O U T I N G

VOL. XXXIX MARCH, 1902 NO. 6

THE INDIAN HUNTER OF THE FAR NORTHWEST

ON THE TRAIL TO THE KLONDIKE

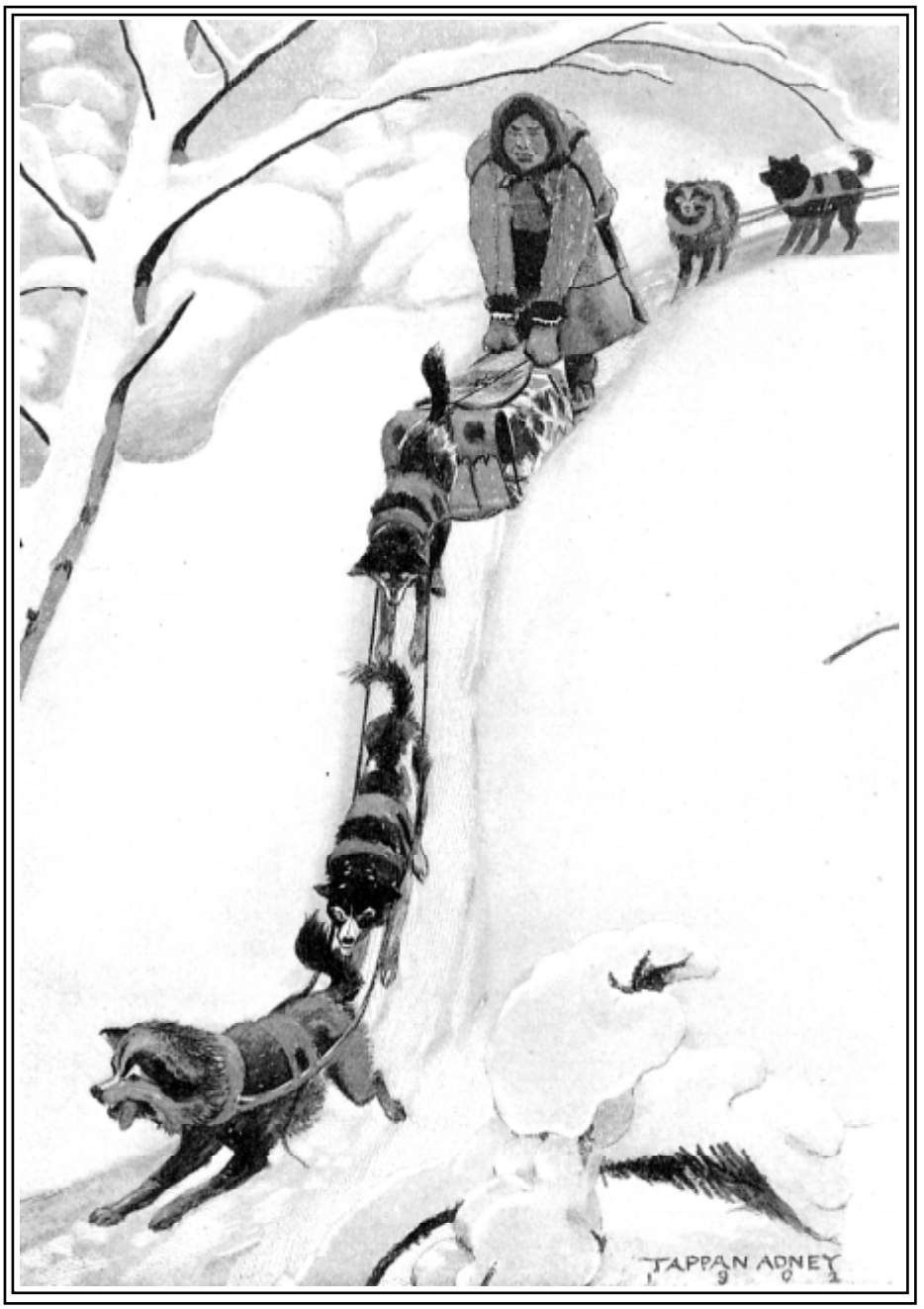
By TAPPAN ADNEY

IT is only one of nearly all impressions of the Yukon country (which includes Klondike) received from the meagre reports of the first miners who gazed from the summit of Chilkoot Pass upon the sources of that river upwards of twenty years ago; that the land is forbidding in every particular, and nearly or quite destitute of game. Had we, who joined the great stampede thither in '97, stopped to consider that the fur-trader had been established on that river for upwards of fifty years, we should have known that the fur-bearing animals, the beaver, otter, sable, mink, fox, and ermine were the basis of a profitable trade, and we might not have conceived a country barren of the larger game. I myself had been further unprepared by hearing a lecture delivered before no less a body than the, American Geographical Society, in which the lecturer, basing his opinion no doubt on the reports of those who had merely drifted down the river in summer, gravely stated that the mosquitoes were so numerous and venemous there that the larger animals, such as the reindeer and I believe moose, could not exist. On my may in, that eventful autumn, by way of the head of the Yukon River, I encountered thousands of ducks on the lakes; while bands of wretched and wild-looking Indians at occasional intervals offered for trade skins of moose, mountain-goat, mountain-sheep, and black and grizzly bears. At Pelly River, I saw in a trading post a bunch of thirteen silver-gray and black fox skins, and learned that the proportion of blacks to "reds" was

greater than in any known place. Farther on, I took a shot, from my boat, at a distant gray wolf; and while drifting in the ice which bore my little craft helplessly along, just above Klondike, I had the exceeding satisfaction of watching my first and only live wolverine, loping along the bank with arched back and drooping tail—characteristic carriage of the weasel family, of which it is the largest representative. And how my imagination carried me back to the tales of the fur countries; lines of broken sable traps, and exasperated trappers!

I heard white men, returned from the upper Klondike, tell of beaver; of bear "signs," plentiful beyond all past experience; and of moose and caribou, in numbers of which they never before had dreamed; and I knew that the real truth, as of game as of mining, was yet to be told. That winter I accompanied a band of about sixty Indians, comprising an entire village, who were established at their ancient home at the mouth of the Klondike River, to the upper waters of that stream; following with dogs, toboggans and "skin-houses" the trail of moose and "deer," as they had been accustomed to hunt for ages. I was the only white man with them, and the only one excepting a missionary, long ago, who ever thus lived with them, and I acquired a knowledge of the game of the country possible to acquire in no other way; of modern and ancient ways of hunting; and of trapping. In all we killed some eighty moose, and sixty-five caribou or reindeer, the main part of which was hauled by dogs to the starving miners at Dawson. Much game was killed by white hunters; but on the whole the best of them lacked the consummate skill of the Indian, brought up as he is to perfect knowledge of the country and of the habits of the game.

