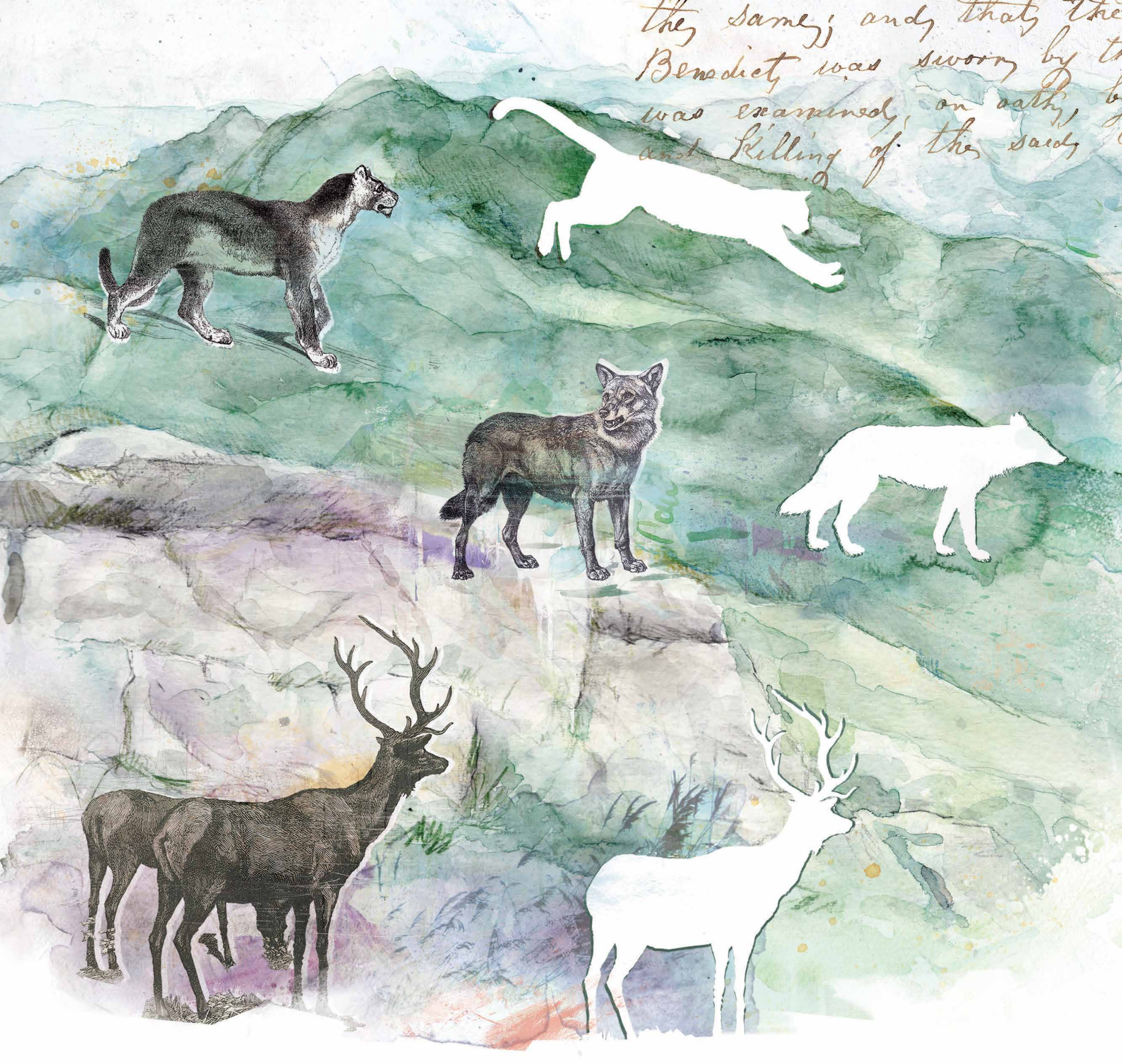


the same; and that thereupon  
Benedict was sworn by the said  
was examined, on oath, by us  
and killing of the said Panther,



