



In the Wilderness of Upper Minnesota

Six Winters in the Big Game Country—Where the Thermometer Goes to 59° Below Zero—Life in a Log Cabin—In the Home of the Chippewas

By J. B. GEYER

Pitcher With the St. Louis Cardinals.

J. B. Geyer, who has always been a good, if not brilliant, pitcher since his entry into big league circles, is far more interested in the pleasures of the chase than in any thrills which the diamond may offer. Big league players are almost without exception fond of hunting, though most of them find opportunity for only a brief annual excursion in the outdoors. Geyer, on the other hand, is one big league player who makes hunting a serious object in life. So far as there are professional hunters in distinction from the vast army of amateur sportsmen, Geyer is entitled to rank as a professional, for in-

our investigations we have known of no major league player who pursues hunting with as great a degree of absorption and enthusiasm as the sturdy pitcher of the St. Louis Cardinals.

ALL big league players like to hunt. It comes as natural to a baseball man to take his gun and tramp off into the fields or the woods as it does to throw a ball or swing a bat. But, like everything else, some players are much more interested in a sport than others. Some are professionals and some are only amateurs.

I think when a man likes hunting better than he likes anything else, when he spends all the time he can possibly get in hunting and thinks more about game and guns and the woods than he does about any other one thing even the profession by which he gets his living, he ought to rank as a professional. I do not know whether I am a professional or not and I never claimed to be a wonderful shot with a rifle, although I am a fair shot, but I know ever since I was big enough to handle a gun I was always carried away with hunting and took every opportunity in that line which came my way.

Since I became a big league player I have had more time to hunt than ever before. The major leaguer works six or seven months a year and then he is free. In that dead time of year between the date when one season ends in October and the next one begins in April, I have always spent all the time I could get at my favorite sport. For the past six years the moment I could get away from the diamond, I have left for the woods of upper Minnesota, where I have stayed through the winter until the next spring called me back to baseball once more.

It is a great game country, this northern part of Minnesota. The country here is wooded for the most part and with open spaces. It is a great bird country, and there are large numbers of deer and other big game. Further north is the heavy country where the dense timber shelters moose, bear, and the typical big game.

Many people might not like the kind of life I have lived in this region for the past six winters. It is a rough life, for the country is still little more than a

wilderness. A man does not see many faces, but if he is at all like me he doesn't miss them much. It might seem lonely to people who have lived all their lives in big cities, but to one who is used to the open there is all the company he needs in the woods and the streams and the wild life—so long as he has his gun and his dog. I know I have never been lonely in my winter home, while I have been in the middle of New York City.

This country I speak of is the paradise for migratory birds of all kinds. Great flocks of ducks and geese fly over every spring on their way to the marshes and lakes of the far north and every autumn they come flying back to the warm lagoons and swamps of the south. At these seasons of the year it is possible to get unlimited shooting, but it has generally happened in my case that I arrived too late and left too early, in order to keep up with my baseball playing, to get the benefit of this migration. But there are many varieties of native birds which stay throughout the winter, particularly partridges and prairie chickens. These birds are very numerous and the hunter has little difficulty in scaring up enough from the underbrush to furnish him a good dinner almost any time. Many eastern people will not know what a prairie chicken is. They once lived all over the United States, but the species I believe is now pretty much confined to the far northwest. Prairie chickens are a species of pheasant, rather easy to kill, for they generally run along the ground a good distance before taking to wing. Most people consider them fine eating, but I do not like them so well as partridges.

I have a piece of land in upper Minnesota in the valley of the Snake River, to the south at a distance of a few miles is Lake Millelac. This is a celebrated lake surrounded by dense forests which are well-known to the Indians. It is about fourteen miles long and five wide and in season is the home of numberless ducks and geese. I have had a good many interesting adventures in the neighborhood of this lake.

My house which I have built myself is not what would be considered a spacious mansion in the city, but it is as comfortable a home as one could want in the wilderness. It is constructed of logs and consists of one room twelve by fourteen feet. I never put a floor into this house for I didn't see the necessity of such a thing. The ground was a very serviceable floor and satisfactory in every respect. This house may not appear large to many people, but it is plenty big enough. My bunk, my stove and table were the main things—there was room enough on the walls to hang my rifle and firearms, room enough in the corners for what provisions I needed, and my dog and I were as comfortable as anyone could wish. The north wind cannot blow through a twelve inch log and the spaces between the logs, I chinked in with clay and moss so that my little house was warm and cheerful. The price of coal never bothered me for there were thousands of acres of timber lying all around and firewood was the most plentiful thing in sight. There is a distinct advantage in having a house twelve by fourteen feet when the thermometer is fifty-nine degrees below zero, for it isn't so hard to heat a space of this size as it would be a larger one. Whatever might be said against my house by people who look at it as a real estate proposition, it was my own, and I have taken more comfort within its walls than anywhere else in my travels through different big cities.