The Klondike River, a swift shallow stream a hundred and fifty miles or more in length, rises in a number of branches at the base of lofty, rugged peaks comprising the northern continuation of the Rocky Mountains. Its valley is generally broad and flat, covered with dense growth of spruce, interspersed with birches, poplars and low willows. On either side there rise rounded. hills, frequently thousands of feet in height, bare upon their tops, their sides covered with trees the same as of the valleys, but sparse and stunted—so much so that a spruce of the size of one's arm might be hundreds of years old, with rings of growth as close as the leaves of a book. The climate is dry, but little rain falling in summer, and in minter the sky is as "clear as a bell"; what snow there is seems to come more from the rising mists of the river, which is never frozen over entirely (though the ice goes out in cakes ten feet thick!), and this falls gently from day to day and the air is so still that the snow clings to the limbs where it falls, until they reach the size of barrels, and often on the higher hills so envelopes the vegetation that the landscape appears like some gallery of tall, weird forms chiseled from purest marble. The intense cold (reaching seventy below zero, and more) and the absence of wind in early winter prevent the snow from packing and crusting until the returning spring sun warms the earth back to life. Two or three feet of snow is the utmost, and being light as down makes snow-shoeing exceedingly laborious, while offering no obstacle to the movements of the moose, which never is obliged to "yard" as in more southern latitudes, but wanders at will from valley to mountain top, browsing upon the fragrant buds of the white birch and young shoots of the willow. The native inhabitants of the valley of the Yukon, as far as tide-water (where the Eskimo begin), are pure Indian, belonging to the Athabaska group of the Tinneh and the most northerly of Indian tribes; those upon the middle Yukon being known to the old Hudson's Bay people as Kutchins. There are many villages of them along the streams, but they are not numerous and are becoming yearly less so. Until the advent of the white man, who now supplies them in small quantities with tea, sugar, flour and pork, they subsisted entirely, with the exception of a few roots and berries, upon the abundant salmon of the rivers, and on the flesh of reindeer and moose, which also supply their clothing, and the coverings for their winter camps. In summer they live by the side of the rivers, and in winter move inland, hunting, following the wooded valleys of the water-courses. All who are able to move accompany the hunt, and with household goods loaded upon the light birch-wood toboggans, drawn by dogs (the pups and babies riding on top), they

