

# Preserving the Beasts of Waste and Desolation:

## *Theodore Roosevelt and Predator Control in Yellowstone*

By Jeremy Johnston

The early history of wildlife management in places like Yellowstone is often assumed to have been based on a consensus that predators such as wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions should be killed. Although President Theodore Roosevelt sought to curtail the slaughter of predators in Yellowstone in the early 1900s, his role in park policy is often misinterpreted, and he has been portrayed as both a hero and a villain. This confusion is the result of not only a divergence of opinions on predator control, but Roosevelt's own writings and changing views. In his book *The Wilderness Hunter*, which detailed his experiences in the Dakota Badlands during the 1880s, Roosevelt referred to wolves as "the beasts of waste and desolation."<sup>1</sup> In this same book, Roosevelt depicted cougars as "bloodthirsty" and "cowardly" predators with a "desire for bloodshed which they lack the courage to realize."<sup>2</sup> Yet despite his depiction of predators as destroyers of cattle and wildlife, Roosevelt was a careful student of predators and their natural behavior. As he spent more time studying predators in their natural setting, his attitudes toward their role in nature began to change, so much so that by 1908 he ordered predator control of Yellowstone's cougars be stopped in order to allow these predator populations to curtail growing elk populations. This change in Roosevelt's perspective toward Yellowstone's pred-



ator population was influenced by several factors, including his goal of establishing a wildlife reserve in Yellowstone, his personal interest in hunting, and his increased understanding of the role of predators in an ecosystem.

### **Roosevelt's Defense of Yellowstone as a Wildlife Sanctuary**

Theodore Roosevelt's interest in natural history began at a very early age. At eight, young Roosevelt viewed a dead seal in a New York marketplace. "That seal filled me with every possible feeling of romance and adventure," Roosevelt later reminisced.<sup>3</sup> The young Roosevelt returned to the market to

measure and weigh the seal. Eventually, he obtained the seal's skull, and began a natural history collection that would continue to grow throughout his life. In 1872, shortly after the creation of Yellowstone National Park, Theodore Roosevelt received a rifle and taxidermy lessons from his father for his birthday. These gifts would further his studies in natural history as well as introduce the young man to the sport of hunting. Roosevelt continued to pursue his natural history studies into his college years, when he initially sought a degree in natural history before deciding on law as a field of study. Despite this change in career goals, Roosevelt continued to study wildlife throughout his life.

Hunting would also play an important role in Theodore Roosevelt's life, not just for the collecting of natural specimens for study, but for recreational enjoyment as well. Roosevelt best summed up his feelings towards the sport of hunting in the preface to *The Wilderness Hunter*:

*In hunting, the finding and killing of the game is after all but a part of the whole. The free, self-reliant, adventurous life, with its rugged and stalwart democracy; the wild surroundings, the grand beauty of the scenery, the chance to study the ways and habits of the woodland creatures—all these unite to give the career of the wilderness hunter its peculiar charm.*

*The chase is among the best of all national pastimes; it cultivates that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone.*<sup>4</sup>

This great interest in hunting and natural history would eventually lead Roosevelt into the American West.

Roosevelt first visited the West in 1883, when he arrived for a bison hunt in the Dakota Badlands. After successfully completing his hunt, Roosevelt invested in a cattle ranch, marking the beginning of his close connection with the West. Roosevelt returned the next year to investigate his ranching operations and escape the grief and hardship caused by the deaths of both his first wife, Alice, and his mother. Roosevelt spent several of the following years herding cattle and having a number of adventures which included fighting drunken assailants and capturing thieves who stole his boat. Hunting also occupied a great amount of his time during these years. Roosevelt hunted a variety of animals throughout the Badlands and into Wyoming and Montana, and continued to spend much of his time at his ranch until the winter of 1886–1887 wiped out most of his cattle herd. In later years he occasionally returned to the ranch, using it as a base for hunting excursions and other sightseeing trips. From there, Roosevelt embarked on two trips into Yellowstone National Park in the 1890s. His experiences and observations from these trips formed the basis for many of his wildlife management policies in Yellowstone National Park.<sup>5</sup>