## *Vanishing Acts*

SOME ADIRONDACK  
CREATURES ARE  
GONE FOREVER.  
OTHERS ARE BACK.  
THE STORIES BEHIND  
THE RISE AND FALL  
OF OUR MOOSE, ELK,  
WOLF, PANTHER,  
BEAVER AND LYNX

by ELIZABETH FOLWELL  
illustrations by JANICE KUN





**BEAVER WERE  
ALREADY RARE IN  
THE ADIRONDACKS  
IN THE 1840s THANKS  
TO TWO CENTURIES  
OF INTENSE INTER-  
NATIONAL TRADING;  
THE FELTED FUR WAS  
SHAPED INTO MEN'S  
AND WOMEN'S HATS  
THAT WERE POPULAR  
IN EUROPE AND  
NORTH AMERICA.**

**WHAT DO WE KNOW AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?**

For a naturalist documenting the Adirondacks in the 19th century, that job was as vast as the wilderness itself and systematic scientific inquiry was nearly as mysterious. Scrutinizing millions of acres to enumerate elusive creatures meant boots on the ground and also contact with hunters, guides and far-flung settlers for their impressions and experiences. Some men were unimpeachable sources of information, while others passed along nuggets of truth embedded in the bedrock of handed-down beliefs, tall tales and wild guesses.

The quest to tally New York's resources began in the 1830s, when the state looked border to border to find coal and mineral wealth; as part of this monumental inventory, mammals, reptiles, birds and fish were described in detail. It was an exercise in hope and wonder, a reconnaissance mission to learn the entire empire of the Empire State. James DeKay—born in Portugal, educated in Scotland as an M.D. and possessing a most curious and analytical mind—was selected to compile the report that measured the living, breathing assets of the territory. Though he briefly enjoyed the limelight for his advocacy of port wine as treatment for cholera and served as a ship's physician on a voyage to Turkey, by the 1830s he was deeply engaged in studying the natural world. As a biologist operating on the verge of a new national appreciation for all things wild, he counted more than 1,100 species and discovered 95 new ones.

The five-volume *Natural History of New-York* was published in 1842 at a staggering cost to taxpayers, more than \$130,000—or about \$3.8 million today. The mammals section fills an oversize leather-bound book with peculiar, cramped engravings showing bats and whales and panthers. A 200-page introduction by Governor William Seward (yes, that Seward, who advocated purchasing Alaska when he was Secretary of State under President Andrew Johnson) summarizes New York's history while establishing the governor and his research team as visionaries. One sentence mentions DeKay in the same breath as John James Audubon.

Our own Audubon, minus the sketchbook, traipsed from Lake Pleasant to Old Forge and the Saranacs with geologist Ebenezer Emmons and guide Lewis Elijah Benedict in 1840.

Benedict—whose Penobscot father, Sabael, was the name-sake of Indian Lake—was already well-known as a guide; he showed David Henderson a piece of iron in 1826 that launched the mine at Adirondac. Emmons was a superb escort as well: In 1836 he had christened the Adirondacks for what he deemed a long-gone Indian group. He ventured to the headwaters of the Raquette River, baptizing two pretty lakes and a small river for his wife and daughters—Janet, Catherine and Marion—the last name the only one that stuck. Mount Marcy was his discovery, and he was among the first to look upon the lakes and peaks as a place where the world-weary could escape urban chaos.

DeKay took copious notes, collected specimens for later study and gathered local wisdom, seeking out those who had actually encountered the animals he never witnessed. His findings mixed value judgments—a lynx, for instance, was “timid and easily killed”—with notations that ring with authority despite questionable facts: beavers, he commented with breezy confidence, can hop like kangaroos and eat fish.

Carnivores were of special interest because they posed direct threats to settlers and livestock and competed—unfairly, it appears—for venison. DeKay's “common American wolf [*Canis lupus occidentalis*]” was a true villain, “their ravages among deer are so great that they destroy five to one killed by man” according to “intelligent hunters.” These reddish to gray or black canines measured 36 to 48 inches from nose to base of tail. “Our wolf is equally voracious and cowardly, flying before man,” asserted DeKay.

