystack. Believing he could do no better than spread his bed on the sweet hay, Captain Glazier decided to spend a supperless night at the haystack. He soon found there were others present who were also hungry. "I had scarcely settled myself," Captain Glazier relates, "when a troop of coyotes, or prairie wolves, came howling and barking in front of me. This made things uncomfortable, and I at once jumped to my feet and, revolver in hand, faced the enemy. Several were killed by my fire. The remainder, however, continued to threaten an attack. I was puzzled as to what was best to do when I was suddenly reinforced by a friendly dog, who, attracted doubtless, by the report of the pistol and the barking of the coyotes, came to my rescue, and kept the animals at bay for the remainder of the night. At

daybreak I was not sorry to bid adieu to the haystack and, neither, I believe, was Paul, who had also spent a restless night, notwithstanding the abundance of good fodder at his disposal."

Not all the pioneers were as fortunate as young Milo Brockway or Captain Willard Glazier. During the winter of 1872 Fred Nagg started on foot from Ocheyedan to purchase some supplies at Sibley in Osceola County. Mr. Nagg had to travel a dozen miles, pulling a handsled over the bleak prairie in a land that was still beyond the frontier line of settlement. On his way home he was caught in a blizzard, and becoming numbed and senseless by the cold and storm, lay down and died. A searching party found his sled and supplies about seven miles southeast of Sibley; the wolves had clawed into the food and eaten part of it. When Mr. Nagg's body was found the latter part of March it had been partially eaten away by the wolves.

The winter of 1856-1857 was one of the "most severe" experienced by the settlers in northwestern Iowa. Howling blizzards and intense cold waves, commencing in December, continued to lash the stragglers until late the following spring. The sturdy pioneers, like the hungry Indians who perpetrated the Spirit Lake massacre, found themselves almost destitute of food and supplies before spring arrived. Two men, who made the long journey from Woodbury

County to Council Bluffs to secure supplies, have left an account of ravages of starving wolves. "Such was the depth of snow during this winter," said the pioneers, "that in some instances it was dangerous to venture far from home, in view of the hungry wolves."

One night they stayed at the home of a pioneer whose large dog had just been "set upon" by a pack of wolves. In less than five minutes the "hungry brutes" had left nothing of the faithful animal but his bones. "In another instance," the traveler related, "a negro had been out a little distance from home chopping, when he was driven into a fence corner by a pack of wolves, who left nothing of him but his bones, by the side of which was his ax and six dead wolves. These were found when the snow had partially left the soil bare."