Roosevelt's interest in the American West soon focused on Yellowstone and the threats to its wildlife posed by railroad development proposals and poaching. He became aware of these problems in 1885 when he met with George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Forest and Stream*, then the leading natural history magazine in North America, and a founder of the Audubon Society. Grinnell had led a campaign to protect Yellowstone's ungulates from market hunting and commercial development ever since his first visit to Yellowstone

in 1875. Roosevelt wanted Grinnell to explain some negative remarks he printed in a review of *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, Roosevelt's first book describing his western adventures. Grinnell had given the book an overall favorable review, but noted that Roosevelt tended to generalize his observations of wildlife and had relied on some tenuous sources for information. During the meeting, Grinnell defended his remarks pertaining to Roosevelt's book, and Roosevelt realized the validity of Grinnell's arguments. Along the way, the two men realized their shared interests in hunting and the West and became good friends. Soon after, they founded the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization that, among other goals, worked to defend Yellowstone and its wildlife. Using *Forest and Stream* as its mouthpiece, the Boone and Crockett club criticized poaching and proposals for railroad developments within Yellowstone. This publicity helped result in the passage of the Lacey Act of 1894, which established Yellowstone's first efficient judicial system, making it possible to punish poachers for their illegal activities. The Boone and Crockett club also stopped efforts to complete a railroad through the northern section of Yellowstone. When railroad developers wanted

to decrease the park's boundaries, publicity generated by the Boone and Crockett club created a public outcry to "save Yellowstone."<sup>6</sup>

Through his efforts with Grinnell, Roosevelt began to envision the park as a sanctuary and breeding ground for wildlife. Roosevelt hoped that if the park's wildlife were protected, their populations would dramatically increase and spread to the surrounding regions. This would ensure the continuation of hunting, his favorite pastime, outside the park's boundaries. It would also alleviate his fear that as settlement increased, the West would become a series of private game reserves creating a situation where only the rich could hunt. As his political career progressed to the presidency of the United States, Roosevelt found himself in a position where he could achieve these goals by micro-managing Yellowstone's wildlife policies.

### Roosevelt and Yellowstone's Predators

Although the hunting of many ungulate species ended in 1883 by a directive of the Secretary of the Interior, park officials continued killing predators throughout the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century. Many



An editorial cartoon's depiction of Roosevelt's 1903 Yellowstone visit. Note the mountain lion perched outside the window. From the *Anaconda Standard*.

conservationists of the day, including Roosevelt, believed limiting predation would increase ungulate populations, allowing them to recover from the results of the intensive market hunting that occurred in the park before the ban on hunting.<sup>7</sup>

Roosevelt's support of predator control was not just the result of an altruistic conservationist urge. His own desire to hunt cougars in Yellowstone was also a factor. On December 17, 1901, Roosevelt wrote to Yellowstone's acting superintendent, Major John Pitcher, asking "what is the practice about killing mountain lions? If I get into the Park next June I should greatly like to have a hunt after some of them—that is, on the supposition that they are 'varmints' and are not protected."<sup>8</sup> Going on a cougar hunt in Yellowstone also would provide Roosevelt with an opportunity for him to get reacquainted with his friend and hunting guide, John B. Goff.

### Hunting Mountain Lions

Roosevelt had first met John B. Goff in January 1901. Shortly after Roosevelt was elected vice president, Goff guided him on his first cougar hunt using hounds, in Colorado. Although cougars greatly interested Roosevelt, he had seen very few of them in wild. His knowledge of the animal had come mostly from the tales of outdoorsmen he met in the Badlands.<sup>9</sup>