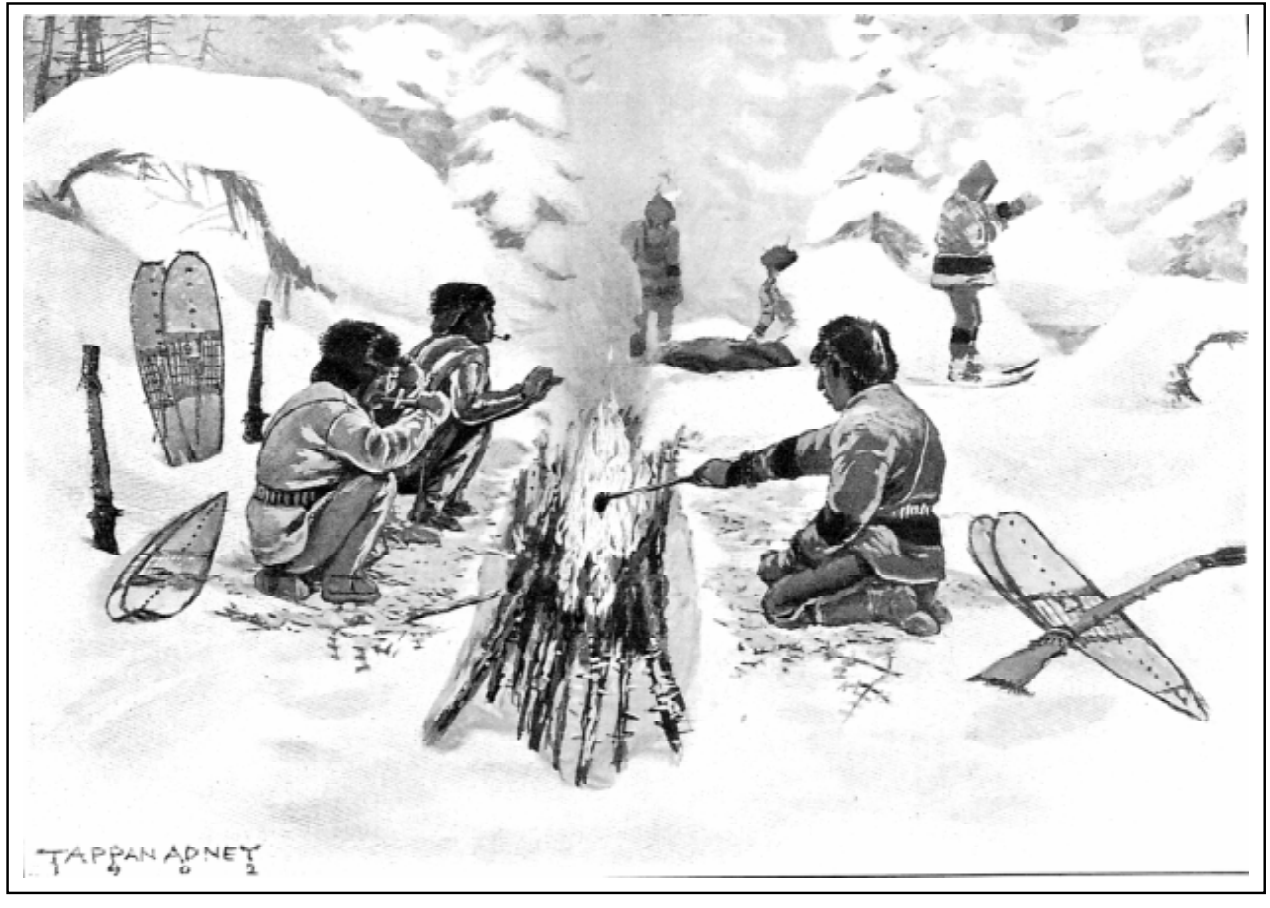


The Women Take Home the Fresh Meat the Hunters Have Killed.

move by short easy stages, seldom more than six or seven miles at a time.

The men are variously dressed. The older men wear shirts of caribou skin (tanned and made up with hair inside), which reach to the middle, with a curious rounded point at front and back extending