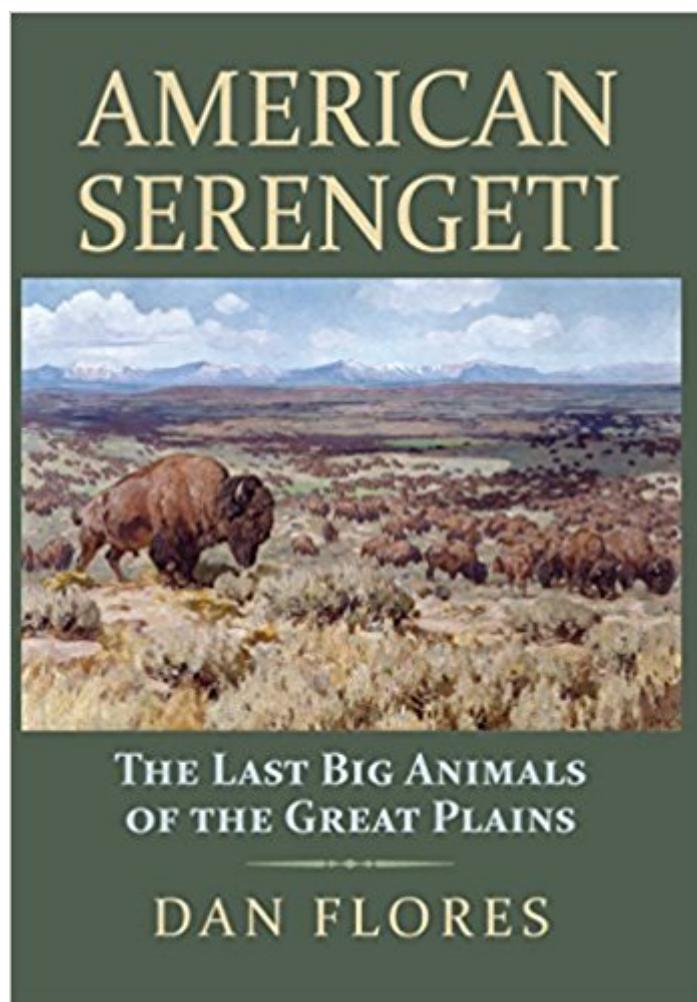


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American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals Of The Great Plains



Synopsis

America's Great Plains once possessed one of the grandest wildlife spectacles of the world, equaled only by such places as the Serengeti, the Masai Mara, or the veld of South Africa. Pronghorn antelope, gray wolves, bison, coyotes, wild horses, and grizzly bears: less than two hundred years ago these creatures existed in such abundance that John James Audubon was moved to write, "it is impossible to describe or even conceive the vast multitudes of these animals." In a work that is at once a lyrical evocation of that lost splendor and a detailed natural history of these charismatic species of the historic Great Plains, veteran naturalist and outdoorsman Dan Flores draws a vivid portrait of each of these animals in their glory and tells the harrowing story of what happened to them at the hands of market hunters and ranchers and ultimately a federal killing program in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Great Plains with its wildlife intact dazzled Americans and Europeans alike, prompting numerous literary tributes. American Serengeti takes its place alongside these celebratory works, showing us the grazers and predators of the plains against the vast opalescent distances, the blue mountains shimmering on the horizon, the great rippling tracts of yellowed grasslands. Far from the empty "flyover country" of recent times, this landscape is alive with a complex ecology at least 20,000 years old—a continental patrimony whose wonders may not be entirely lost, as recent efforts hold out hope of partial restoration of these historic species. Written by an author who has done breakthrough work on the histories of several of these animals—including bison, wild horses, and coyotes—"American Serengeti" is as rigorous in its research as it is intimate in its sense of wonder—the most deeply informed, closely observed view we have of the Great Plains' wild heritage.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Most valuable for extending one's awareness of the Great Plains south into Texas, Flores's book begins as a survey of what is forever lost, then continues as lamentation over the few survivors, and finally tentatively presents a modestly hopeful review of the last century's efforts to reverse the faunal eclipse. Fully capable of rapturous writing, Flores thankfully eschews the purple sage for the emphatic clarity of a Sig Olson or Farley Mowat. His individual animal biographies are useful, each tempting the reader further while remaining (frustratingly) brief. Flores is especially well grounded in the historical literature of the Plains, by which I mean mainly the many narratives of exploration. It is an odd feature of American travel writing that The Great Plains were accorded a sublimity in the nineteenth century that is rarely observed today. Flores ascribes this mainly to technological and agricultural destruction, but I would suggest that an equally guilty culprit is the great speed by which we traverse the plains today. I'm chilled as much as the next person by endless cattle-lands and cornfields, but afoot or by canoe I find I'm much more able to filter out our cultural mistakes in favor of moments of connection with an older place. Flores seems to have found this in his conclusion when he speaks of canoeing down the "Wild and Scenic" portion of the Missouri. To a canoeist accustomed to managed (i.e. dammed) river and lake systems like the Boundary Waters, a wild river may only occasionally be scenic: the banks are often a wasteland of debris and shifting mud and sand; the channel is often nonexistent or clogged. Only daring and insolent men perchance go there.

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