

The 1858 Buffalo Hunt in the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Territory¹

By Henry Youle Hind

... The ranges of the buffalo in the north-western prairies are still maintained with great exactness, and old hunters, if the plains have not been burnt, can generally tell the direction in which herds will be found at certain seasons of the year. If the plains have been extensively burnt in the autumn, the search for the main herds during the following spring must depend on the course the fires have taken. Red River hunters recognized two grand divisions of buffalo, those of the Grand Coteau and Red River, and those of the Saskatchewan. Other ranges of immense herds exist beyond the Missouri towards the south, as far as Texas and Mexico.



The north-western buffalo ranges are as follow. The bands belonging to the Red River Range winter on the Little Souris, and south- easterly towards and beyond Devil's Lake, and thence on to Red River and the Shayenne. Here too, they are found in the spring. Their course then lies west towards the Grand Coteau de Missouri, until the month of

¹ Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, Vol. II (London: 1860), Chapter XXVIII. Note above sketch by C.W. Jeffries.

June, when they turn north, and revisit the Little Souris from the west winding round the west flank of Turtle Mountain to Devil's Lake, and by the main river (Red River), to the Shayenne again. In the memory of many Red River hunters, the buffalo were accustomed to visit the prairies of the Assiniboine as far north as Lake Manitobah, where in fact their skulls and bones are now to be seen; their skulls are also seen on the east side of the Red River of the north, in Minnesota, but the living animal is very rarely to be met with. A few years ago they were accustomed to pass on the east side of Turtle Mountain through the Blue Hills of the Souris, but of late years their wanderings in this direction have ceased; experience teaching them that their enemies, the half-breeds, have approached too near their haunts in that direction. The country about the west side of Turtle Mountain in June 1858 was scored with their tracks at one of the crossing places on the Little Souris, as if deep parallel ruts had been artificially cut down the hill-sides. These ruts, often one foot deep and sixteen inches broad, would converge from the prairie for many miles to a favourite crossing or drinking place; and they are often seen in regions in which the buffalo is no longer a visitor.

The great western herds winter between the south and north branches of the Saskatchewan, south of the Touchwood Hills, and beyond the north Saskatchewan in the valley of the Athabasca; they cross the South Branch in June and July, visit the prairies on the south side of the Touchwood Hill range, and cross the Qu'Appelle Valley anywhere between the Elbow of the South Branch and a few miles west of Fort Ellice on the Assiniboine. They then strike for the Grand Coteau de Missouri, and their eastern flank often approaches the Red River herds coming north from the Grand Coteau. They then proceed across the Missouri up the Yellow Stone, and return to the Saskatchewan and Athabasca as winter approaches, by the flanks of the Rocky Mountains. We saw many small herds, belonging to the western bands, cross the Qu'Appelle Valley, and proceed in single file towards the Grand Coteau in July 1858.

The eastern bands, which we had expected to find on the Little Souris, were on the main river (Red River is so termed by the half-breeds hunting in this quarter). They had proceeded early thither, far to the south of their usual track, in consequence of the devastating fires which swept the plains from the Rocky Mountains to Red River in the autumn of 1857. We met bulls all moving south, when approaching Fort Ellice; they had come from their winter quarters near the Touchwood Hill range. As a general rule the Saskatchewan bands of buffalo go north during the autumn, and south during the summer. The Little Souris and main river bands, go north-west in summer and south-east in autumn. It is almost needless to remark again that fires interfere with this systematic migration, but there are no impediments which will divert the buffalo from their course. The half-breeds state that no slaughter by large parties of hunters or Indians can turn large herds from the general direction they have taken when on the march; want of food is alone able to make them deviate from the course they have taken. The approach of numerous herds can be recognised by a low rumbling sound they occasion, if the weather be calm, fully twenty miles before they arrive, this warning is best perceived by applying the ear to a badger hole. During the rutting season they can be heard bellowing for a great distance on a still night.

When we arrived at the Sandy Hills on the South Branch, the Crees, on being asked if the buffalo were numerous near at hand, answered, 'listen to- night and you will hear them.'

The summer and fall buffalo hunts are the grand events of the year to the Red River settlers, in fact the chief dependence for a livelihood of the greater part of the population. The start is usually made from the settlements about the 15th of June for the summer hunt, the hunters remaining in the prairie until the 20th August or 1st of September. One division (the White Horse Plain) goes by the Assiniboine River to the 'rapids crossing place,' and then proceed in a south-westerly direction. The other, or Red River division, pass on to Pembina, and then take a southerly direction. The two divisions sometimes meet, but not intentionally. Mr. Flett in 1849 took a census of the White Horse Plain division near the Chiefs' Mountain, not far from the Shayenne River, Dacotah Territory, and enumerated 603 carts, 700 half-breeds, 200 Indians, 600 horses, 200 oxen, 400 dogs and one cat.

After the start from the settlement has been well made, and all stragglers or tardy hunters have arrived, a great council is held, and a president elected. A number of captains are nominated by the president and people jointly. The captains then proceed to appoint their own policemen, the number assigned to each not exceeding ten. Their duty is to see that the laws of the hunt are strictly carried out. In 1849, if a man ran a buffalo without permission before the general hunt began, his saddle and bridle were cut to pieces, for the first offence; for the second offence of the same description his clothes were cut off his back. At the present day these punishments are changed to a fine of twenty shillings for the first offence. No gun is permitted to be fired when in the buffalo country before the 'race' begins. A priest sometimes goes with the hunt, and mass is then celebrated in the open prairies.

At night the carts are placed in the form of a circle with the horses and cattle inside the ring, and it is the duty of the captains and their policemen to see that this is rightly done. All camping orders are given by signal, a flag being carried by the guides, who are appointed by election. Each guide has his turn of one day, and no man can pass a guide on duty without subjecting himself to a fine of five shillings. No hunter can leave the camp to return home without permission, and no one is permitted to stir until any animal or property of value, supposed to be lost, is recovered. The policemen, at the order of the captains, can seize any cart at night-fall and place it where they choose for the public safety, but on the following morning they are compelled to bring it back to the spot from which they moved it the evening previous.

This power is very necessary in order that the horses may not be stampeded by night attacks of the Sioux or other Indian tribes at war with the half-breeds. A heavy fine is imposed in case of neglect in extinguishing fires when the camp is broken up in the morning. In sight of buffalo, all the hunters are drawn up in line, the president, captains, and police being a few yards in advance, restraining the impatient hunters. Not yet, not yet, is the subdued whisper of the president; the approach to the herd is cautiously made. Now! the president exclaims, and as the word leaves his lips the charge is made, and in a few minutes the excited half-breeds are among the bewildered buffalo. Blind buffalo are

frequently found accompanying herds, and sometimes they are met with alone. Their eyes have been destroyed by prairie fires; but their quickening sense of hearing and smell, and their increased alertness enable them to guard against danger, and makes it more difficult to approach them in quiet weather than those possessing sight. The hunters think that blind buffalo frequently give the alarm when they are stealthily approaching a herd in an undulating country. When galloping over stony ground blind buffalo frequently fall, but when quietly feeding they avoid the stones and boulders with wonderful skill. ...



A Metis buffalo Hunt, from Harper's Magazine



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