While this country is generally wooded, there are a great number of muskeg swamps. A muskeg is a typical sight in the northwest. There are many kinds of muskegs ranging from dangerous to merely uncomfortable, but they are all difficult to travel over and form a dreary and melancholy landscape. A muskeg is a particular kind of a swamp, generally of black mud which may be as soft and treacherous as quicksand or may, in places, be hard enough to walk upon. It is generally covered entirely with gigantic clumps of moss often as big as a dinner table. This moss is of every conceivable hue and shade of green, red and yellow mixed in together. As you walk over it you will sink into this moss up to your knees. Quite often scattered clumps of spruce trees grow in these

muskegs, the roots spreading over the surface of the ground and in no case striking into the mud itself. Oftentimes these trees have been blown down by hurricanes or fallen through mere age and form a tangle of stumps, trunks, and branches which make travel almost impossible. There are many pools of water sprinkled over the surface of a muskeg and the treacherous mud crops out in unexpected places as if it waited for the unfortunate traveler to make a false step and be swallowed up in the heart of the swamp. Muskegs even when comparatively firm are exceedingly unpleasant to travel over for it tires a man as much to walk across a half mile of their spongy surface as it does to walk twenty times that distance on firm and level ground. But in some cases, as I have said, a muskeg is practically impassable owing to the extreme softness of the mud.

It is an odd fact but none the less true that a moose which is a very heavy animal can cross a muskeg which will not bear the weight of a man. I saw a cow moose once crossing a particularly dangerous muskeg and it was an interesting sight. In such a position a moose will slide through the swamp practically on its shoulders with its legs spread out to their farthest extent. It covers so much surface that in spite of its weight it does not break through into the dangerous mud below. It is a slow process true enough, for it is not so much walking as crawling, but they get through the swamp in some way and that is what they are after.

This is a great country abounding with valuable timber and offering all kinds of advantages to settlers. It will some day be a fine grazing and grain growing country, but that is all in the future. At present it is hardly more than a wilderness over which all kinds of wild game roam. Along the banks of the Snake River it is much broken where lumber companies and forest fires have cleared the land. But farther north a hunter enters the heavy timber where he can encounter the largest of big game.

My main object all the time I have spent in northern Minnesota has been hunting. Often I have left my little house and been gone for several days at a time. On such occasions I seldom took

anything with me save a blanket, gun and ammunition. When I wanted to eat I had to shoot something or go without. This sounds interesting and is interesting, but there have been times when I have lost my sense of direction while travelling through the woods and I once wandered around for the better part of the day in an extensive area of muskeg swamps. Travel through the muskegs is not so difficult in the winter time, for then the intense cold has frozen the mud. But it is not a pleasant thing to get lost in the northwest where a man might walk for twenty miles and not come in sight of a human being. It is a peculiar feeling to realize that you are swallowed up in the wilderness and have no idea in the world which way to go. There is an overwhelming sense of loneliness about it which is one of the most disagreeable things I have ever experienced. In such circumstances a person almost invariably gets badly rattled and loses all power of using judgment. There is a blind desire to strike out at once on the backward trail and all the time a person is hurrying to the best of his ability there is the constant fear that every step is carrying him further away from his destination. This was not by any means the first time I had been lost but it was the most serious, and I certainly don't want to get into that situation again.

Ordinarily, in my journeys I had very good success in keeping my bearings, and it is surprising how soon a person learns to find his way about the woods.

To a city dweller such a life as this may not seem exciting, but there is a charm about it all which is a continual fascination to the hunter. To tramp all day through the snow following a fresh deer trail and choose a camping spot at night when the sun is set in the winter twilight, is to me a pleasure such as I can find in nothing else. There is a sense of independence in feeling that you are alone in the wilderness, cut adrift from all the rest of the world, dependent solely upon your own resources and to feel that you are able to wring from the wilderness itself those things which are necessary to your comfort. Many a time I have built myself a wind break of spruce boughs, cut enough of these fragrant branches for a couch, built a fire of dried

