

Presettlement Wildlife in Sherburne County, 1/19/2022

Some of the most specific information about presettlement wildlife in Sherburne County comes from the journals of Zebulon Pike. In 1805, Pike was a young Lieutenant in the US Army. He was ordered to travel up the Mississippi River from St. Louis to the river's origin. This was at the same time that Lewis and Clark were making their famous exploration up the Missouri, over the Rocky Mountains and on to the Pacific Ocean. Pike left St. Louis relatively late in the summer with twenty soldiers in his command. His northward journey took him past what is now Sherburne County in October of 1805. The expedition traveled in two large and heavily laden boats. Although they brought some basic foodstuffs, the force needed to hunt for fresh meat along the way. In addition to Commander, journalist and mapmaker, Pike took on the role of primary hunter. Most days he left the work of paddling, pushing or dragging the boats to his men while he walked along the shores exploring and hunting.

On good days they traveled 8 to 16 river miles.

The expedition passed Saint Anthony Falls (Minneapolis) on September 28th and reached the vicinity of Little Falls near the end of October.

Although Pike reported seeing elk tracks soon after passing St. Anthony, he did not actually see elk until he reached the mouth of the Elk River. That report in Pike's journal is the origin of both our Elk River and the City of the same name.

In the 30 days that the expedition traveled from present day Minneapolis to present day Little Falls, Pike reported harvesting at least the following.

Nineteen geese, 16 deer, 13 pheasants, 9 ducks, 6 prairie hens, 4 raccoons, 4 bears, 2 swans, 2 porcupines and 1 wolf. All of these animals including the wolf were eaten.

During the month, Pike unsuccessfully hunted elk several times, wounding at least one.

He reported "flocks" and "droves" (herds) of elk several times in Sherburne County.

By late October, the weather was becoming cold and the men were weary. Pike decided to stop and build winter camp near Little Falls. The timing was right and they had reached the beginning of the northern pine forest. The large pines in the vicinity would be good for building winter quarters.

Pike reported "immense herds of bison and elk" grazing on the prairie south and east of Little Falls. That is the northern end of the prairie that extends through Sherburne County. Winter grazing would have been good. Although we think of prairie as a relatively well-drained area, Pike and others labeled the large areas of what we sometime call wet or low lands as prairie also. Before the drainage projects of the 1920s much of Sherburne County had large "meadows" which were harvested for hay. Those same meadows were excellent winter feed for the herds reported by Pike.