lower; or a shirt of rabbit skins, split, plaited and sewn together, making at once the lightest and warmest garment known, which they wear next the skin in the coldest weather, with nothing else! Heavy "duffel" blankets, of the most brilliant colorings, are also made into short, full skirts. A piece of

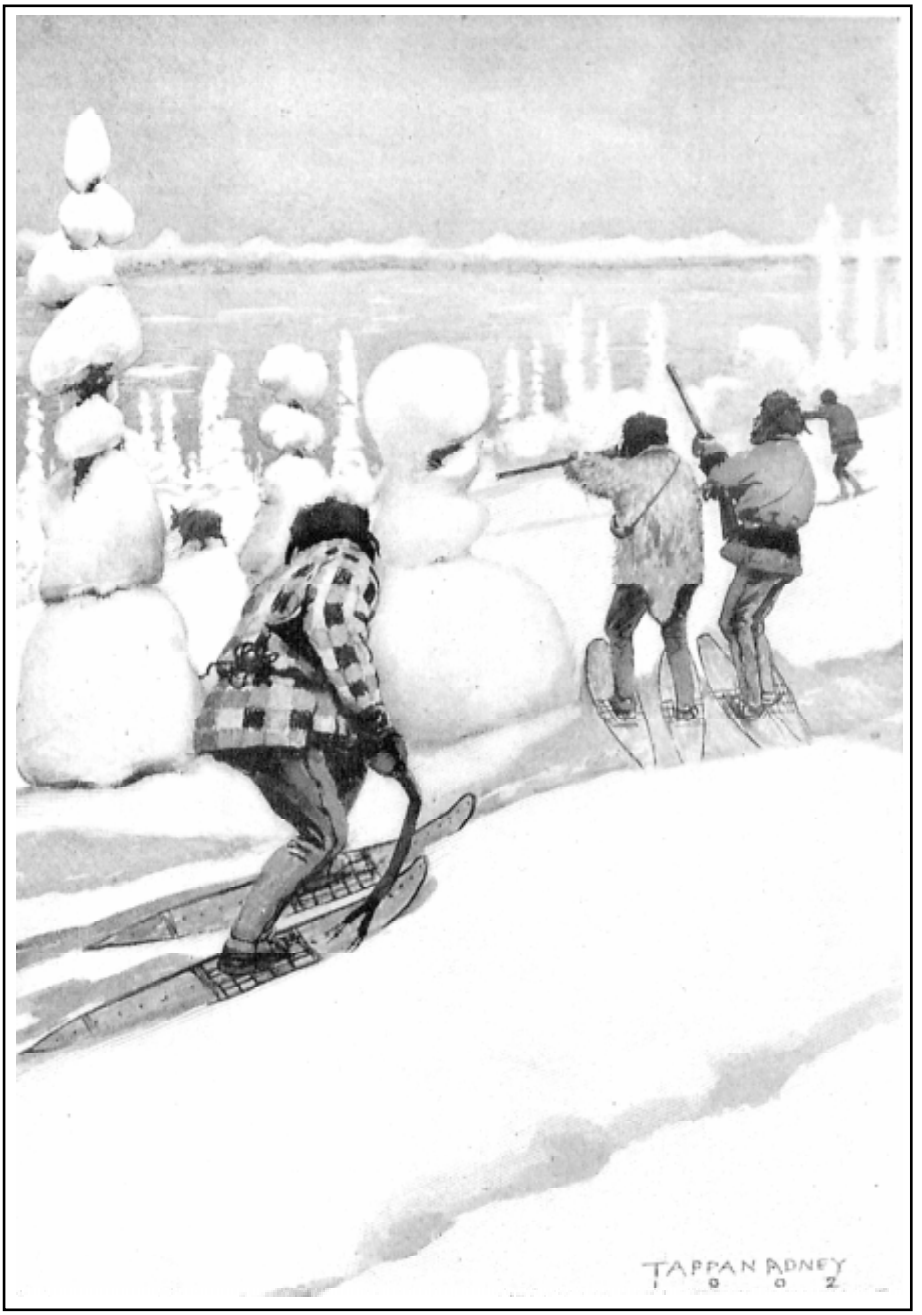
Visiting the Wolverine Trap.