sticks and roasted a freshly killed partridge over the flame. There is no bill of fare in any city hotel to compare with a hunter's supper of this kind with the icy air for an appetizer. After the best meal that the great northwest can produce, to build a roaring fire, wrap your blanket warmly about you and lie down beside the sheltering branches of your windbreak is an experience such as no highly civilized, densely settled community can give. I have laid awake many hours on my spruce bed to listen to the wind rushing through the tall branches of the forest, as it sweeps down from the frozen shores of Hudson Bay. It is a solemn sound and makes the hunter shiver involuntarily and wrap his blanket closer about him and perhaps prod the embers of the dying fire to give out a little more light and warmth. And then, in the lull of the wind when the silence is broken only by the crackle of the frost it is a wonderful sight to watch the northern lights in the sky overhead. They will dart up and down, ranging clear to the zenith and flashing in all colors from deep orange to violet. The Indians watch them with a look of awe on their faces and call them by words which mean in their language the "dance of spirits." In their eyes these soft shifting lights are the spirits of the ice and snow of the far north flashing out across the winter sky. Under such conditions a man who is tired with the healthful exercise of tramping all day in snowshoes in the woods can fall asleep and feel that he is really living even with the wolves howling close at hand. I have slept like this when the wolves came so close as to almost touch me, though never, of course, when they were in such numbers as to be dangerous. Then too, I always felt well-protected, as I never went anywhere without a hunting knife, a Savage Automatic Revolver and a Winchester 33. My Winchester was my best friend in all my travels. A hunter becomes attached to his gun and looks upon it in almost the light of a living thing. In the intense solitude of a winter pilgrimage into the wilderness there is a craving for companionship and much of this feeling expresses itself for attachment to a dog and a gun. I know I have always felt the strongest friend-

ship for my old Winchester. I called it Betsy. And Betsy and I have had many thrilling adventures together.

The winter climate in northern Minnesota seems very severe, but is in reality far less uncomfortable than it might look at first sight. The air is so dry and still that the cold does not penetrate as it seems to in a damper climate and a temperature of twenty degrees below zero is not by any means unusual. The coldest I have ever seen it was fifty-nine below and that is cold in any climate. When the thermometer ranges around sixty it may be dangerous to venture into the open air. The intense cold when breathed into the lungs is liable to give them frostbite and result in acute pneumonia.

It is often difficult to get water to drink and beginners in the country sometimes resort to eating snow. This is a very unwise thing to do when lost in northern Minnesota for the snow is so fine and dry consisting of little less than ice crystals, that it burns the mouth if you try to eat it and gives a severe sore-throat. The wild deer eat this snow and seem to thrive upon it, but a human being cannot. It is impossible to wear shoes in this northern climate for the cold will strike through the soles, following the nails and quickly freezing a person's feet. I always wore buckskin moccasins like those which the Indians use. Ordinary leather will soon crack and be utterly destroyed by the intense cold.

All this country, as I have said, abounds in game. Deer are very common and so are bears. The heavy timber of the north shelters many moose, while the big blue timber wolves range much farther south and the coyotes are everywhere. Occasionally a hunter will stumble upon the skull of a bison or American buffalo, for thousands of these animals used to range through the prairies and light timber of Minnesota. Those vast herds have now completely disappeared and the only traces they have left behind are the stories which the old hunters tell of them, and their scattered bones in the forests.

I was alone once for twenty days without seeing a human being. Many might think such an experience disagreeable, but it was not. I was far less lonesome

in my own cabin than I have been in the city of New York when I was visiting it in the summer with the St. Louis Ball Club. I had my dog for company and my gun. And I was satisfied.

I sometimes used to lay awake at night and listen to the wolves howling far off in the forest. It is a particularly mournful and melancholy sound. The timber wolves are big rangy brutes. They are commonly called blue wolves, for their heavy coat of winter fur has a buff color which looks bluish at a distance. They are a savage animal with long black jaws and keen, strong teeth. In the deep silence of a winter night when there is not the slightest sound save the crackling of the snow outside, and the frost in the timbers of your cabin the howling of the wolves is a stern reminder of the wilderness. A wolf's howl is very unlike that of a dog. It is far deeper, of much greater volume, a long-drawn bass note. It echoes through the woods and is intensely thrilling to a person who listens alone and at night. Wolves seldom attack a man except when they are in great numbers, but I believe where two or three are together in some of the bitter cold spells of the winter and they are half starved, they would overcome their natural fear of a human being. Such conditions make any animal savage.

Coyotes, which are a small species of wolf, a rather pretty animal, are also part of the accompaniment of a winter landscape in Minnesota. On bright, moonlight nights they will gather on a snow covered knoll in a clearing and seated in a group with their noses high in air will yelp at the moon for an hour at a time. The wolves' battle cry is far deeper than that of a dog, while the coyote's, on the other hand, is much higher pitched. It is a succession of quick, short, piercing yelps. It is annoying, but not in the least dangerous, for a coyote has never been known to attack a human being.

There are many bears in this region. A bear is always a dangerous animal to hunt, but I have never been afraid to meet one. It takes only one shot to kill a bear, but you must place it right. If you don't it may take a dozen and cost you your own life.

