

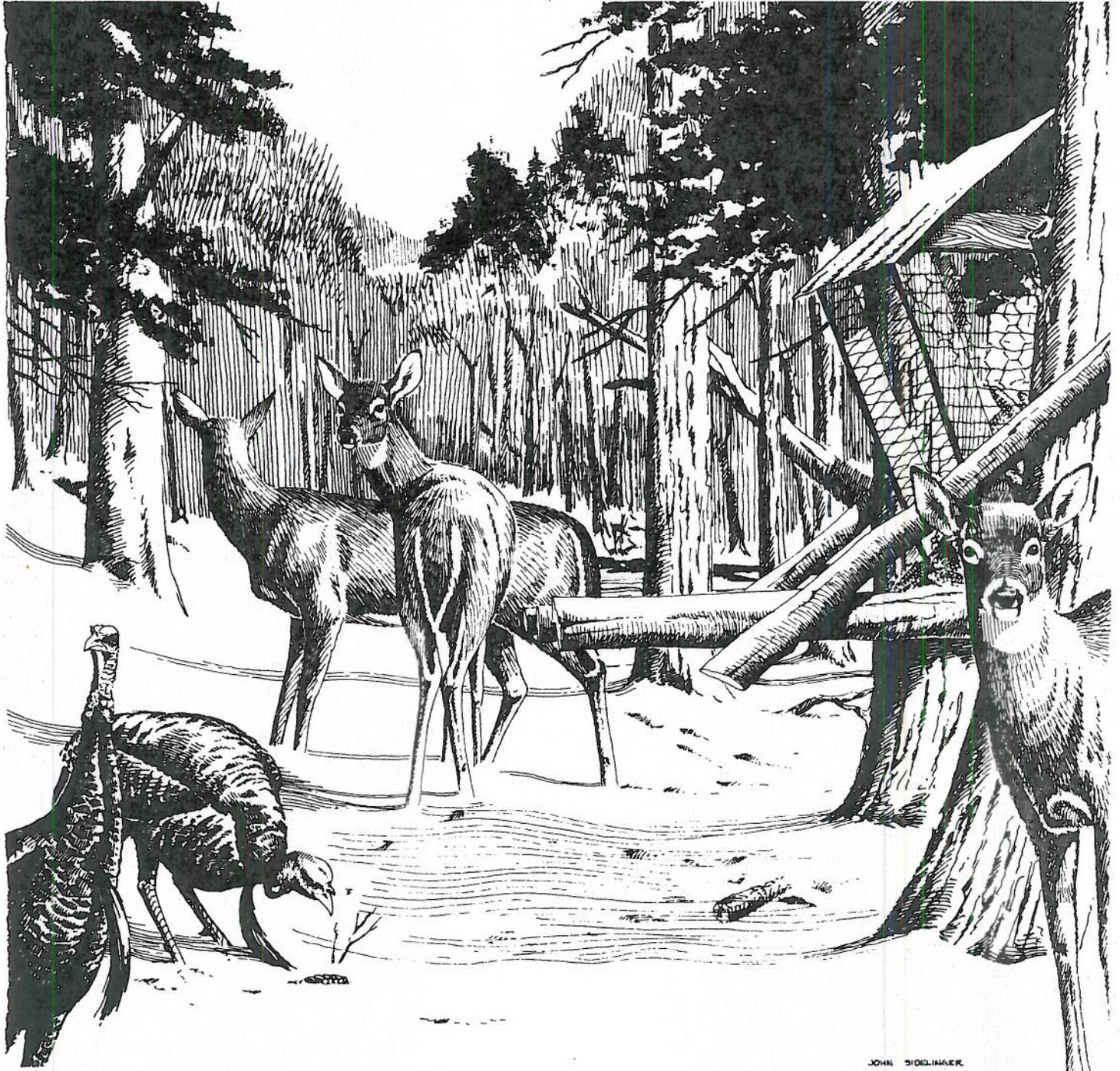
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JOHN DIEHLMAIER

"The next best thing to being there."

Mountain Nightingales:

the story of wolves in western Pennsylvania

by Jeffrey E. Lovich

When the first settlers arrived in Pennsylvania there were immediate conflicts with wolves. The white man's habit of keeping domesticated animals such as sheep and hogs created a situation that the opportunistic wolf could not resist. By doing so, pioneers provided the wolf with prey that was often penned and certainly much easier to catch than deer and other wild creatures. Inevitably there were stock losses. The Quaker government under William Penn was apparently reluctant to enact laws placing a bounty on wolves, because of conservationist attitudes. However, after a couple of hard winters brought howling packs to the very outskirts of Philadelphia, the administration was compelled to readdress their position.