After the Killing Comes the Feasting.

the same makes a pair of pants, while the remainder of a fourteen-pound "four-point" blanket serves as a covering by night. The better nether garment is made of caribou skin with pants and moccasins in one, gathered around the waist by a draw-string. Mittens made full large are of moose hide lined with blanket or lynx-fur, suspended from the neck by a large cord of variegated yarn. The head covering is a flat cap of sable with ear-flaps. The hair generally falls to the shoulders, and with their prominent cheek bones, capacious mouth, and strong eyebrows (often squinting downward toward the nose), they have been characterized as "extremely ugly"—rather, I should say, fierce-looking. The men wear thin, coarse mustaches, and some of them shave this below the nose, with a curious effect. The "A-C" company supplies them with the best of forty-five-seventy repeating rifles, which they carry in brightly ornamented cases of caribou skin open at one end so as to be instantly drawn off in the presence of game. The older men cling to the long, single barrel trade smooth-bore, and bullets and caps are carried in an ornamented bag suspended in front by a strap around the neck, powder being carried in a horn at the side. A plaited moosehide cord fifteen feet long, slung at the side, for packing in the first meat of the freshly killed animal, a pair of snow-shoes five feet long and a foot wide, made and laced of white birch with fine caribou webbing, except under foot, where an open, old-fashioned bed-cord arrangement of thick rawhide is stretched, and a sheath knife and cartridge belt, complete the equipment of the hunter. The women's principal garment is a voluminous over shirt reaching below the knees, with a large hood, which chiefly serves as a carrying place for the baby; her own head being covered by a silk kerchief. If the village has plenty of dogs the women do all the work of making and breaking camp, and cutting wood; the manner of hunting being this: the hunters start ahead before daybreak, usually in a body, with snow-shoes and rifles; where they wish the next camp to be they turn off toward the hills. The women follow with the camp, and when the hunters return it is all ready for a stop of a day or a week, as circumstances shall determine. If dogs are scarce (we had only fifty, numbers having been sold to the miners at prices too tempting to resist) the hunters turn in like good fellows and help the women. How easy to say of these people (or Indians in general) "the men are lazy, the women do all the work!" Having done my share with them; having accompanied the hunters fifteen to twenty miles a day up and down the steep mountains, in snow so light that a heavy man goes through at every step, I assert, unhesitatingly, that of camp work and hunting, the hunting is the harder. Indeed, all strive to the limit of endurance, with an energy such as is only begotten of sharp, keen air, and imminence of starvation. It is the dogs that really suffer. Starved, lean, ill kept, snarling, cringing, wolfish brutes, howling from the instant toboggans rattle down from the caches, until unharnessed at night. One would scarcely suppose that a moose would remain in the whole country.