I was hunting a deer once and sat down to rest for a minute on the roots

of a Tamarack tree which had been blown down in a heavy wind. It was very cold, in the dead of winter. There were some other hunters in the neighborhood and I had been tracking a doe for some time. I finally shot her all right and when I returned to the Tamarack, the hunters were pulling a bear which they had just killed from under the roots of the tree. I had been sitting directly over this bear without knowing it. If I had fallen over backward I would have landed on him.

Bears, as is well known, den up for the winter, but as this country offers few natural caves or places where they can find shelter in the rock they usually roll up a large mass of moss and wall up the space under the roots of an upturned tree. In this way they build for themselves an artificial den and into this den they will crawl and completely cover themselves with moss to keep out the cold.

This country was once peopled by the Chippewa tribes and scattered remnants of these Indians still wander about the woods in frequent excursions from the Reservation. The Indian is supplied with food by the government so long as he remains on his Reservation, but if he prefers to live and camp out in the country which once belonged to his fathers, he can do so as long as he remains peaceable and respects property. But there are no longer any of those war parties which once caused so much destruction to the settlers of this country.

The Chippewas are in the main very friendly. I met them so often that I learned their language so that I can talk with them well enough. This is not such a difficult matter as it seems, for knowledge of a hundred words or so will enable a man to be understood. The Indian seldom talks the way more civilized people do. About the only words in his vocabulary are the names of various objects. He talks mainly by stringing a few nouns together with grunts and motions of his hands. Some of their words are very apt. For instance, a mule was an odd-looking animal to an Indian and he did not know what to call it. Finally he invented a name himself, a combination of his word for a horse and a rabbit. The reason for this was that to the Indian a mule's ears looked like a rab-

bit's while the rest of his body resembled that of a horse.

The agents for the great Hudson Bay Company sometimes travel through this country buying up furs from the Indians and the few scattered settlers. I would never have any dealings with them because the prices they offered were little less than robbery. In fact I shot a wolverine once and was examining the body when a Hudson Bay buyer happened to come by and wanted to secure the fur. I had no use for it myself but rather than let him have it at the price he offered I cut it to pieces with my hunting knife.

This is a lawless country in some ways. I had a small dog at one time and was visiting a settlement. A teamster was sitting on a pile of logs nearby. He had a big black dog which attacked mine. I told him to call his dog off, but he refused. So I shot his dog with my revolver. He had a few remarks to make and after he was through I told him if he said any more I would shoot him. He didn't say any more.

In my hunting excursions I much prefer to be alone. I suppose everyone has his peculiar notions about hunting, but to me it is no place for conversation or foolishness. Sound travels very far in the woods. I also object to being with anyone who smokes cigarettes while hunting, for a wild animal can smell cigarette smoke almost as far as he can see. Last winter I hunted for a day or so with Fred Clarke's party, but left them rather abruptly and went home. They were not hunting according to my way of thinking as much as they were off for a good time. They were so reckless with their firearms that I didn't want to risk my neck in the vicinity. They might not be able to hit a deer at a hundred yards, but I was taking no chances on my own account.

In my six years' experience in Minnesota, while it is true that hunting has been my main object, I have also been interested in securing as much land as I could handle, for I have every faith in the development of this country, and when it is settled I want to own a farm which will at least insure me a fair living. Most of my hunting has been confined to birds and deer, but I have shot several wolves, two bears and a moose.

The moose country is in the heavy timber to the north and is some considerable distance from my log house. So I have ventured into their native home only rarely and have seen them but seldom though I have often followed their tracks through the woods.

Moose do not eat grass as a deer does. In fact, a moose stands so high it cannot reach the ground at all with its mouth. A moose lives for the most part upon leaves and young twigs of trees. They will fairly climb up a young sapling by straddling the tree and bending it down beneath the weight of their body. Then when they leave it the tree will spring back into its original position and a passing observer will wonder how a moose could possibly reach so high.

Not only does this country abound in game, but the lakes and streams are also

full of fish. The Indians catch great quantities of fish in Lake Millelac and they also hunt ducks and geese. The waters are fairly covered with these birds in the spring and fall when it is difficult to get near enough for a fair shot. The Indians overcome this little handicap by making a dugout canoe from the partially hollowed trunk of a tree. Lying full length in the hollow of this log, they will drift across the surface of the lake until they get in a favorable position for a shot. I have hunted and fished on this lake myself, and it is an exciting sport though I have never been there during the real season. Sometime I hope to be in the vicinity the year round.

Baseball is all right. It is exciting enough. But for real life give me a dog and a gun in the wilderness of upper Minnesota.