During his hunt with Goff, Roosevelt thoroughly enjoyed himself and learned much about cougars. Fourteen cougars were killed during the trip, 12 of them by Roosevelt alone. If this sounds like senseless slaughter, it should be remembered that in a time before high-tech film and advanced scientific methods were used to study wild animals, hunting was one of the only available ways to closely examine wildlife. Roosevelt's narrative of the hunt, found in *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*, published in 1905, was "the first reasonably full and trustworthy life history of the cougar as regards its most essential details."<sup>10</sup> Clinton Hart Merriam, director of the Division of Biological Survey,

agreed with Roosevelt. After receiving cougar skulls from the hunt, he wrote Roosevelt that "your series of skulls from Colorado is incomparably the largest, most complete, and most valuable series ever brought together from any single locality, and will be of inestimable value in determining the amount of individual variation."<sup>11</sup> The 1901 hunt not only provided specimens for classification; Roosevelt gained a better understanding of the predation habits of cougars, learned about their diet by examining stomach contents, and dispelled the myth of cougars being man-killers. This information formed the basis for Roosevelt's decisions regarding predator control in Yellowstone.<sup>12</sup>

Roosevelt planned to return to Colorado for a second hunt with Goff for bear in 1903, but his plans never came to fruition. Philip B. Stewart from Colorado Springs, a close friend who

had accompanied Roosevelt on the 1901 cougar hunt, took on the task of organizing the hunt, but one obstacle after another confounded his plans. First, Goff was wounded by an over-eager tourist he was guiding on a hunt. Roosevelt expressed his frustration to Stewart in a letter, "I hope he beat the 'tourist' who inflicted the wound severely."<sup>13</sup> Goff recovered rapidly, and promised enough cougar to keep Roosevelt satisfied, but on January 22, 1903, Roosevelt wrote Stewart to cancel the hunt. "Many things are conspiring to make it unlikely that I can go," he complained.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Roosevelt scheduled a grand tour of the western states for the spring of 1903, with one stop at Yellowstone.

Roosevelt continued hoping for another hunt with Goff. Shortly after canceling the hunt in Colorado, Roosevelt wrote Stewart about the possibility of sending Goff from Colorado



*After leaving his position in Yellowstone, Goff continued to hunt cougars in the Shoshone National Forest, east of Yellowstone National Park's boundary, where he was photographed circa 1907 with his dogs and a recent kill. Photo courtesy of the Park County, Wyoming, Historical Archives.*

to meet him in Yellowstone. By bringing Goff to Yellowstone, Roosevelt would be able to meet two objectives: controlling predators within the park and enjoying a hunt. "The park authorities say they would like Johnny Goff to be up there with his dogs on trial for the business of killing out some of the mountain lions," Roosevelt wrote to Stewart, "then if things went right, I might get a week with him myself."<sup>15</sup> But his plan began to unravel when Secretary of War Elihu Root noted that Roosevelt's public image might be tarnished if he killed any animals within the park.<sup>16</sup> Root most likely felt that a hunt in Yellowstone National Park, where hunting by the general public was forbidden, would appear to be self-serving, and no less than a misuse of presidential authority. If the public got wind of Roosevelt ordering his hunting guide to Yellowstone, it could create a minor scandal.

Roosevelt attempted to resolve the issue by writing Major John Pitcher, "Secretary Root is afraid that a false impression might get out if I killed anything in the Park, even though it was killed, as of course would be the case, strictly under Park regulations... Now I have thought of this: Would it be possible, starting from within the Park, to go just outside the border and kill any

mountain lions?"<sup>17</sup> Roosevelt then requested Pitcher to send out scouts to find a suitable area, and concluded the letter by asking if he had requested any hounds for the purpose of killing predators.<sup>18</sup> Roosevelt wanted to be sure that if Goff could not reach Yellowstone for some reason, he would still be able to hunt cougars outside of the park boundaries by using the government's pack of dogs. Pitcher's response is not known, but it appears he did submit an application for three hounds. Roosevelt ordered Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock to send Pitcher an additional three dogs to supplement the pack. On March 2, Roosevelt ordered Pitcher to put the dogs through a trial run. "We must be dead sure we get our mountain lion," noted Roosevelt.<sup>19</sup>