In 1683 a bounty was established offering 10 shillings for the head of a dog-wolf and 15 for that of a she-wolf. Continued depredations by wolves and other predators eventually led to a precedent: in 1705 an act was passed to employ professional wolf hunters, the first in North America. By the time of Penn's death in 1718, wolves were practically exterminated east of Lancaster, and by the late 1700's they were rare east of the Blue Mountains. In spite of relentless persecution, wolves persisted in the Allegheny Mountains of central and western Pennsylvania for another 100 years.

Fortunately for natural historians, a small body of literature exists regarding the last wolves of western Pennsylvania. Much of what we know can be found in two books published just after the turn of the century: "Mammals of Pennsylvania and New Jersey" by Rhoads, and "Extinct Pennsylvania Animals" by Shoemaker. Other bits and pieces of information are scattered throughout numerous county and regional history references pertaining to the area. Unfortunately it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction in these highly entertaining accounts since many are based on second hand information. In addition, some incidents are obviously exaggerated beyond reality. However, after carefully distilling the available references and tempering them with our current understanding of wolf biology, the following story emerges.

According to Shoemaker, Pennsylvania wolves occurred in three basic color phases: grey, brown and black. The range of variation even included a white wolf which was shot in the Sugar Valley of Clinton County. As far as size is concerned, Pennsylvania wolves were thought to be slightly smaller than those found in the western United States. Measurements for one specimen were given as follows: nose-to-tail length - 57.5 inches, shoulder height - 26.5 inches. Most probably weighed about 80 pounds. Larger wolves may have been found in

the state, but reliable measurements are not available. The largest on "record" was supposedly killed by the famous Indian Jim Jacobs in Potter County. The animal was reported to be just over six feet long from tip-to-tip and over 100 pounds.

As elsewhere, Pennsylvania wolves generally travelled in packs, although loners were occasionally encountered. Hunters in McKean County noted that wolves which had lost a foot in a trap generally became loners. Early reports of Pennsylvania packs with hundreds of wolves are ridiculous. The complex social behavior typical of these animals could not be maintained under such circumstances. More reliable recent information indicates that packs are usually composed of 2-15 individuals with 4-7 being typical. According to Shoemaker, a pack of 20 wolves was an unusual occurrence in western Pennsylvania after 1850.

Man's hatred for the wolf was no less in western Pennsylvania than elsewhere and they were persecuted unmercifully. Some of the more notable wolf hunters included: Andy Jackson Long, who claimed to have killed 150 wolves in Clearfield and Jefferson Counties. George Smith boasted of killing 500 in Jefferson County. LeRoy Lyman is said to have killed 300 wolves in Potter County between 1852 and 1865. Philip Shreckengast reportedly killed 93 in Clinton County. While some, if not all of these figures, may be gross exaggerations, the fact that wolves were killed in large numbers is well documented. For example, Luzerne County paid bounties on at least 562 wolf scalps between 1808 and 1820. Up to 273 were paid in a given year!

In 1840, Jefferson, McKean, Potter, and several other counties offered a bounty of \$25 per wolf and \$12 per wolf pup. It actually became more profitable to trap predators than to raise sheep and many respectable farmers dropped the plow to become professional hunters. According to Shoemaker in his book, "Black Forest Souvenirs": "The effect was demoralizing to the proper opening of a new country, and agriculture was given a back seat from which it took half a century to recover. In some sections it never recovered. Everyone enjoyed hunting, it was easy money; even after the wolves, panthers, catamounts ('lynx') and other proscribed animals disappeared, the professional bounty-chasers were loath to go back to the plow and grubbing hoe.

As a result of the increased efforts at eradication, the scalps really began to roll in. The McKean County coffers were so devastated after paying the bounties that every citizen who was not a hunter or trapper voted to cut the bounties in half. Part of the problem was apparently the result of unscrupulous claimants who would present the

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Mountain Nightingales --

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scalps of wolfish dogs or wolves taken outside the county for payment. The lower rates caused a general lack of interest on the part of wolfers. Shortly thereafter, the public perceived an increase in wolf predation and the bounties were raised to the original levels.