The hunters having marked the new camp site, swing toward the hills, in single file, ten to fifteen in number. Usually within one to three miles a fresh moose track is found, and with unerring skill (remarkable because of the lightness of the snow, which at once obliterates the foot-print) they turn in the direction which the animal is taking, and when they are assured by the "sign" of the nearness to the game, they quickly spread out, and, rushing forward with swift strides and surprising the moose at close quarters, one of the band is able to drop him by one or more well directed shots. There is some luck about this, for I knew an Indian to fire eighteen shots without touching the moose, and going back next day over the same ground with ten others, himself get two, the only moose killed. It is a common thing for one hunter to get two while the rest get none. Hence the obvious necessity for the law respecting the division of the meat, which is as follows: the hind-quarters are absolutely the property of the man who shoots the animal, the rest belongs to the community; but he may designate to which persons the fore-shoulders shall go. The recipient of a fore-shoulder, in turn, reciprocates. Thus as long as there is game, each gets his share, while there is also incentive for the skilful hunter to increase his personal wealth to some extent. The surplus meat may be traded for guns and blankets, and



Surprising the Moose at Close Quarters.

these in turn are traded with other Indians. The successful hunter and the shrewd trader becomes the man of wealth, and is chosen chief, and his position is that of patriarch who counsels his people, yet without compulsory authority.

The instant the moose has fallen, the work is finished with sheath knives. The carcass is skinned, quartered, and the head removed, with nothing but the knife. While some are doing this, others are breaking small dead trees with their hands

Klondike Indian Village—Arrival of a Load of Moose Meat.

and building a large fire on top the snow, on each side of which spruce boughs are laid to kneel upon. Strings of fat and shreds of flesh from inside the carcass are toasted in the flames on the ends of sticks, and greedily swallowed. The brilliant colors in the costumes of the hunters as they crowd around the fire add to the general goriness of snow and hands, and the ferocious vigor with which the half-raw flesh is gorged presents a picture that is seldom witnessed of savage revelry and of manners scarcely better than wolves. In the space of an hour from the first shot a lunch will have been partaken, a piece of the moose slung over the back of every one, and all have started back in single file. On the first day we walked eighteen miles, got two moose, and when we reached camp at dark, two others, old men, hunting alone, each brought in one moose. The best hunters prefer to hunt alone, but it requires much skill. No chances are taken rushing the game blindly. As the trail grows "warm" the hunter moves with great circumspection, peering through the trees and bushes on each side, hoping to find the game lying down resting or asleep. As the trail becomes "hot," snow-shoes are laid off, and the hunter creeps slowly ahead until he sees the head and long ears of the moose as it lies in its bed; with a well-directed shot through the head he secures it. Thus one Indian killed three moose. This man had killed moose in quite recent years with a bow and arrow!

Following the killing the men and women next day take dogs and fetch in the meat. The hide is at once prepared for subsequent tanning. It is laid across a slanting pole inside the skin-house and a squaw scrapes off the hair, and then with a sharpened shin-bone "fleshes" the other side. The edges are slit (for lacing into a frame) and the skin is placed in a pan of hot water with which rotten wood has been boiled; the surplus moisture is then wrung out and the skin hung over an elevated pole outdoors. When the camp moves on, the pelt is hoisted into a tree out of reach of wolverines, to be picked up on the return, and tanned in the summer with a "soup" of liver, worked until soft, then smoked, and made into articles of use.

The head and leg bones are roasted before the camp' fire, cracked and eaten, and not even the gristle or the cartilage of the ears is wasted. Whatever an Indian cannot eat, he gives his dogs.

By midwinter the antlers have fallen, and there is no readily distinguishing bulls from cows. A cow, indeed, is much preferred to tough bull—for, as Isaac the chief expressed it in his much broken English, "Mull moose, too much tupp; cow moose, plenty fat stop, he-all-right." So we ate the cows; and the tough meat went to the miners! The capture of a fat moose is celebrated by a grand feast. All the hunters assemble in one house, the host (usually the chief first) levies upon all the tin kettles and pans in camp and a great quantity of meat is boiled, each man receiving a share proportionate to the size of his family. At a signal all sit up, and each eats as much as he can; the rest is handed out to the women and children. No salt is used. The hot fat which rises to the top is skimmed off in an immense wooden spoon and passed around the circle, each taking a sip. Ten with sugar is served, and the pans are filled twice; thus the whole day (the only day of rest known to a hunting people, although missionaries have taught them to keep one day in seven as one on which they shall not hunt, but employ for every other household purpose) is spent in talking, smoking, and general enjoyment.