Pitcher wrote a report to the president on the hunting possibilities, noting that his scouts had located "the fresh tracks of ten mountain lions, close to the point where we propose to make our camp."<sup>20</sup> He also noted that the park's buffalo keeper, C. J. "Buffalo" Jones, had captured a live lion while feeding some bighorn sheep in the area. Pitcher reported that the dogs would soon arrive in the park from Texas, and that kennels awaited them. Perhaps trying to alleviate the president's fears about public opinion, Pitcher wrote, "Now these

lions have simply got to be thinned out, and if you will lend us a hand in the matter, you will be of great help to us and no one can offer any reasonable objection to your doing so."<sup>21</sup>

With Pitcher's assistance, Roosevelt eagerly anticipated his trip to Yellowstone, with a side-trip outside the park to kill some cougars. Roosevelt's plans took another turn on March 21, however, when Pitcher informed the president that only four of the eight dogs had arrived, and they were untrained. Buffalo Jones was attempting to train them using his captured cougar. Pitcher also noted that he had telegraphed Mr. Poole, the dog supplier, and informed him that he needed the other four dogs, two of which must be trained or else the contract would be voided. Poole telegraphed back that four more dogs were being shipped to the park. Pitcher requested John Goff's address in order to contact him if the four new dogs were unsuitable.<sup>22</sup>

Upon learning of the problem with the dogs, Roosevelt wrote back to Pitcher to cancel the hunt and comment, "Having had experience in the past with individuals who sold hounds, I am not in the least surprised at your news."<sup>23</sup> Roosevelt wrote that "an untrained hound is worse than useless. Such a pack will run deer or elk in the place of lion, and will be a perfect curse to the Park."<sup>24</sup> He also noted that bringing Goff up to the park would be unacceptable. "The more I have thought it over...[Goff] coming up would cause a great deal of talk."<sup>25</sup> He concluded the letter by noting that seeing the game of the park would be exciting enough but that, on the off chance the hounds were trained in time, he would attempt to hunt cougar.<sup>26</sup>

On April 8, 1903, Theodore Roosevelt arrived in Yellowstone National Park for his long anticipated visit. Famed naturalist and writer John Burroughs accompanied Roosevelt during his visit, which lasted for over two weeks. During this time, Roosevelt and Burroughs spent most of their time studying the park's wildlife. Roosevelt fired only one shot within the park. Using a tree for a target, he tested a new revolver, only to have the spent shell fly



*President Theodore Roosevelt (left) in camp near Tower, Yellowstone National Park, with John Burroughs (right), April 1903. NPS photo.*



*“Head of Cougar Shot Sept., 1889” by J. Carter Beard, from Roosevelt’s The Wilderness Hunter. This illustration shows how mountain lions were depicted in the past—as bloodthirsty killers.*



to be thinned down, and that predators were needed to fulfill this function in place of human hunters. Roosevelt now realized that predators such as cougars were an important part of the Yellowstone ecosystem. This was a rare opinion for the time period, especially from a former Western rancher. Roosevelt believed the winter die-offs were an effective method of population control of elk numbers, but he considered it to be too inhumane. Instead, his background in range management focused him on establishing a balance between elk numbers and what he considered to be efficient feed on the range.

Although Roosevelt wrongly believed that cougars alone could keep down the elk numbers, he still feared that cougar predation would destroy other wildlife populations such as deer and bighorn sheep. He worried most about cougars because he thought coyotes and wolves were not as dangerous to the ungulate herds. By that time, wolves would have been too low in numbers to have had much of an impact on the ungulate herds, and Roosevelt dismissed coyotes as formidable predators. “Although there are plenty of coyotes in the Park, there are no big wolves,” he noted, “and save for very infrequent poachers the only enemy of...all game, is the cougar.”<sup>31</sup> Based on this belief, Roosevelt began to advocate a limited predator control program for the cougar population. Major Pitcher assigned Buffalo Jones the responsibility

were out with the President.’ Jones was so mad that he never said a word.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Predator Control in Yellowstone**

