

18th CENTURY DEER POPULATIONS

A HISTORICAL STUDY

In mid-1984, a scientific study was begun to gather basic natural history data on the white-tail deer in and near the Saratoga National Historical Park. This study was initiated in order to address two concerns - one by the park that the deer could be preventing the natural plant succession from open field to forest; the other by local farmers that the deer were severely damaging their crops.

One question that will be addressed during this deer study is what the herd size was in this region in 1777, our historical period. If we found that there were few deer historically, this information could be used as a reason, some said, for controlling the size of the present deer herd.

In order to provide a preliminary report, research into 18th sources was undertaken. Journals written by travelers through this region were examined. Two recently translated German journals were also looked at. Only two libraries were used, the one at the park and the excellent library at Skidmore College. An exhaustive search was not made through either of these libraries. A much more detailed search would have to be made before any herd reduction could be based on historical data. This paper, however, does provide a general idea about deer populations in this area during the last half of the 18th century. The body of the report consists of brief comments on the nine sources used.

1. The journal by John Bartram looked like it could be a profitable source of information since he was writing specifically on the flora and fauna. Unfortunately, Bartram did not travel through this area. He followed the Susquehanna River up into New York then up to what is now Syracuse and on to Oswego. He did dine on venison at least once (p.70) and near Niagara Falls saw 200 Indians, most of them belonging to the Six Nations, carrying packs of furs, chiefly deer and bear.

2. In 1780-1782, the Marquis de Chastellux went through this area. He wrote only brief references about wildlife and deer are not mentioned. The Marquis did mention the vast fir woods and the presence of many quail or partridges (p.192).

3. Chateaubriand passed through the region in 1791. He wrote a brief reference on deer, but much longer ones on beaver, bear, moose, bison, skunk, fox, wolves, muskrat, and wildcats (pp.74-77). He goes on to mention Indians going on hunts for beaver, bear, otter, fox, and muskrats, but no mention of deer (pp.120-130). Chateaubriand discusses the wildlife of the region in some detail. The lack of any significant references to deer is interesting but not important by itself.

4. Like Chateaubriand, St. Jean De Crevecoeur, traveling about the same time, made many references to the wildlife of the area. Mentioned are beaver, partridge, eagles, wolves, bear, otter, ducks, opossum, mountain cats, fox, and elk. Deer are mentioned only a few times and there is no indication as to the number of deer.

5. In 1817, Henry Fearon traveled from Boston to New York City through Albany. He made no mention of wildlife in upstate New York.

6. The recently translated German journal, by Ensign Von Hille, contains only a passing reference to deer. In June 1777, Von Hille, near Crown Point, wrote that, "It is strange not to encounter any deer or bears in these immense forests."

7. One of the best known accounts of travel through this area was Peter Kalm who traveled through the Hudson River, Lake George, Lake Champlain corridor twice during the mid-18th century. Kalm wrote extensively about the flora and fauna of the region. Bear (very common), skunk, raccoon, muskrats, beaver, fox, wolves, and mink are encountered during his travels. At one point, Kalm recounts a curious anecdote about deer. "American deer", he says, "can likewise be trained, and I have seen such myself in several places." According to Kalm, in New Jersey, a tame deer would bring "a wild deer out of the woods, giving its master an opportunity to shoot it." (p. 110)

At the southern end of Lake George, Kalm reported the only evidence encountered in any of the early journals examined that a substantial deer population could have been in the area. Along the southern shore of the lake and in the country between Lake George and the Hudson River, Kalm reported that Indians live in this area for several months by hunting, "especially roe deer which are plentiful in this vicinity." (p.589) He later wrote that an Indian hunter killed a great number of roe deer..." (p.591) Roe deer

are European deer that resemble the white-tail deer. Kalm evidently used a familiar name for what seemed to be a familiar animal.

8. Another recently translated German Journal by Wasmus was examined for the period of February 1776 through May 1778. Unfortunately, the journal appears to be incomplete for the time Wasmus was in this area. He did make two references to the scarcity of deer in Canada (May 1777) and central Massachusetts (January 1778).

9. I had brief talks with Helga Doblin, our translator, and Steve Strach, a seasonal Park Technician. These two people are probably as familiar with the German material that has been translated as anyone. Both said that they did not remember any evidence of significant deer populations and were somewhat surprised about the lack of such references. They both felt that the deer population in this area was very small.

SUMMARY: Only Peter Kalm, of the journalists examined, had any reference to plentiful deer in this general region. The two German journals contain specific references to the scarcity of deer, but they were comments made about conditions farther north or east. The other journals either contain no reference about deer or only make brief comments about deer, but not about their numbers.

CONCLUSION: Only a relatively few sources were used in this study. Based on the evidence in these sources, it is not possible to say what the deer population was in this immediate area. The one author who did mention deer in this general area, Peter Kalm, said that they were plentiful.

The two German journalists who mention the scarcity of deer do not really contradict Kalm since they refer to deer at Crown Point, Canada, and central Massachusetts. These men were also traveling with armies. It should not be too surprising that deer would not remain in the area of armies with their noise and movements.

Those journalists who made no mention of the number of deer may have had reasons. Deer, in fact, could have been very scarce or the writers were looking at a familiar animal and did not consider them important to write about. Deer, in Europe, after all, were fairly common.

The scientific research now underway could turn up more specific evidence of the 18th century deer population. Until this happens, we are left with too little information to draw clear conclusions. I believe that deer populations was less in 1777. I do not think that they were rare, however. It seems probable that even at this early date the number of deer would have been increasing as more and more fields were opened up. It seems clear that before any deer management program took into account the number of deer historically, more definite evidence will be needed.

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