The wolves of McKean County reportedly took a heavy toll on sheep. One night in May of 1868, two wolves killed 14 sheep. Fifteen days later they returned, killing 14 more. Considering the subsequent death of orphan lambs, a total of 40 sheep were lost. In May of 1869 another farmer claimed the loss of 11 sheep. Again, the wolves returned, this time five days later, to kill the two remaining sheep, thus wiping out the farmer's flock.

Wolves were very difficult to trap and because of this, no one ever became rich in the trade. Some of the bounties were claimed by deer, bear, and elk hunters that simply shot wolves on sight whenever they were encountered. A more successful technique for killing wolves was to stuff the carcass of a horse, lamb, or cow with strychnine and haul it out into the woods. The results were often devastating. Twelve wolves were killed at one time near Snow Shoe with this trick. Other hunters claimed to be able to call wolves out of the forest by imitating their howl, whereupon they would be shot. Bill Long of Jefferson County reportedly called wolves for his father to shoot near Brookville.

An interesting description of the howl was given by an old Pennsylvania wolfer bears repeating: "I wish I could describe this howl, but the best comparison I can give would be to take a dozen railroad whistles, braid them together, and then let one strand after another drop off, the last peal so frightfully-piercing as to go through your heart and soul ..." This "song" earned the wolves of western Pennsylvania the name "Mountain Nightingales." Howling wolves were not appreciated by many people at the time. One old woman living near Snow Shoe in the mid-1800's reportedly beat the side of her cabin with a slab of wood early on winter mornings to make the wolves stop howling.

Another method used to kill wolves was to locate their den. Hunters that knew the location of a den would visit it in the spring to take pups. In McKean County, pups were born sometime between April 10-20 in a den located in rocks or a hollow log. Litter sizes ranged from 5 to 12. It was often difficult to extract pups from their lair. Sometimes a dog was sent in to haul them out. Other times, a large fishhook was fastened to a long pole to "fish them out." This technique was often used in McKean County and at least once by Bill Long in 1845 along Mill Creek near Sigel in Jefferson County, where he extracted 8 pups. Most of the pups taken in those days were scalped and offered for bounty, while others were kept as pets. These tame wolves often crossed with domestic dogs, and hunters in Jefferson and Clearfield Counties would use them as hunting dogs.

Early settlers in Pennsylvania often formed large hunts to rid the countryside of predators. These were sometimes

organized as "Ring Hunts" where large numbers of hunters and drivers would form a ring which, in one instance, was supposedly 30 miles in diameter. At the appointed time, a signal was given that started everyone moving toward the center. As the perimeter tightened, animals were pushed into the central killing ground where they were then slaughtered. It is reported that 109 wolves were killed in a Ring Hunt on the Juniata River, along with scores of other animals.

No story on wolves would be complete without reference to some of man's "terrifying" encounters with them. Naturally, western Pennsylvania has its share. One professional hunter in McKean County reported that wolves were cowardly during the day, but became bold at night, often approaching hunters' camps and small settlements. In spite of this, he could recall no instance where wolves ever attacked a man. Indeed, documented attacks are rare anywhere within the range of the animal. Lumbermen reported that wolves were plentiful on Mosquito Creek in Clearfield County around 1880. Their howling and snooping around the camps at night so frightened the horses that they were hardly fit for work the following day. Similar situations were reported from lumber camps on Hunt's Run in Cameron County during the winter of 1857. Emmanuel Harman claimed to have

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"I wish I could describe this howl, but the best comparison I can give would be to take a dozen railroad whistles, braid them together, and then let one strand after another drop off, the last peal so frightfully-piercing as to go through your heart and soul." An old Pennsylvania wolfer describing the howl of a wolf.

Mountain Nightingales --

Continued from Page 4

been surrounded by a snarling pack on Grove Run in the same county in 1852.

A more dramatic tale was related far to the east concerning a doctor enroute to a patient's house in the Catawissa Valley. Along the trail the doctor's horse became hopelessly mired in a laurel swamp. After trying unsuccessfully to free the beast, he set off on foot. At nightfall a pack of wolves fell in on his trail. Sensing his predicament the doctor cut a stout club and prepared to defend himself beside a large cliff. Reaching into his satchel, he removed a wad of gauze which he wrapped around his club and then soaked it with ammonia. As the wolves moved in, he flailed at them with the noxious rags, which sent them back choking and coughing. After being lost for two days, during which time he had several confrontations with the wolves, he finally reached the settlement. That was in 1843.