During the president’s visit in April 1903, he had substantial time to study Yellowstone’s wildlife. His perspective on predators began to change, especially after he witnessed the conditions of the elk herds. He saw many elk along the way to his campsite on the Yellowstone River near the Black Canyon of the Yellowstone, and noted that they “were certainly more numerous than when I was last through the Park twelve years before.”<sup>29</sup> With the help of Pitcher and their guide Elwood Hofer, who had also guided Roosevelt during his 1891 visit to the Yellowstone area, Roosevelt counted 3,000 head of elk in one sitting. He also noticed many elk carcasses lying on the ground. He paid close attention to what had caused their deaths. Two were killed by “scab,” and some by cougars, but most had died of starvation—the result, Roosevelt believed, of overpopulation. Roosevelt assumed the numbers to be too high on the basis of what he had witnessed during his visits in 1890 and 1891. Certainly, the elk numbers would have increased throughout the 1890s due to the cessation of market hunting within Yellowstone and increased power to prosecute poachers under the Lacey Act. In addition to decreased hunting, the destruction of the wolves and other natural predators in this time period would have decreased predation, allowing for a greater increase in elk numbers.

Roosevelt now began to defend the cougars’ presence in the park: “As the elk were evidently rather too numerous for the feed,” he later wrote in the account of his trip, “I do not think the cougars were doing any damage.”<sup>30</sup> Roosevelt began to worry that the elk herds would meet the same fate as his North Dakota cattle herds had in the disastrous winter of 1886–1887; that they would deplete the range, leaving little if any winter feed, and leading to starvation for themselves and other wildlife. To prevent this from occurring, Roosevelt believed the elk herds needed

back, cutting his cheek. The only animal Roosevelt killed during his trip was one mouse. With hope of discovering a new species of mice, Roosevelt caught his prey by throwing his hat over the mouse to entrap the small creature. He spent the evening skinning the mouse and treating the small pelt for shipment to the U. S. Biological Survey to see if it was a new species. It was not, but was a species previously unknown to the park area. John Burroughs worried newspapers might misprint the word “mouse” in their articles as “moose” and create a controversy for the president.<sup>27</sup>

Roosevelt’s preparations for a cougar hunt came back to haunt him during his visit. Buffalo Jones decided to take matters into his own hands by bringing the government’s pack of hounds to the presidential camp for a quick cougar hunt. Upon Jones’ arrival at the camp, Roosevelt instructed Pitcher to order Jones and the hounds back to Mammoth Hot Springs. John W. Meldrum, the judge of Yellowstone’s court who tried to warn Jones not to bother the president, later recalled, “I met [Jones] down at the Post Office shortly after he came in and said, ‘Hello Jones, I thought you

ty for controlling cougars with the government's new hounds. However, Jones soon ran into a conflict with park military officials and resigned his position. When notified of Jones's resignation, Roosevelt knew just the man for the job—his former hunting guide, John B. Goff.

In the spring of 1905, during a bear hunt with Goff, Roosevelt wrote to Major Pitcher; A.A. Anderson, the Yellowstone Forest Reserve inspector; and Ethan A. Hitchcock, Secretary of the Interior, requesting that Goff be "given all the privileges that can be given for killing lion within or without the park."<sup>32</sup> Goff left for Yellowstone in June, expecting the job of thinning out the Yellowstone cougar population to take four years.<sup>33</sup>

Roosevelt's instructions to Goff indicated his newly selective approach to predator control. "Of course you can not afford to let the cougar exist in the neighborhood of where the deer and sheep are," Roosevelt wrote Goff in May, 1906, "but any cougar that are found off where there are practically nothing but elk, I should think it a good plan to leave them alone."<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, Roosevelt failed to realize that after years of steady hunting, Yellowstone's cougar population had already been fairly well exterminated. Goff's son Byron later recalled, "Roosevelt was misinformed about the lion situation."<sup>35</sup> John Goff soon discovered that few cougars existed in the park, and he resigned after less than a year of service.