By the time DeKay was on the trail, bounties were already a powerful incentive to remove wolves from the state, netting as much as \$30 to the person who presented skull and skin to a local justice and town supervisor. Though this predator had been found throughout the colony as early as 1640, two centuries later the range had retreated to St. Lawrence and adjacent Adirondack counties.

The northern panther, according to DeKay, had once lurked downstate as well as in

**The Brown's Tract Guides' Association was active in the central Adirondacks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The group advocated for fair woods wages, supported game laws and promoted moose and elk restoration, as this undated poster indicates.**

the mountains, but by the 1840s it was most numerous in Herkimer, Hamilton and St. Lawrence Counties. Dutch settlers believed this tawny cat to be a true lion, and DeKay solemnly stated specimens were as much as 10 feet long, including tail. One male shot near Fourth Lake, displayed at a museum in Utica, was reportedly an astonishing 11 feet three inches, or stretching from bumper to bumper of a new VW bug. (Sadly, that museum, along with its spectacular cat, disappeared a long time ago.)

“An animal of undoubted strength and ferocity,” wrote DeKay, “uniformly cowardly,” retreated from man and was not prone to attack. Emmons chimed in that tales of cougar depredation were fictitious and “they have not destroyed a single man or child.” Nonetheless, panthers were seen as pure trouble to homesteaders; bounties paid by county and state encouraged their wholesale slaughter. Their guide, Benedict, was also a bounty hunter, and his name shows up in Hamilton County records for killing a panther in Wells.

The lynx was “not uncommon” in the North Country, according to DeKay. Oversize paws helped it prey on varying hares and “sometimes lambs and pigs.” There were no bounties on lynx, though their beautiful spotted pelts brought three or four dollars at a time when a buck was equal to \$27 today.

“The beaver, whose skins once formed so important an article of commerce to this state, as to have been incorporated into the armorial bearings of the old colony,” DeKay wrote,

“is now nearly extirpated within its limits.” No wonder: from the dawn of New Netherlands, tens of thousands of beaver were taken every year until the supply ran out. Thanks to the international fur trade, this huge rodent was the first mammal to fade unequivocally from the Adirondack forests.

DeKay's party, searching between the Hudson and St. Lawrence in 1841, found a few scattered individuals on the Cedar and Indian Rivers and Tupper Lake. Stick dams and log houses were no longer signs of active beaver colonies: “so much harassed by hunters it has ceased making dams” and instead burrowed, incognito, into mud banks. That behavior change is plausible, though DeKay's statement that “it advances on land by a series of successive leaps of 10 or 12 feet, in which it is powerfully assisted by its tail, which it brings down with a resound-

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ing noise” smacks of a wily old pioneer pulling the gullible expert’s chain.

Elk—also known as American stag and wapiti—was uncommon. DeKay called it the “most stupid of the deer kind” despite its noble appearance and offered that it brayed “like an ass.” It was possible, he allowed, that elk might be mistaken for moose.

Moose were the unquestioned monarchs of the Adirondack woods, not just majestic but delicious. “They are yet numerous in the unsettled portions of the state, in the Counties of Essex, Hamilton, Franklin, Lewis and Warren,” DeKay said. The population around Raquette Lake was on the rebound because of the “gradual removal of the Indians,” who, he felt, profligately used moosehide for moccasins and snowshoe webbing. DeKay gave an explanation for the name of Raquette Lake that honored a local moose/snowshoe connection. He also opined that moose could be easily domesticated and broken to the plow, harking back to the old Dutch name for them, wild forest oxen.

**IF THE LAST ADIRONDACK** moose appeared in the sights of your rifle, would you kill it? In 1861 the question was answered with a resounding yes.

But that attitude was coming under fire. In 1855 S. H. Hammond’s *Wild Northern Scenes* had proposed constitutional protection for the forests; an op-ed for *The New York Times* nine years later suggested that the Adirondacks become a “Central Park for the world.” Henry David Thoreau wrote admiringly of our own wilderness, and calls for preserving the Adirondacks came from photographer Seneca

Ray Stoddard and surveyor Verplanck Colvin. The impetus was more than saving watersheds and trees, but the residents therein.

