

Home  
on the Range?



“**T**hey were like a river,” says Jackie Legault, absently breaking off a small piece of homemade oatmeal cookie and handing it to her daughter, eighteen-month-old Chloe. The toddler is safely tucked in the back seat of the Legaults’ big farm truck, parked about fifty yards from a few dozen bison browsing on a hillside. We’re sitting smack in the middle of their Great Divide Bison Ranch in Saskatchewan, Canada, about a quarter-mile east of North America’s north-south Continental Divide and almost within shouting distance of the Canada-U.S. international border.

Jackie’s watching the bison quietly graze, doing what bison have always done—being born, cropping wild grasses, moving across the land with stolid, lumbering dignity. They are the continent’s largest land animals; plains bison can weigh up to eighteen hundred pounds, wood bison up to twenty-two-hundred pounds—a full ton. And at one time, some seventy million bison roamed the North American continent, ranging from Mexico to Alaska. For some ten thousand years, they were the continent’s reigning species, the major living element in its varied ecosystems. In free-roaming herds up to a mile wide and ten miles long, they migrated hundreds of miles in annual treks from summer grounds to sheltered winter areas, then back again. In the nineteenth century, pioneer wagon trains were sometimes forced to halt for days, waiting for one of the huge herds to plod past.

These days, though, North America’s bison are fenced in, mostly on sprawling ranches like the Legaults’ six thousand acres, some forty miles south of the small town of Ponteix. A couple of years ago, Kim Legault, Jackie’s husband, a fourth-generation farmer on these fields, quit growing grain, lentils, peas, and mustard. He sold his farm equipment and used the money to buy as many bison as he could. He now has more than four hundred animals, and he’s convinced he’ll someday do better financially with bison than he ever did growing grain.

Overleaf: The nearly nineteen-thousand-acre National Bison Range, in western Montana, home to some 350–500 bison, is one of the U.S.'s first wildlife refuges, established in 1908

Former Canadian farmer Kim Legault, below, hopes to bring back the native bison—which once numbered in the millions—to his six thousand-acre Saskatchewan ranch

Unlike cattle, says Legault, bison don't need to be fed as long as they've got plenty of Prairie to browse, and they spread out on that Prairie, never over-grazing one spot. They keep having calves for up to twenty-five years, where cattle usually quit calving after twelve years or so. Like most ranch bison, his are raised naturally on wild grasses. They eat no feed laden with antibiotics to prevent disease or hormones to speed weight gain.

And Legault believes North Americans, seized by fears of cardiovascular disease due to consumption of too much unhealthy fat, are slowly catching on to bison meat's superior nutritional profile. Bison is the perfect healthy red meat, he says, high in protein, lower in cholesterol than chicken, and carrying almost no fat.

"They are my future, and my equipment," he says, "planting with their feet." As they did for thousands of years, the bison—and the wind—are distributing wild Prairie grass seeds across fields where Legault once planted grain, fields now being restored as native Prairie that future bison will eat. "We're back to the pure, natural animal that was natural to the land," says Legault, "and which is the most natural thing to be consuming."

Legault happily spends days at a time here, replacing or repairing dozens of miles of fencing around his land, the bison his only company except for occasional deer and pronghorn antelope—other animals now coming back to his land as the Prairie returns to its wild roots.

It's early spring now, and most of the cows have calved. One is right in the middle of the messy business, tail upraised, straining. "She's alright, she's doing fine," Legault nods approvingly. "They don't need help with this either—not like cattle."

But although this pastoral scene may seem unremarkable, in truth, it's almost miraculous. A hundred years

ago, the ancestors of these beasts were within a hair's breadth of extinction.

For ten thousand years, North America's natives hunted bison, barely denting their numbers. The animals were survival staples as food and raw material for clothing, weapons, shelters, and tools. Communal groups hunted them, using buffalo pounds—makeshift corrals into which bison would be driven, or, where hilly terrain made it possible, buffalo jumps—steep cliffs over which the animals could be driven to fall to their deaths. Runners circled a herd, cutting out selected animals. One man might don a buffalo hide and head, complete with horns, to encourage the beasts to follow him. Other tribe members fanned the beasts onward by startling them with waving blankets or leaping from behind small shrubs or rock piles. Below the jump, a clean-up crew of women and children waited to finish off still-living animals, drag them aside, and butcher them.

Successful hunts provided enough meat and pemmican (dried meat pounded with fat and berries and preserved) to feed everyone for months. Plains tribes followed seasonal migrations, and paid tribute to the bison. Ritual dances praised the animal's spirit before every hunt.

Some buffalo jumps were used for thousands of years. At Wanuskewin Heritage Park north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, archaeologists have discovered artifacts more than eight thousand years old—older than Egypt's Great Pyramids. In western Alberta, Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump has become a World Heritage Site.

In both places, Plains Cree or Blackfoot people still dance in tribute to the buffalo; now they do it for the tourists, not for the hunt.

It took less than fifty years for European explorers and settlers to hunt the bison almost to extinction.



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(Europeans also sparked the misuse, now a universal synonym, of the word buffalo for the animal.) In Canada, fevered trade, first in pemmican, then in hides bartered to fur traders and explorers, led to the buffalo's near-extirmination by the mid-1800s.