Shortly before Goff left the park, Roosevelt began to realize that the cougar population had become dangerously low. After receiving a letter from Goff, Roosevelt responded, "I am sorry to hear about the elk having had such a bad winter, but just as I have said, there are so many elk that they have begun to be too plentiful in the park, and personally I should be sorry to see all the cougar killed off."<sup>36</sup> These fears regarding the rising elk populations and loss of predator populations caused Roosevelt to rescind his predator control policies against the cougar populations. In a 1908 letter to Superintendent S. B. M. Young, Major Pitcher's

replacement, Roosevelt ordered an end to the killing of cougars in the park:

*I do not think any more cougars should be killed in the park. Game is abundant. We want to profit by what has happened in the English preserves, where it proved to be bad for the grouse itself to kill off all the peregrine falcons and all the other birds of prey. It may be advisable, in case the ranks of the deer and antelope right around the Springs should be too heavily killed out, to kill some cougars there, but in the rest of the park I certainly would not kill any of them. On the contrary, they ought to be let alone.*<sup>37</sup>

Although hundreds of coyotes continued to be killed while Roosevelt was in office, cougars were left alone in Yellowstone after his directive was received. The pack of dogs purchased by the government under Roosevelt's directions was sold. The official killing of cougars did not resume until 1914, when 14 were killed. After the National Park Service assumed control over Yellowstone National Park, cougars continued to be killed: four in 1916; a total of thirty-four in years 1918 and 1919. The last reported official killing of a cougar in Yellowstone occurred in 1925.<sup>38</sup>

### **Too Many Elk in Yellowstone?**

In 1912, Roosevelt's attention again focused on Yellowstone. In an article to *Outlook* magazine, Roosevelt publicly voiced his concern over the increasing number of elk in the park. He had previously expressed worry regarding the park's elk numbers, but now feared that the problem would result in disaster. Roosevelt predicted the following:

*Elk are hardy animals and prolific. It is probable that a herd under favorable conditions in its own habitat will double in numbers about every four years. There are now in the Yellowstone Park probably thirty thousand elk. A very few moments' thought ought to show any one that under these circumstances, if nothing inter-*

*fered to check the increase, elk would be as plentiful as cattle throughout the whole United States inside half a century. But their possible range is of course strictly limited, and as there are no foes to kill them down, the necessary death-rate is kept up by nature in far more cruel way—that is starvation by winter. The suffering and misery that this means is quite heartrending... What is needed is recognition of the simple fact that the elk will always multiply beyond their means of subsistence, and if their numbers are not reduced in some other way they will be reduced by starvation and disease.*<sup>39</sup>

The only solution, Roosevelt decided, was that "it would be infinitely better for the elk, infinitely less cruel, if some method could be devised by which hunting them should be permitted right up to the point of killing each year on an average what would amount to the whole animal increase... Of course the regulation should be so strict and intelligent as to enable all killing to be stopped the moment it was found to be in any way excessive or detrimental."<sup>40</sup>

A number of obstacles prevented the implementation of Roosevelt's proposal for controlling the numbers of elk in Yellowstone by limited hunting. It was hard to convince the public and the military administrators in Yellowstone that the elk herds should be culled. Park administrators did attempt to solve the problem by increasing the feeding of hay to elk, decreasing domestic grazing in the National Forest Reserves, and by shipping elk outside the park, but this was not effective in Roosevelt's opinion.<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt criticized these methods: "from time to time well-meaning people propose that the difficulty shall be met by feeding the elk hay in winter or by increasing the size of the winter grounds... But as a permanent way of meeting the difficulty neither enlarging the range nor feeding with hay would be of the slightest use. All that either method could accomplish would be to remove the difficulty for two or three years until the elk had time to multiply beyond once more to the danger-point."<sup>42</sup>

Misleading publicity regarding the elk die-off in the winter of 1916–1917 seemed to confirm Roosevelt’s worst fears. This news led many people to believe the winter had killed off most of the park’s elk population. Heavy snowfall kept the elk herds from traveling to their winter range. Many elk died from starvation, which preservationists took as proof that overpopulation was threatening the future of the elk. Some people became alarmed that the species that barely survived the era of market hunting was again headed for extinction, this time from natural forces. Most of this fear was based on exaggerated counts from previous years, but the park’s new administration, the National Park Service, responded by continuing the policy of feeding hay to the elk. Roosevelt felt this would only continue to compound the problem by once again raising the elk population to uncontrollable standards.<sup>43</sup> Predator control of wolves and coyotes continued as the newly-established National Park Service assumed the management of Yellowstone National Park. The new managers also targeted the cougar populations once again. In 1916, four cougars, 180 coyotes, and 14 wolves were killed. The following year, 100 coyotes and 36 wolves were killed. In

