

The Beastes of the Province

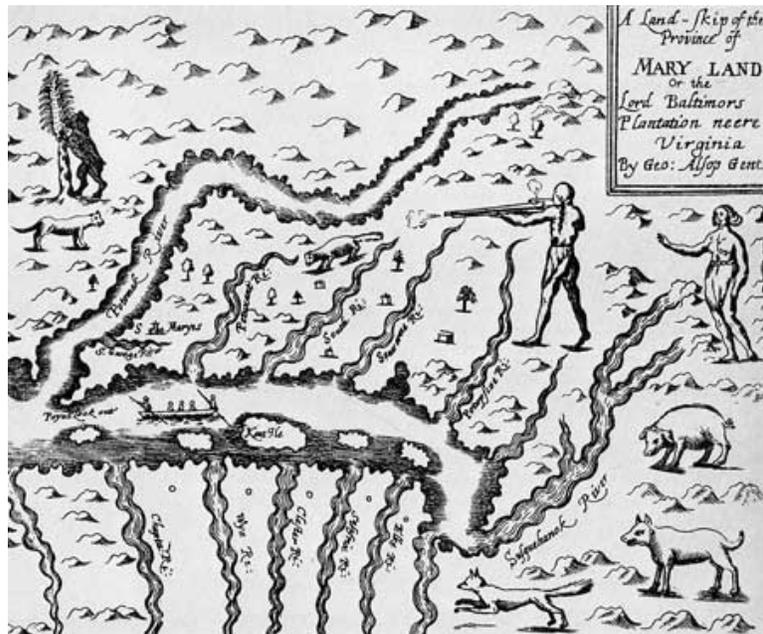
by Susan Wilkinson, HSMC Director of Marketing and Communications

The presence of a variety of wildlife is one of the many charms of Southern Maryland. The sight of deer grazing or an eagle in flight, the antics of squirrels at our birdfeeders, and the opossum blindly plugging her way across Route 5 are all too familiar to some of us but novelties to visitors. Records of the colonists' impressions of the local fauna show that while many of the *beastes* that made their homes here in the 17th century were also indigenous to the British Isles, others were oddities.

Our common cardinal seems to have been one such curiosity. In 1638, Leonard Calvert wrote to his brother, Cecil, Lord Baltimore, in England, "I had procured a red bird and kept it a good while to haste sent it to you but I had the ill fortune to loose it by the negligence of my servant who carelesly let it out of the cage. . ." And he continues, "The Lyon I had for you is dead, if I can get an other I will and send it you." We don't know whether another mountain lion made that trip; we do know Leonard Calvert would have one heck of a time finding a mountain lion here now.

George Alsop produced a lively description of the region's wildlife in *A Character of the Province of Maryland*, published in 1666. Alsop made his way to this area as an indentured servant and was released in 1663. His narrative has been described as idealized and inaccurate. Given that *Character* is not a scientific treatise, I think Alsop's enthusiastic and rather artful descriptions compensate for his lack of objectivity.

"As for the wilde Animals of this Country. . ." Alsop first mentions the Deer because of their frequency and the likelihood of being seen by population. He writes, they "are little or not at all affrighted at the face of a man . . . they will stand (all most) till they be scratcht." Deer were a common source of meat, hunted by Indians to give or trade with the English. Alsop related an anecdote from his days as an indentured servant, when his master had so much venison in the house that household members longed for plain bread instead of more venison at mealtimes.



The abundance of wildfowl in the colony caught Alsop's attention. Birds of the woods — woodcock, pheasant, partridge, and pigeon, and migratory swans, geese, and duck— are mentioned. While these were fair dinner fare, Alsop writes that the turkey is "an extraordinarily fat Fowl, whose flesh is very pleasant and sweet." Paragraphs within *A Character of the Province* note the great number and variety of fish, " . . . with very much ease caught," to "the great refreshment of the Inhabitants of the Province." Archaeologists have found evidence that before 1650 the colonists' diet consisted mainly of game and fish.

Also noted that elk, "Cat of the Mountain," "Rackoon," fox, beaver, otter, "Possum," hare, "Squirrel", "Monack" (woodchuck), and "Musk-Rat" were plentiful. Although Alsop considered these good eating, he wrote they are sought more for their pelts, as other food is so plentiful. Alsop described, "Wolves, Bears, and Panthers . . . in great multitudes in the remotest parts . . ." as infrequent marauders of plantation stock. "The Effigies of a man terrifies them dreadfully, for they no sooner espy him but their hearts are at their mouths, and the spurs upon their heels, they (having no more manners than Beasts) gallop away, and never bid them farewell that are behind them."



As for domesticated livestock, our author mentions cows and horses by the homes and a multitude of hogs living in the woods. Sheep were less plentiful, "few desire them, because they . . . draw . . . Wolves... by the sweetness of their flesh . . . the humility of their nature." A likely accessory to a wolf's feast, Alsop wrote, was "the sawce that's dish'd out of the muzzle of a Gun . . ."

The livestock at the Historic St. Mary's City Godiah Spray Plantation capture the interest of visitors, mostly of the human ilk. Cows are not indiginous to these shores, but were imported by the colonists. Trouble is a Linebach cow. Cattle with Linebach color patterns have been in the U.S. and Europe for centuries, but there is little historical documentation on specific herds. The modern Holstein is a descendent of the Linebach breed. Bob is a Red Devon cow, a rare breed that originate in Devonshire, England, and brought to the New World in the 17th century. The Plantation pigs are descendents of the original stock brought to the Americas by the Spanish in the 1600s. These Ossabaw Island pigs have been genetically isolated and, consequently, have developed traits useful in biomedical studies. The Spray family's poultry will remind art aficionados of paintings by the Dutch masters. Master Spray identifies members of the flock as "Golden Polish, Golden Hamburg, and Silver Grey Dorkings and notes that the latter are related to chickens the Romans brought to England at the height of the Roman Empire. Apart from an occasional fox raiding the chicken coop, the threat of bears, wolves, elk, and "Lyons" is long past.



This article first appeared in The River Gazette, a publication of St. Mary's College of Maryland.