Four decades after DeKay’s survey, Clinton Hart Merriam wrote *The Mammals of the Adirondack Region*. For key megafauna, so much had changed. While chronicling the demise of moose and elk and predicting the extermination of wolf, mountain lion and beaver, Merriam’s book repeated hearsay from DeKay, quoted letters from gentleman hunters and offered fun facts such as panther meat is “very fine eating” and ingesting beaver testicles could cure “gout, mania, dizziness, poor vision and retention of afterbirth.”

More useful to modern readers, he recorded bounties by county for the decade prior to his book’s publication, showing where remnant populations of cougars and wolves were found. A man named E. L. Sheppard was responsible for deleting 28 mountain lions from Essex County, and Merriam observed, “since the state offered a bounty for their destruction so many more have been killed than have been born that they are well nay exterminated.” From 1871 to

1882 New York paid out \$920 in bounties for 46 mountain lions, with the majority killed in St. Lawrence County. Merriam estimated that more than 100 had been killed in the 24 years after 1860.

The wolf population was dwindling, Merriam felt, because it is “hard work to get a living here.” Subsisting on frogs, skunks and carrion, wolves are “always gaunt and hungry.” In the same breath, he also commented, “The wolf is one of the most cowardly and wary of our mammals. ... When opportunity affords he is one of the most destructive

On the back of these images, published by Hurst’s Stereoscopic Studies in 1870, the caption reads: “The Panther is now rarely seen in this State; it is occasionally met with in the deep woods and among the mountains of the northern parts, but like Moose and the Beaver, are either driven away or exterminated by the advance of civilization.”



STEREOSCOPIC IMAGE COURTESY OF TED COMSTOCK

**WHAT MANY BELIEVE TO BE THE LAST MOOSE WAS KILLED NEAR RAQUETTE LAKE IN 1861. PRIZED FOR TAXIDERMY AND THE TABLE, AN 800-POUND BULL COULD DRESS OUT AT MORE THAN 400 POUNDS OF MEAT, INCLUDING STEAKS, ROASTS, TONGUE AND LIPS, WHICH WERE ESPECIALLY PRIZED.**

and wasteful of brutes, always killing as much game as possible regardless of the condition of his appetite.” Merriam thought that the wolf’s disappearance was puzzling, not due to sport hunting or bounties, but a kind of leakage northward to Canada.

“That the American elk or wapiti was at one time common in the Adirondacks there is no question,” Merriam proclaimed. “A number of their antlers have been discovered, the most perfect of which I have seen is in the possession of Mr. John Constable. It was found in a bog on Third Lake of Fulton Chain in Herkimer County.” But elk were little more than a faint memory by 1880.




Though the passing of the last moose—shot in Raquette Lake—was mourned, warning signs were present a decade earlier, even as sportsmen like artist A. F. Tait and Governor Horatio Seymour took aim. At least one felt real remorse. North Country aristocrat John Constable, whose grandfather had engineered the three-million-acre Macomb Purchase, wrote in an 1851 letter to Merriam, “I must ever regret the part I have taken unwittingly in exterminating this noble animal from our forest. Were I younger, I would assist in reinstating them, as the plan is perfectly feasible.”

Beaver, scarce in DeKay’s day, were so impossible to find, Merriam explained, “few people know that they still exist here.” What was left were old ponds and place names.

**AS INK WAS DRYING** on the obituaries for iconic creatures, numerous attempts to restore them were launched by guides, a magazine publisher, wealthy landowners and New York State. Harry Radford, of *Forest and Stream* and *Woods and Waters*, was an ardent advocate for bringing them back, starting with moose in 1901 and beaver three years later. The state allocated \$500 for the rodent relocation and half a dozen from the West were released in the vicinity of Old Forge. More transplants followed. As quick as you can say “Beaver dam!” the eager pioneers multiplied. Tens of thousands today prove this the sole success story for any deliberate Adirondack reintroduction. (Continued on page 72)





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**VANISHING ACTS**

Continued from page 45

What many believed to be the last Adirondack wolf was shot at Brandreth Lake by guide Reuben Cary in 1893. The animal lives on, sort of, as a mournful taxidermy specimen on display at the Adirondack Museum, in Blue Mountain Lake. No bigger than an average Labrador, he seems more coyote than timber wolf. Considering the questions of what we know and how we know it, add another: Was *Canis lupus* ever here at all? What exactly was our native wolf?

