

Outing
March, 1886

Ranch-Life and Game-Shooting in the West

I. The Ranch

To see the rapidity with which the larger kinds of game animals are being exterminated throughout the United States is really melancholy. Twenty-five years ago, the Western plains and mountains were in places fairly thronged with deer, elk, antelope, and buffalo; indeed there was then no other part of the world save South Africa where the number of individuals of large game animals was so large. All this has now been changed, or else is being changed at a really remarkable rate of speed. The buffalo are already gone; a few straggling individuals, and perhaps here and there a herd so small that it can hardly be called more than a squad, are all that remain. Over four-fifths of their former range the same fate has befallen the elk; and their number, even among the mountainous haunts, which still afford them a refuge is greatly decreased. The shrinkage among deer and antelope has been relatively nearly as serious. There are but few places left now where it is profitable for a man to take to hunting as a profession; the brutal skin-hunters and meat-butchers of the woods and prairies have done their work; and these buckskin-clad and greasy Nimrods are now themselves sharing the fate of the game that has disappeared from before their rifles.

Still, however, there is plenty of sport to be had by men who are of a more or less adventurous turn of mind, and sufficiently hardy and resolute to be willing to stand rough work and scant fare; and of course, excepting men who go out to spend some months in traveling solely for purposes of sport, no class has as much chance to get it as is the case with the ranchmen, whose herds now cover the great plains of the West, and even range well up on the foothills of the mighty central chain of the Rocky Mountains. All of my own hunting has been done simply in the intervals of the numerous duties of ranch life; and in order to understand the way we set out on a trip after game it is necessary also to understand a little about the nature of our homes and surroundings.

Many of the ranches are mere mud-hovels or log shanties, stuck down in any raw, treeless spot where there happen to be water and grass; but many others are really beautifully situated, and though very rude in construction, are still large enough and solid enough to yield ample comfort to the inmates. One such, now in my mind, which is placed in a bend of the Heart River, could not possibly be surpassed as regards the romantic beauty of its surroundings. My own house stands on a bottom of the Little Missouri nearly two miles in length, and perhaps half a mile or over in width, from the

brink of the current to the line of steep and jagged buttes that rise sharply up to bound it on the side farthest from the river. Part of this bottom is open, covered only with rank grass and sprawling sage-brush; but there are patches of dense woodland, where the brittle cottonwood trees grow close together and stretch their heads high in the air. The house itself, made out of hewn logs, is in a large open glade many acres in extent. It fronts the river with its length of sixty feet, and along the front runs a broad veranda, where we sit in our rocking-chairs in the summer time when the day's work is done. Within it is divided into several rooms; one of these is where we spend the winter evenings at the time when the cold has set in with a bitter intensity hardly known in any other part of the United States. A huge fireplace contains the great logs of cedar and cottonwood; skins of elk and deer cover the floor, while wolf and fox furs hang from the walls; antlers and horns are thrust into the rafters to serve as pegs on which to hang coats and caps.

In the glade, besides the house, there are several other buildings,— a stable, a smithy, and two or three sheds and outhouses, besides a high, circular horse-corral, with a snubbing-post in the center, and a fenced-in patch of garden land. The river itself is usually a shallow, rapid stream that a man can wade across, but that cannot carry the lightest boat; but when the snows melt, or after heavy rains, it is changed into a boiling, muddy torrent that cannot be crossed by man or beast, and that will bear huge rafts. It is at all times dangerous to cross on account of the quicksands; but after a series of freshets the whole river can be described as simply four or five feet of turbulent water running down over a moving mass of quicksand three feet in depth, that fills the entire bed of the stream. In ordinary floods there will remain certain fords and rapids that can be crossed; but at times any horse that dared to attempt a passage, no matter where, would be almost certainly lost.

Back from the river for several miles extends a stretch of broken and intensely rugged country, known in plains parlance as "bad lands." It consists of chains of steep buttes or hills, often spreading out into table-lands, and separated by a network of deep ravines and winding valleys, which branch out in every direction. When we pass these bad lands we come to the open prairie, which stretches out on every side in level or undulating expanse as far as the eye can reach. In a few of the gorges in the bad lands there are groves of wind-beaten pines, or dwarfed cedars, favorite haunts of the black-tail deer.

