

On the open plains of eastern Montana, wildlife advocates want to restore free-ranging bison. Livestock producers strongly oppose the idea. What's a ranch-owning hunter to do?

BY ANDREW MCKEAN



# BUTTING HEADS OVER BISON

The badlands and sagebrush prairies south of my house, where I hunt mule deer and graze cow-calf pairs with my neighbors, don't look like a battleground.

But this folded sea of gumbo knobs, prickly pears, and dust devils is the setting for a gathering conflict that pits wildlife advocates against ranchers. Though both sides have been clashing over various issues for a long time, what's different about the bison discord is how it stitches together three very different eras: the old West of cowboys and Indians, the current West of graduate-degree ranchers and pedigreed cattle, and the new West of ecologists who see in this wide, empty land a perfect place to restore the keystone native species of the plains.

At the heart of the battle are bison, and the question of whether or how to return free-ranging bison to public grasslands in eastern Montana. This conflict divides my little town of Glasgow. It pits hunters, who would like the chance to pursue buffalo in the same

divides me, equal parts conservation-minded hunter and taxpaying rancher.

The issue isn't an abstraction. There is a pressing need to find a permanent home for hundreds of wild bison that have overpopulated the fragile mountainous habitat of Yellowstone National Park, 300 miles to the southwest. Wildlife agencies and private conservation groups suggest that these surplus animals—some of the last genetically pure bison remaining on the planet—should be returned to the Great Plains, where tens of millions of their ancestors lived until a century ago. Returning bison as apex herbivores, they say, will promote grassland health and biodiversity.

Ranchers and others who depend on the cattle economy say the appropriate fate of these wild bison—"wooly tanks," some call them, for their habit of running through fences—is a slaughterhouse, not relocation. They worry that the Yellowstone animals could spread brucellosis, a disease endemic to the park's bison that can cause beef cattle to abort their calves. Fundamentally, they say, there is no longer room in the West for wild buffalo. Barbed wire and homesteads have replaced itinerant Indian tribes and frontier hide hunters. And free-ranging bison.

But there's a larger threat. Ranchers worry that wild bison could displace cattle from the range and upend the fragile cow-country economy that relies on

places they now hunt antelope, against ranchers, who view the wild bovines as competition for grass and a threat to the fences that hold their cattle. And it

subsidized livestock grazing on public land. They recall the last time bison were in the headlines. It was the 1980s, when the idea of the "Buffalo Commons" was circulating. That was a proposal to

BISON CALF BY NELSON KEMTER

“rewild” the plains, replacing humans with bison and prairie dogs to restore ecological balance and create a potentially appealing tourist destination.

It’s important to keep that context in mind anytime bison are mentioned here. To traditional ranchers, a bison isn’t just a wild cow. It’s code for the systematic dismantling of the ranching culture. But bison are equally emblematic to wildlife advocates, who view the animals as the single species capable of restoring wildness to one of the largest ecosystems on the continent, the short-grass prairie that stretches from central Canada south to Oklahoma.

Of course, these Great Plains have been irreversibly altered in the two centuries since Lewis and Clark paddled through here and marveled over endless herds of buffalo. Many grasslands have been converted to grain fields, and beef cattle have replaced bison as the bovines that define the region.

“We don’t talk about bringing back the dinosaurs, but that’s exactly what big herds of free-roaming buffalo are,” John Brenden, a Montana state senator and a leading bison opponent, told the Associated Press. “Their time has passed.”

*Andrew McKean of Glasgow is the editor of Outdoor Life, in which this article originally appeared.*



**My backyard**

A few sizeable sections of the plains are relatively unchanged since the mastodons, and bison later occupied that landscape. The area happens to be my backyard, an empire of sagebrush that sprawls from the Missouri River north to the Canadian border in eastern Montana. It is predominantly public land, managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

There are reminders here of the historic presence of bison, if you know where to look. You can find bison skulls in the eroded banks of prairie streams. The edges of car-sized granite boulders, left on the open prairie by retreating glaciers, are polished smooth by

**WHICH GRAZER GETS THE GRASS?**

If bison end up on Bureau of Land Management property, conservationists might urge the agency to amend its grazing permits to include the wild bovines. Ranchers understandably worry that if that happened, in dry years there wouldn’t be enough forage to go around and their cattle would lose out.

generations of hip-scratching bison. And below some of the steepest scarps you can sometimes find drifts of bison bones and stone spear points, relics of prehistoric buffalo jumps and butchering parties.

There’s a certain wildness to this country



LEFT TO RIGHT: DEE LUNNELL/BLANK; MC GLASSETTER

that attracted me and keeps me here in the heart of a hunter’s domain. But nearby there’s a satisfying sense of order, too, imposed by ruler-straight section-line fences, miles-long strips of durum wheat, and close-knit communities that promote inclusion and a sense—expressed as a sort of pioneer pride—that the rest of the world has forgotten us out here on this last American frontier.