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By the middle of the nineteenth century, the wolves in

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There is some debate in the early texts as to who actually killed the last native Pennsylvania wolf. The dubious distinction may belong to Seth Iredell Nelson, who killed two wolves in Clearfield County in 1892. Other counties and their last wolves are given below. Two were shot in Potter County, 1890. A three-footed wolf was shot in McKean County, 1886 or 1888, along Kinzua Creek by two boys from Bradford. A wolf was reportedly killed near Black Lick in Indiana County, 1890. Two were killed in Jefferson County, 1881. Tracks were seen along Square Timber Run in Cameron County, 1895. One was shot near Patton in Cambria County, 1881. Wolves may have existed in Elk County as late as 1891. Another was killed in Clinton County, 1877.

Other wolves undoubtedly persisted that were never killed or reported. For example, wolves were supposedly sighted in Mifflin County in 1909. Other records were questioned by the early writers. These included the celebrated "Beaver Dam Wolf" shot on the Blair-Cambria

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County line in 1907. Shoemaker considered this animal to be either a stray or an escaped captive, not a native wolf. The huge gray wolf shot by John Queer in Somerset County, 1897 was thought to have been a western wolf brought in by a hunter. Other wolf stories started as a result of coyotes. These animals were not originally native to Pennsylvania, but may have been introduced around 1880 by hunters returning from the western United States. Two were shot in Clinton County, between 1915-1916. Known escapees were also brought to bay in Potter and Bradford County at about the same time. Today the coyote survives in many parts of Pennsylvania, but the present stock is likely derived from natural expansion of the range via New York or Ohio.

By the beginning of this century the wolf was almost certainly extinct in Pennsylvania, or nearly so. Some people at the time figured they had just moved north into New York and Canada. Others thought they had migrated into Maryland and West Virginia. Not surprisingly, people in those localities wondered if their wolves hadn't just moved into Pennsylvania. The fact was that they were gone, along with the great forests of white pine and hemlock, the elk, bison, and others. At that time a man could ride a full day without seeing a green tree or game larger than a chipmunk. The era of reckless logging, hunting, and trapping had come to an end. The Pennsylvania wilderness had been tamed. A new Game

Commission was created to preserve what little was left, but it came too late for the wolf. Looking back from our vantage point we see that the primary cause of their extermination in the state was habitat destruction and the wanton slaughter of game, on which they depended for food. Poison and traps contributed to the disappearance.

One thing is certain, the wolf is gone from Pennsylvania, perhaps never to return, but their presence is still felt by all who love Penn's Woods.

"Jeff Lovich is currently enrolled in the Ecology Ph.D program at the University of Georgia. Jeff has published many articles in state magazines, presented seminars on brook trout, and has received numerous grants and honors for his work. We look forward to more of his writing in the future."

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The original range of the gray or timber wolf in Pennsylvania was statewide. A scientific publication by Stephen Williams, Suzanne McLaren, and Marion Burgwin at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History states that there may have been as many as 40,000 wolves in early colonial Pennsylvania. In 1770 alone, 6,581 skins were exported from the state for the fur trade. According to Shoemaker, Pennsylvania wolves occurred in three basic color phases: gray, brown, and black. Even a white wolf that was shot in the Sugar Valley of Clinton County. In size, Pennsylvania wolves were thought to be slightly smaller than those found in the western United States. Measurements for one specimen were given as follows: nose-to-tail length – 57.5 inches, shoulder height – 26.5 inches, probable weight around eighty pounds. Larger wolves may have been found in the state, but reliable measurements are not available. The largest on record was supposedly killed in Potter County by the oft-cited Indian Jim Jacobs; it measured just over six feet from tip-to-tip and weighed over a hundred pounds.



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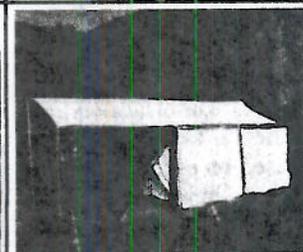
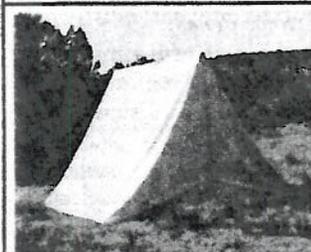
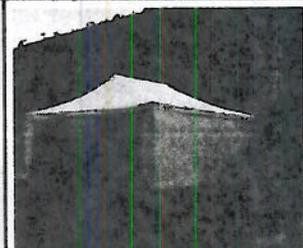
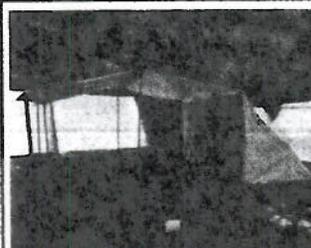
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log. Litter sizes ranged from five to twelve. It was often difficult to extract pups from their lair. Sometimes a dog was sent in to haul them out. Other times, a large fishhook was fastened to a long pole to "fish them out." This technique was often used in McKean County and at least once by Bill Long in 1845 along Mill Creek, near Sigel in Jefferson County, where he extracted eight pups. Most of the pups taken in those days were scalped and offered for bounty, while others were kept as pets. These tame wolves often crossed with domestic dogs, and hunters in Jefferson and Clearfield Counties would use them as hunting dogs.