In the U.S., extirpating the bison became a deliberate strategy to subdue rebellious native people. In 1873, American secretary of the interior Columbus Delano declared "civilization of the Indian is impossible while the buffalo remains upon the plains." Two years later, General Philip Sheridan urged the U.S. Congress to encourage buffalo hunters. "For the sake of lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated," he said.

And they did . . . almost. Between hunters and so-called sportsmen who sat comfortably in passenger railcars, firing on herds and slaughtering hundreds as the trains passed by, tens of millions of animals were massacred. Some reports claim there were only twenty wild plains bison alive by the turn of the century—a dozen in the U.S., eight in Canada. Just 250 wood bison remained, near remote Great Slave Lake in what's now northern Canada.

With the bison gone, the native people began to starve. For some years, a few tribes on the U.S. side of the border drifted north to Canada, where the government was feeding the hungry, but eventually put a stop to the migration; the Canadians had enough problems dealing with their own starving natives. The Americans' goal, however, had been met; their Indians' resistance to white settlement had been squelched.

But while there was little furor over the plight of the natives, some people strongly disapproved of destroying the bison. Even while the slaughter continued, a few ranchers began rounding up scattered survivors to begin raising their own herds. Two Montana men, Michael Pablo and Charles Allard, spent more than twenty years putting together the continent's largest living assemblage of bison.

And one small wild herd of twenty-three animals had survived in Wyoming's newly created Yellowstone National Park.

In 1905 in the U.S., the American Bison Society formed to help secure the species' survival. (The Society disbanded twenty-five years later, after establishing a number of public herds.) In 1907, the Canadian government bought Pablo's animals, now more than seven hundred of them, and shipped them north, marking the beginning of Canadian efforts to help save the species. The descendants of those bison are today protected at Elk Island National Park in the province of Alberta.

Canada's Wood Buffalo National Park was established in 1922 to protect the last remaining wood bison, but even so, they were declared extinct in 1940. Nineteen years later, wildlife officers flying over the park's northwestern corner spotted a small, isolated herd—the world's last wood bison. Today, with perhaps four thousand alive, wood bison are still considered threatened. In the spring of 2006, thirty calves and yearlings boarded an

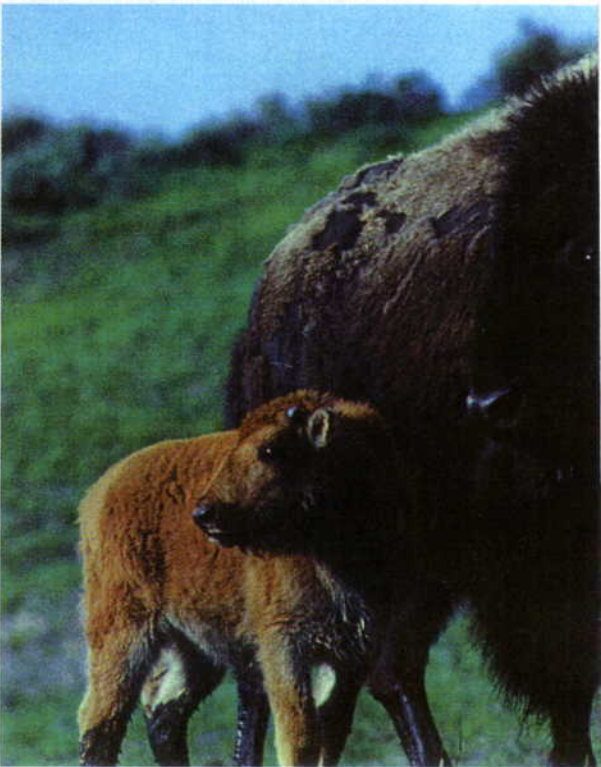
Aleutian cargo plane bound for northern Russia, to be reintroduced after an estimated five thousand-year absence. Part of that re-seeding involves planned exchanges of scientific research, but it's also a bid to "fail-safe" the wood bison should disaster ever befall the Canadian herd.

Meanwhile, from the relative handful of beasts rescued by ranchers and the few wild survivors of the massacres, North America's plains bison have become conservation-success poster children, numbering some five or six hundred thousand all told.

That population explosion's happened largely over the last two decades, thanks to bison ranches. Perhaps 275,000 ranched bison in the U.S. and about 250,000 in Canada are intended for North American dinner tables; ironically, the once-threatened species is again becoming prized for its meat. The world's largest herd of roughly forty thousand, owned by American media mogul and CNN founder Ted Turner, is parceled out on 2.2 million acres among thirteen ranches in various American states. His bison become burgers in his chain of thirty-nine restaurants, called Ted's Montana Grill, in sixteen states.

"The best way to save the bison is to eat them," says Dave Carter, executive director for the National Bison Association in the United States. About thirty-five thousand bison were processed in the United States in 2005, 17 percent more than went to slaughter in 2004. And Kim Legault and thousands of ranchers like him are banking on a growing North American appetite for bison.

As well as the ranched, or commercial, herds, about twenty thousand protected bison roam fenced public lands in small conservation herds that have popped up around North America in recent years, partly to preserve the species and partly because environmental groups and governments have been acquiring patches of Prairie, Great Plains, and high plateau to restore them as closely as possible to their original ecosystem status. That requires bringing back the animals that were the dominant



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