1918, 23 cougars, 190 coyotes, and 36 wolves were killed.<sup>44</sup>

In 1918, Roosevelt wrote to his friend George Bird Grinnell to express his concerns for the future of Yellowstone:

*The simple fact is that if we got additional winter grazing grounds for the elk, or fed them alfalfa, in four years they would have multiplied beyond the limit again, and we should be faced by exactly the same difficulty that we are now. There is winter ground for a few thousand elk in the park but not much more than a fraction of the present number. As their natural enemies have been removed their numbers must be kept down by disease or starvation or else by shooting. It is a mere question of mathematics to show that if protected as they have been in the park they would, inside of a century, fill the whole United States; so that they would then die of starvation!<sup>45</sup>*

The next year, the National Park Service killed 11 more cougars, 227 coyotes, and six wolves. Predator control continued to remove what “natural enemies” of the elk were left. Former Yellowstone superintendent and National Park Service Director Horace

Albright later described the reason for this policy: “the rangers have grown to love all wild life except those predatory species which they so often observe destroying young antelope, deer, or elk. Aside from those outlawed animals, a national park ranger is never known to kill a native animal or bird of the park, or to express a desire to kill.”<sup>46</sup> The issues raised by Roosevelt regarding elk numbers and the role of predators have continued to be debated by the National Park Service into the 21st century. Eventually, the National Park Service used controlled hunting to maintain elk numbers at certain levels. This ended in the 1960s when bad publicity and evolving scientific theories of density dependence led to the adoption of natural regulation policies. Attitudes toward Yellowstone’s predators also changed. Many scientists began to realize the important role of wolves, coyotes, and cougars in the Yellowstone ecosystem. In 1935, the National Park Service ended predator control.<sup>47</sup>

In 1919, Roosevelt passed away at his home at Sagamore Hill, New York. With his death, Yellowstone lost not only one of its most important defenders, but also one of its early wildlife managers. Roosevelt’s handling of predators in Yellowstone will always be debated as having been good or bad. Yet one thing is clear: Roosevelt attempted to establish policies that he believed were in the park’s best interest as he understood it at the time. Unfortunately, he did not understand many of the environmental changes that were occurring in Yellowstone, nor did he recognize how drastically the environment had been changed by those before him, especially how much damage had been done to the predator populations. He also believed that the natural increase of the elk populations and the effects of winter kills, which are now recognized as part of the natural process in Yellowstone’s ecosystem, were inhumane and needed to be managed with what he viewed as more humane methods. Despite these shortcomings, Roosevelt’s changes to Yellowstone’s predator control policies were fairly advanced for his day and age. Roosevelt must be given credit for his effort to look beyond the image of



T.R. on Officer’s Row in Mammoth, 1903. NPS photo archives.

predators as “beasts of waste and desolation” to critically examine their valuable role in the Yellowstone ecosystem. 🌲

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*Jeremy at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, New York. Roosevelt built this Queen Anne home from plans he sketched in 1885 and lived in it until his death in 1919. Photo courtesy Jeremy Johnston.*

## Endnotes

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- 44 Murie, *Ecology of the Coyote*, pg. 15.
- 45 TR to George Bird Grinnell, April 17, 1918, pg. TR Papers.
- 46 Horace M. Albright and Frank J. Taylor, *Oh, Ranger!*, (Stanford University Press, 1928) pg. 15. Note: this quote was deleted from later editions of this book, probably due to the ending of predator control policies in 1935.
- 47 Paul Schullery, *Searching for Yellowstone* and James Pritchard, *Preserving Yellowstone's Natural Conditions: Science and the Perception of Nature*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).