Early settlers in Pennsylvania supposedly formed large hunts to rid the countryside of predators. These were sometimes organized as "ring hunts" where large numbers of hunters and drivers would form a circle, which, in one instance, was supposedly thirty miles in diameter. At the appointed time, a signal was given that started everyone moving toward the center. As the perimeter tightened, animals were pushed into the central killing ground where they were slaughtered. It was reported that 109 wolves were killed in a ring hunt on the Juniata River, along with scores of other animals.

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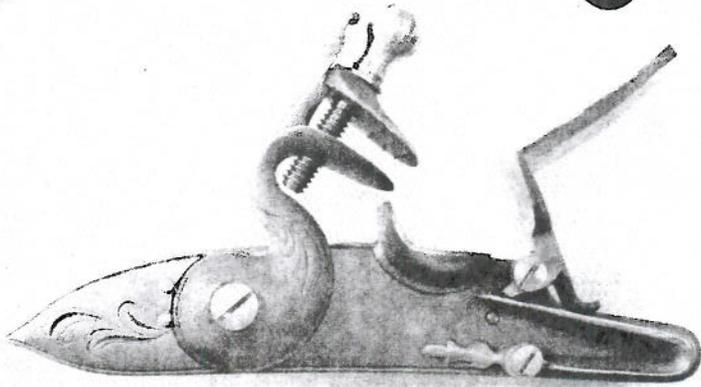
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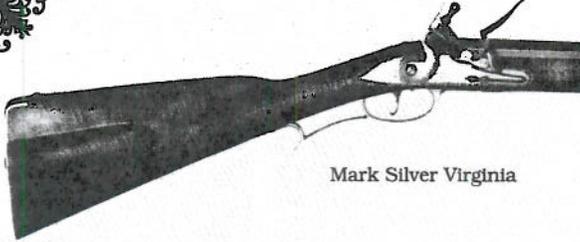
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Other wolves undoubtedly persisted that were never killed or reported. For example, wolves were supposedly sighted in Mifflin County in 1909. Later records have been questioned by early writers, including the "Beaver Dam Wolf" shot near the Blair-Cambria County line in 1907. Shoemaker considered this animal to be either a stray or an escaped captive, not a native wolf. Other wolf stories no doubt started based on coyote sightings. Not originally native to Pennsylvania, the adaptable coyote was either brought into the Commonwealth by hunters returning from the west, or it immigrated into the state

of its own accord. Two coyotes were shot in Clinton County between 1915 and 1916. Known escapees were also brought to bay in Potter and Bradford Counties about the same time. Whichever scenario is correct (and there is evidence in support of both), the coyote is now firmly established in Pennsylvania as a replacement for their larger cousins.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the wolf was almost certainly extinct in Pennsylvania, or nearly so. Some people at the time figured the wolves had just moved north into New York or Canada. Others thought they had migrated into Maryland or West Virginia. Not surprisingly, people in those localities wondered if their wolves hadn't just moved into Pennsylvania. The fact was that they were gone, along with the great forests of white pine and hemlock, elk, bison, wolverines, and others. At the beginning of the 20th century a rider on horseback could ride all day and not see game larger than a chipmunk in Pennsylvania. The era of reckless logging, hunting, and trapping had come to an end. The Pennsylvania wilderness had been tamed. A new Game Commission was created to preserve what little was left and begin the road to restoring Pennsylvania's natural heritage, but it came too late for the wolf. Looking back from our vantage point we see that the primary cause of the wolf's extermination was habitat destruction and reckless persecution as a predator. Poison and unregulated trapping contributed to its disappearance.

One thing is certain: the wolf is gone from Pennsylvania, probably never to return. However, its memory is part of the rich natural and historical tapestry of life in the Keystone State. MB



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