A hunting expedition from the ranch needs but scant preparation, because all of our business is carried on in the open air, and our whole outfit is such as is best suited for an out-door life. After cattle the most conspicuous adjuncts of a cow-ranch are horses. Everything is done, and almost all of each day is spent, in the saddle. The horses run free in a band, which is driven to the corral every day or two, when the animals needed at the moment are roped (no plains-man, by the way, ever on any occasion uses the word lasso; in its place he uses the verb to rope; it is sure sign of being a "tenderfoot" to use the former), and the rest of the band again turned loose. Every day some rider goes out among the neighboring cattle; and from May to November most of the hands are away from the ranch-house on the different round-ups. For a short expedition only three or

four men may go, taking a pack outfit; that is, each man taking a spare horse, on which his bedding, food, and the indispensable branding-irons are packed. On a longer trip a wagon is needed. The regular plains-wagon is perforce a stout, rather heavy affair, or it would not stand the rough usage to which it is exposed. It needs a team of at least four horses to handle it properly, can carry a very large load, and with its hooped canvas top offers a good shelter to a small number of men in the event of a sudden night storm of rain. This is the wagon we take when going on a trip of any duration ; but for quick, light work we use the buckboard. This will carry a couple of men and their traps in good style, can go almost everywhere, and moreover can travel nearly as fast as can a man on horseback. A pair can drag a buckboard perfectly, although if merely going up to a neighboring ranch or to some definite point we often put in a team of four, who bowl us along over the prairie at a great rate, trotting or galloping. The stock-saddles used throughout the cow-country are admirably suited for a hunting-trip, as they have pockets in which various articles can be stowed, and things can be tied on them almost everywhere, thanks to the raw-hide strings with which they are plentifully provided. Thus a couple of antelope, or a brace of young deer, or a big buck can be carried behind the saddle with perfect ease. Both ranch-men and cow-boys habitually spend their days in the very costume in which they hunt,—broad hat, flannel shirt, trousers tucked into top-boots. In winter the biting gales render it necessary to take to fur caps and coats, great mittens, and the warmest wool-lined shoes. Leathern overalls or “chaps” (the cowboy abbreviation for the Spanish word chaparajos) are very useful when riding through thorns or to keep out the wet. The same blankets and bedding that are taken on a round-up of course do for a hunting-expedition. Though we have a tent we do not often use it, shielding ourselves from wet weather by sleeping under the canvas wagon sheet. The cooking utensils need not be very numerous; a kettle and a frying-pan, a “Dutch-oven,” merely of short trips made from the ranch. If we make longer ones, such as an expedition after bear and elk to the Big Horn Mountains, which would take a couple of months, we would need to make much more ample preparations.

Almost every cow-boy carries on his hip a heavy Colt or Smith & Wesson revolver but this is of very little use for game. The regular hunters use rifles, for the most part Winchesters, although many of them still carry the ponderous Sharps, of .40 or .45 caliber, carrying a long, narrow, heavy ball, an ounce or so in weight; weapons which are relics of the days when a war of extermination was waged on the herds of the buffalo, and than which no hunting-rifles in the world possess greater accuracy, range, and penetration. They are, however, very cumbersome, have but one shot, and, now that the larger kinds of game have so grown scarce, are giving way to the handier Winchester. A ranch-man, however, with whom hunting is of secondary importance, and who cannot be bothered by carrying a long rifle always round with him on horseback, but who, nevertheless, wishes to have some weapon with which he can kill what game he runs across, usually adopts a short, light saddle-gun, a carbine, weighing but five or six pounds, and of such convenient shape that it can be hung under his thigh alongside the saddle. A 40-60 Winchester is perhaps the best for such a purpose, as it carries far and straight, and hits hard, and is a first-rate weapon for deer and antelope, and can also be

used with effect against sheep, elk, and even bear, although for these last a heavier weapon is of course preferable.

There is thus very little need of preparation indeed when one starts off to hunt from his own ranch: horse, dress, outfit and weapon are already all there. Our supply of fresh meat depends entirely upon what we ourselves kill; and even now we can generally get a deer in an afternoon's walk from the house, without having to make a regular trip; but, to insure the capture of anything else, it is now necessary to go prepared to spend a night or two out on the hunting-grounds.