Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Countdown To Extinction Animals In Danger

Written by

David Burnie

Published by

Oxford Children's Books

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.

In the Hunters' Sights

Thousands of years ago, people relied on hunting to survive. Today, almost all of our food comes from farms, but hunting still goes on. In most countries, it is strictly regulated, but illegal hunters – or poachers – ignore the law, and kill hundreds of thousands of animals every year. People hunt animals for food, for money, or simply for the thrill of making a kill. Poaching is a worldwide problem, and it has pushed some animals to the brink of extinction.



Prehistoric extinctions

THE FIRST HUMANS LIVED in Africa, more than 200,000 years ago. From here, they spread across the world. Compared to their prey, they were crafty and cunning. By using weapons and working together, they managed to kill animals far bigger than themselves. Some of these animals were already in trouble, because the world's climate was changing. Human hunters made life harder still, wiping out the stragglers that managed to survive.



End of the mammoth

In Europe, prehistoric cave paintings show animals that people once hunted. They include reindeer, horses, bison, and the aurochs – a wild ox with long, sharply pointed horns, which became extinct in the early 1600s.

CAVE PAINTINGS are *windows on the past*, bringing extinct animals back to life.

BACK FROM THE *brink*

Long ago, the European bison (or wisent) roamed across most of Europe. However, it was hunted for many centuries, and the last wild bison was killed in the early 1900s. Fortunately, some bison survived in zoos, and in the 1950s, the species was reintroduced into the wild. Today, there are about 3,000 European bison. One of the biggest herds is in the Bialowieza Forest, in eastern Poland.



Giant Kangaroo *Giant Wombat* *Giant Goanna*

EXTINCT AUSTRALIANS

At one time, Australia was home to many outsize animals, but all of these giant species vanished soon after people reached Australia, more than 40,000 years ago.



Giant sloth

As dead as a dodo



IMAGINE HAVING A PAIR of wings but not being able to fly. It sounds strange, but it makes perfect sense if you are a bird that feeds on the ground. For the dodo, being flightless was not a problem – until human hunters arrived in its remote island home of Mauritius in 1638. Almost as soon as people stepped ashore, the slaughter began.

TOO TAME TO MISS

The dodo was a giant member of the pigeon family, with a thickset body and tiny wings. It lived in dense forest, nested on the ground, and fed on fallen fruit. Like many animals from remote islands, it had no fear of humans, which made it very easy to kill.

In just 50 years, the dodo was wiped out, but hunters were not solely to blame. With people came pigs, dogs and cats, which destroyed the dodos' nests and ate their eggs and chicks.

spotlight on giant birds

The elephant bird, which lived on the island of Madagascar, weighed nearly half a tonne. It had tiny wings, but a kick that could kill. Human hunters finished it off in the late 1500s.



EXTINCTION AT SEA

On 3 July 1844, two bird-hunters from Iceland killed a male and female great auk. Although the hunters did not know it, this was the moment when the great auk became extinct. Great auks looked very much like penguins, but they lived in the North Atlantic instead of the southern hemisphere.

ARABIAN OSTRICH

Today, wild ostriches are found only in Africa, but until recent times, ostriches also lived in Arabia and other parts of the Middle East. As this painting from an old manuscript shows, Arabian ostriches looked very much like African ones, although they were smaller. For centuries, these birds were hunted with bows and arrows, but they were killed off when hunters started using guns.





HEADS UP

Standing nearly two metres tall, these ostriches are on the alert for any signs of trouble. Ostriches are off the danger list, but in the past, they were hunted all over Africa, for their feathers as well as for their meat. Many other birds – from egrets to albatrosses – have been massacred by feather-hunters, and some are now close to extinction.