When the country for a radius of six to ten miles has been scoured, the village moves on another stage; then the same hunting and feasting take place. We took five weeks to travel forty-five miles from Dawson, and in that time we got forty-eight moose. No tracks of caribou were seen. The village continued on thirty miles farther toward the foothills of the Rockies, and there found the caribou and killed sixty-five, the meat of which was dried and, with the skins of the moose and deer, packed to Dawson.

The so-called caribou seems to be the Barren Ground species, which is none other than the native "reindeer" of Alaska. The woodland caribou is found in the mountains to the south of Klondike, but I am informed that it does not occur south of Big Salmon River, where the Indians know it by name and distinguish it from the Barren Ground caribou of the North. The caribou of the Klondike region occurs in small bands over the country on the higher hill tops where it feeds

The Women and the Children Move Camp.

on the gray moss; but it is generally local in its range, migrating at times in bands so vast as to stagger belief. One such range is on the head of Forty Mile River, and from there they migrate, it is said, across the Yukon in winter to the eastern or Klondike side, and are found on the bald foot-hills of the Rocky range. Once in their migration they passed by the mouth of Forty Mile and 400 were shot by the miners. In the fall of 1897, two or three small parties of white ascended the Klondike to a point above where the Indians went. They reported the "deer," as the caribou is called, exhausted their ammunition in killing forty-seven, and brought back the almost incredible story that the deer were there in numbers that would easily reach ten or twenty thousand. Another party, a member of which I came to know intimately, and to know him as a perfectly reliable man, said that he, too, found the deer, which seemed to be moving in bands of twenty to thirty in a general direction, and that some of the main roads which they traveled were beaten by their hoofs "as smooth as the trail on Bonanza Creek." Thus they occur on Porcupine River and Birch Creek; yet so variable and uncertain are these eccentric animals that the Indians sometimes altogether fail to strike them, and in two cases while I was in the Yukon, a village, one at Porcupine and one at Tanana, was obliged to flee for very life. In the first instance, the Alaska Commercial Company's agent at Fort Yukon, being advised by courier, met the starving village of fifty souls, who in the previous three days had had to eat but a single weasel; while the miners at Circle City similarly sent relief to the others. Hunters told me that above where we hunted the moose were much more abundant. Passing over, the following summer, some of the ground where we had hunted, I found in a walk of six miles and return the fallen antlers in fair preservation of no less than four moose. The gray or timber wolf is found in occasional bands, following the moose and deer, and on the clear surface of the Klondike I saw the marks of a tragedy only a few days old, where half a dozen wolves had surrounded a moose, which ran only two hundred yards among the bushes before he was downed. The tracks in the snow plainly told the story, and when I came up the ravens were completing the work of the wolves. A hunter who poisoned one of this band told me that from the carcass he obtained a quart of oil, and that in all his considerable experience it was the first wolf which had any fat at all.

In the days of bows and arrows, when Indians were also more numerous, sometimes as many as one hundred hunters would surround a band of caribou. Leaving the village in the valley, the Indians would mount the hills, and, as they neared the band, one went cautiously ahead until he located the herd slowly feeding, perhaps brought down one, then stole back unobserved, and then the hunters spread out each side, keeping an equal space between them until the unsuspecting herd was entirely surrounded. Then they closed in, and, as they came near, the startled deer would rush off only to meet men. The hunters rushed in with shouts, and the poor creatures, knowing not which way to go, fell easy victims to the arrows. In this way (the old men say), as many as four or five hundred deer have been killed at a single time. The Indians usually do not hunt in summer, but during the summer of 1898 the demand for fresh meat continued so great at Dawson that numbers of white men proceeded to the upper Klondike in canoes and hunted moose with considerable success. They lay in wait at roads leading to ponds or salt-licks where the moose came down to drink. There were not lacking men even here, who forfeited every right to carry a gun by shooting down in pure wantonness numbers of moose which they made no attempt to save. I was never able to learn that "calling" is ever employed in Alaska by Indian or white man to bring moose, by imitating the call of the cow, within reach of the hunter. The favorite method of the Indian is to lie in wait by a trail leading to water.