**Still essential to tribes**

Another culture that shares these plains with ranchers is on the opposite side of the bison issue.

They’re American Indian tribes—Sioux, Assiniboine, and Gros Ventre—that have

been lobbying to receive many of Yellowstone National Park’s surplus bison. Tribal leaders find themselves in a new range war with ranchers as they try, through the courts and the Montana Legislature, to enable the restoration of wild bison to reservations as well as nontribal public lands.

For Indians, bison are as essential now as they were 130 years ago, when the animals’ removal hastened the end of free-ranging tribes and spawned the modern reservation culture. Tribes want to restore bison herds to feed and employ tribal members and give them a sense of historical completion, their gift to a species that for centuries gave prairie tribes food, shelter, and a world view that

revolved around the hides and horns and meat of buffalo.

“Bison are a connection to our ancestors,” says Mark Azure, director of fish and wildlife on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation west of Glasgow.

Conservationists are mostly on the Indians’ side, and they think they have found the right moment and place to begin the restoration. They want to translocate a herd of Yellowstone National Park bison to the 1.1 million-acre Charles M. Russell (CMR) National Wildlife Refuge in the Missouri River Breaks. This first step is actually pretty sensible—wildlife refuges are mandated with managing native wildlife, and nothing could be more native (or in need

of management) in eastern Montana than wild bison. The CMR is already known for its world-class elk, mule deer, and bighorns, and it’s not a reach to imagine that a hunt-able herd of wild bison could live here, too.

But what excites conservationists, and troubles ranchers, is that the CMR represents a foothold on the plains that could enable bison to be returned to a wider landscape, one occupied mainly by cattle. Much of the prairie north of the CMR all the way to the Canadian border—an area nearly the size of Indiana—is managed by the BLM, whose principal function is to award permits allowing ranchers to graze cattle on public lands. Many conservationists are urging the



Shipping bison to a zoo in the early 1900s to help save the species.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY

**American hunters are proud** of saying that we brought back the nation’s wildlife species from the brink of extinction. Most of the animals we love to hunt—whitetails, wild turkeys, elk—recovered because hunting licenses funded professional management and we agreed to restrain ourselves through bag limits and season structures.

But one species—America’s bison—took a different path to recovery, and the current struggle over where to continue that restoration goes back to decisions made at the dawn of the nation’s wildlife conservation movement.

The bison was the species that jump-started that movement. Back in the 1880s, just two decades after visitors to the West described limitless herds of the animals, it appeared that buffalo would be exterminated from the planet. Hide hunters slaughtered them, railroads and homesteads fragmented their range, and soldiers killed

them to deprive warring Indian tribes of their main food source.

By some estimates, the number of bison plummeted from between 30 and 60 million in 1880 to fewer than 1,100 in 1890.

Leaders of the nascent conservation movement—Theodore Roosevelt, William Hornaday, and J.A. McGuire (founder of *Outdoor Life*) among them—concluded that the way to save America’s buffalo was to round them up and protect them in zoos. Only by creating a captive population of breeding bison would the species be saved, these early conservationists determined.

The few remnant wild bison outside of Yellowstone National Park were corralled at the Bronx Zoo in New York City—the model for the U.S. Mint’s iconic buffalo nickel was one of the captives—and the offspring of these survivors were sent to other zoos around the country. Over generations, these bison lost their wildness, and their

genes became diluted as they were interbred with cattle, first at zoos and later on private livestock ranches where surplus bison were shipped.

Conservationists—including members of the American Bison Society, founded in 1905 by Theodore Roosevelt—call bison the “left-behind” species because of that decision to institutionalize them rather than work to return them to functional landscapes.

With few exceptions, the source of many of the nation’s private bison herds is the offspring of these captive animals, which became more domesticated with each generation. That helps explain why, in many states, bison are considered livestock. And it helps explain why the pure bloodline and the relatively wild nature of Yellowstone National Park’s bison are so valuable to those who would repopulate the plains with this icon of the American West. ■ —A.M.



**DIVERGENT VIEWPOINTS** Above: Local sentiments in Phillips County. Many Montanans bristle at the notion that bison should be restored to the animals' native landscape. Below: Yet many Montanans also support the idea of having bison join elk, deer, pronghorn, wild sheep, and other species on the Great Plains where they lived for thousands of years. And where they could be hunted like other game animals. The big question: Can bison and cattle coexist?



BLM to amend these coveted grazing permits—traditionally passed down from generation to generation of the same ranch family and fundamental to the financial security of most Western ranches—to include wild bison. In dry years, there wouldn't be enough grass to feed both beef and bison, and ranchers worry that if buffalo are allotted some of this precious forage, their cattle could lose out.

**Sustainable solution**

As a hunter, I anticipate the opportunity to someday draw a tag to hunt a wild bison.