Throughout most of the 20th century there was little interest in bringing back historic carnivores—that is, until the 1980s. Research, much of it carried out at the State University of New York's Adirondack Ecological Center, in Newcomb, examined the possibilities with a distinctly dispassionate, empirical slant. In 1981 SUNY College of Envi-

**WHAT MANY BELIEVE TO BE THE LAST ADIRONDACK WOLF WAS SHOT AT BRANDRETH LAKE BY GUIDE REUBEN CARY IN 1893. BUT WAS CANIS LUPUS EVER HERE AT ALL? WHAT EXACTLY WAS OUR NATIVE WOLF?**

ronmental Science and Forestry looked at transplanting mountain lions, but the preponderance of roads was a huge deterrent. Later that decade, dozens of Canada lynx from the Northwest Territories were shipped to Newcomb and set free, but within a year or two the radio-collared cats had fled (one was found in New Brunswick) or had been killed by cars hundreds of miles from the release site. In 1999 the national organization Defenders of Wildlife—after years of pro-wolf publicity—concluded a study that found gray wolf restoration was problematic due to development trends and also questioned if red wolf should be the reintroduced species instead.

Hoofed animals fared better. William C. Whitney was eager to reintroduce



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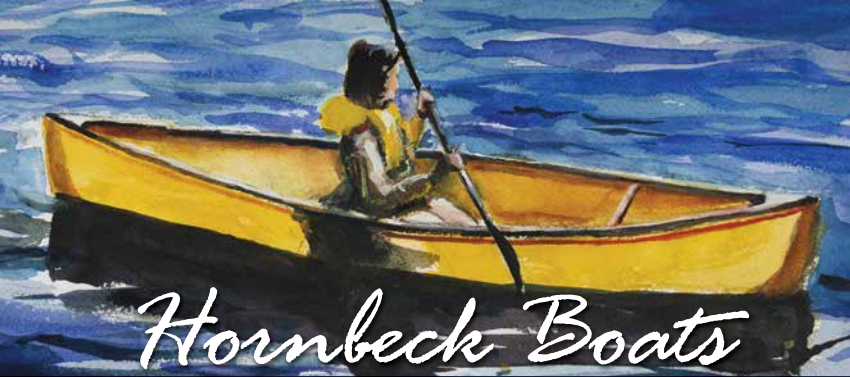


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**VANISHING ACTS**

elk and gathered 17 cows and five bulls from a game farm in Massachusetts. The herd was packed into a railcar bound for Raquette Lake station, then loaded on a barge and ferried to the Forked Lake carry. Elk were released at Little Tupper Lake, Paul Smiths and elsewhere, with the widely dispersed herd numbering more than 200. But this habitat wasn't ideal for the deer that prefer high meadows, and they looked—at a distance—like especially robust whitetails. The scheme was futile, though in 2006 the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation raised the possibility of Adirondack elk again, citing the success of a program in Pennsylvania.

Starting with two pairs set free near the Opalescent River in the 1870s and continuing into the early 20th century, there were many efforts to return moose to their ancestral lands. Railroad magnate William Seward Webb had a vast fenced preserve at Nehasane and he let a handful of his personal moose escape onto state land. A dozen moose, equal numbers of cows and bulls, were set free at Big Moose Lake in a state-funded experiment in 1901.

Despite considerable investment, these haphazard experiments flopped. In the 1980s and '90s, the Department of Environmental Conservation proposed an active restoration program but public outcry over car/moose accidents helped table the idea.

Early-20th-century restoration attempts were propelled by good intentions but hampered by incomplete understanding of the natural world. Even the best information was flawed, as we see from the cool, scientific remove of modern times.

When the moose were primed to venture from New England westward they did, first bachelor bulls squeezed out of Vermont—forced to migrate by population pressure. The 21st-century landscape here welcomed them, an accidental atonement played out in hidden wetlands and second-growth forest replete with moosewood and other favorite browse. As nearly a thousand moose prove today, nature proceeds on its own schedule, relying on its own truth. 🌿