

TIPS FROM THE POSSE: Lumpers & Splitters



These days, the country seems more divided than ever. Politics infects everyone and everything in one way or another. Folks are saying this is the worst they have ever seen, but I offer the 60's and 70's as evidence that we have been through worse. Somehow, we survived, and somewhat reunited as a nation.

I always believed that outdoor folks were exempt from all that division nonsense. Sure, we have our differences like the wolf introduction, lion, and bobcat ballot issues, closing of lands in the West End, but true outdoor people don't take it personally, and don't like any restrictions on our outdoor rights.

Generally, outdoor people respect each other's rights to recreate as they see fit. Those who don't hunt or fish, respect the rights of those who do, except for that misguided anti-hunting crowd. When someone attacks one particular outdoor area, we all seem to join forces to fight off the bad guy. There was a time when the divide between outdoor people was quite large.

Lumpers and splitters are opposing factions in any discipline that has to place examples into rigorously defined categories. A lumper is someone who assigns examples in the broad sense, while the splitter makes very precise definitions, creating new categories along the way. It started in the mid 1800's with the classification of animals into multiple species.

Where this really came to light was during the days of Teddy Roosevelt, who besides his time as President, was one of the leading naturalists in the country, having penned numerous books and countless articles about the history of species. One of his books, "African Game Trails," is one of the most comprehensive books written about safari hunting in Africa, and all the animals he encountered there.

A lumpener argues that what is referred to as a subspecies, is actually just an animal living up to its full potential because of the conditions it lives in. Elk that live on the Olympic Peninsula, for example, are larger than elk elsewhere because the diet available there is better suited for growing larger elk, while Rocky Mountain Elk have the largest antlers because of the minerals available to them that grow larger antlers. Lumpeners believe they are just elk.

Splitters on the other hand view any population that appears or behaves differently, or is isolated from others, is to be a subspecies. This argument divided outdoor people and went all the way to the White House.

The chief splitter at the time was a gentleman known as C. Hart Merriam, considered one of the top biologists in America. Merriam trotted around the country seeking out a species he could split. His position was there were 30 different subspecies of mountain lions, based on size, color, fur thickness, and behavior traits that he witnessed.

I seriously doubt Merriam saw 30 different mountain lions, but nonetheless, science currently confirms there are six species of them in North America. I know that with all the time I spent outdoors over six decades, I have only seen less than 20.

Our boy Teddy was a lumpener. He often took time out from his political world, to publicly debate Merriam over their differences pertaining to species. Using elk as an example, Roosevelt argued that they were bigger in some places simply because there was more for them to eat. Merriam's rebuttal would be based on physical differences and genetic traits.

Elk, at one time, lived in both the east and west sides of the country, all the way up to the coastal plain along the eastern seaboard. By the early 1900s, however, elk had been driven to extinction in the east, and badly hurting everywhere else.

The elk that resided during Roosevelt's time, living east of the Mississippi were considered a different species, called the Eastern Elk, while those in the Midwest were called the Manitoba elk, Merriam's elk lived in the southwest, Thule elk in California, Rocky Mountain elk, and the Roosevelt elk in Washington state. The Eastern and Merriam's elk are now extinct.

Roosevelt was a powerful man, and popular opinion generally fell in his favor, as publicly ridiculed splitters, namely Merriam. Although he never publicly conceded to Teddy, Merriam did give something up when, in 1897, he named the oversized elk of the Pacific Northwest after the then, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, noting that it was “fitting that the noblest deer in America should perpetuate the name of Roosevelt.” I find no record of Teddy objecting to this left-handed compliment.

Roosevelt lost the presidential election in 1912, but it did not end his outdoor adventurer ways. New Year’s Day, in 1914, found Teddy deep in the jungles of Brazil, hunting the elusive jaguar. As he returned to the paddleboat which served as a base camp, on the river Rio Cuiba, his skin torn to pieces, eaten alive by mosquitos, ants, wasps, and everything else that bites in the jungle, following a fruitless hunt, he was asked how he was feeling. His one-word response, “Bully.”

By the time his safari into the Amazon jungle was over, he had lost 55 pounds, had malaria, and was suffering from numerous infections. He was carried home on a stretcher. So much for bully. He never fully recovered, eventually crossing the last horizon in 1919, he remains one of the great conservationist and outdoorsman in history.

Despite the great debate between lumpers and splitters, that lasted several years, the battle still goes on in the scientific world. I kind of like the idea of different species because it gives me more hunting trips to take. Splitters will see to it I never run out of potential trips.

Although, this splitting business can get out of hand, in terms of numbers of species, insects take the cake. There are more than one million species of insects that have been documented by scientists. The same science says that there were at least nine species of humans, but now there is only one. Maybe we better start getting along better before we go extinct.

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