I think limited numbers of bison could roam here, in small scattered herds whose numbers and movement could be controlled through public hunting. That management strategy has worked elsewhere, in Utah's Henry Mountains and South Dakota's Black Hills, where ranchers grudgingly share the range with bison. I'm convinced that, given the opportunity, hunters would flock here from around the world for a chance to hunt wild bison in places they haven't roamed in 130 years. That revenue could be good for our rural economy.

But as a rancher, I share my neighbors' worries about competing with herds of wild bison for precious grass. I worry about my fences, as well as my liability should a herd of wild-eyed "wooly tanks" tear through one, allowing my cows to graze my neighbor's high-dollar wheat. I worry about my county's tax base, and our ability to fund schools and

roads, if the ag economy dries up.

The sustainable solution is probably between the two poles, but the battle lines in my town are so stark that it's hard to hold a rational conversation about bison management here. A friend of mine, a banker who helped arrange the loan for me to buy my ranch, told me that he could no longer do business or be seen socially with me if I publically endorse bison relocation.

My friends in the conservation community can't understand why I'm not fully supportive of bison restoration. But they don't live in a town where pickups are festooned with bumper stickers that say, "Don't Buffalo Me" and "No Federal Land Grab." And they don't own a ranch that depends on federal grazing leases.

Walk into almost any rancher's house in Montana and you might see some reverential nod to bison. It could be a weathered skull dug out of a cutbank and now decorating a mantle. Or it might be a faded Charlie Russell print of bison grazing the fenceless plains, framed on the dining room wall. Even Montana's license plate features an iconic bison skull.

That's how many eastern Montanans would like to keep bison: as artifacts and hollow-eyed skulls. Meanwhile, Yellowstone National Park's surplus bison keep growing in number, waiting for a future that could bring either a kill-floor bolt to their head or a return to the open plains of their ancestors. 🐃

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DENNIS J. LANGRISH; TONY BYNUM; LINDSAY BROWN; WAIRE DAILY NEWS; TONY BYNUM

**UNCERTAIN FUTURE**  
The bison is the iconic wild animal of the American West. Will it one day return to the land where Indians once hunted and pioneers found them by the millions? Or will Montana's buffalo remain only on license plates and old nickels?



**Bison Management in Montana**

In July 2013 the Montana Supreme Court validated a proposed transfer of bison between tribal lands on the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Reservations. In August 35 bison were moved to the Fort Belknap tribal lands from Fort Peck. The Supreme Court decision and the tribal

activities raised questions by the public about bison management in Montana.

Bison management by the State of Montana falls into three categories: bison around Yellowstone Park (YNP), bison on nontribal lands in the rest of the state, and bison on tribal lands.

► **Yellowstone bison:** Bison that migrate into Montana from YNP are managed by three federal and two Montana agencies (FWP and the Department of Livestock) under a court-ordered agreement. Under a management plan, the state agencies are considering allowing bison some degree of movement outside the park's west and north boundaries. On the west side, the proposal could allow bison to range from the Hebgen Basin to as far north as the Taylor Fork drainage, but not into the Gallatin



**CULTURAL VALUES** Bison transferred from the Fort Peck Reservation are released into a 900-acre fenced field on Fort Belknap Reservation in August 2013.

Canyon. On the north side, this proposal could allow for bull bison to be present in the Gardiner Basin.

FWP has held public meetings on the proposal in Gardiner, Lewistown, and West Yellowstone, and a draft environmental review was released in July. This past September the department hosted a two-day meeting of individuals and groups with different opinions on future bison management. "Our aim was to foster better understanding of the various positions," says Jeff Hagener, FWP director.

► **Outside the Yellowstone area:** On nontribal lands in the rest of Montana, FWP has no current plans to move bison anywhere, says Hagener. "But we believe it's critical to take a statewide look at bison management in Montana, and we've started a planning process to explore the future of wild bison," he says. In 2012 FWP held eight public meetings around the state, and received more than 20,000 comments. "There are no predetermined outcomes to this statewide planning process," says Hagener.

If bison movement is contemplated in the future, FWP would

convene a local working group to provide input and develop an area-specific management plan, all through a public process. "This process would occur before any bison under FWP jurisdiction were released on private or public land in Montana, and the owner of that land would have to authorize any such release," Hagener says.

"We believe it is important to undertake an open and honest planning effort to determine the course of bison management in Montana," adds Hagener. "And we are committed to an inclusive process that allows all interests to weigh in and take part in public forums that provide for reason and respect."

► **Tribal lands:** Native American tribes have expressed strong interest in obtaining wild bison for restoring cultural and subsistence values. Hagener says that no bison will be moved to tribal lands by the State of Montana without extensive brucellosis testing and specific management measures agreed to by the parties, as was done with the bison moved from YNP to Fort Peck lands in 2012. There are currently no plans to move additional bison to other reservations. ■ —FWP News Reports