

The Buffalo's Revenge

Credit: San Francisco Examiner
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By Patrick Owens

When
Yellowstone's
tourists get too
close for comfort

Gardiner, Mont.

The males weigh up to a ton, the females half that. But they're also built for speed: A buffalo in a hurry can outdash a horse.

There were a great many of them (50 million is a conservative estimate) spread from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico and from Oregon to Buffalo, N.Y. Then they came under attack—by hunters for their hides, by country diners for their tongues, by sportsmen for the pleasure of their slaughter.

Social theorists of the time defended the killing. "They are destroying the Indians' commissary. . . . For the sake of lasting peace, let them kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated," the legendary General Phil Sheridan is alleged to have said of the hide hunters in 1875.

The Indians did not believe the evidence of their eyes or of their shrinking stomachs. The explanation accepted in many tribes was that the Great Spirit had called the buffalo home, into the same hole in the ground from which much of creation originally issued. Bishee, as the Crow Indians called the great beast, would return when the white man took greed back to wherever it was the white man had come from.

White men are still around all the old buffalo grounds, including this mile-high mountain village of 600 at the north edge of Yellowstone National Park. But their greed is somewhat moderated.

Far from facing extinction, bishee thrives now as spectacle in many zoos and in such grander settings as the National Bison Range, a federal reserve 300 miles to the west. They are also a meat crop grown on hundreds of ranches and farms, either purebred or as beefalo, a cross with their cousin, the cow. Some western states even pretend buffalo are game animals, licensing citizens to hunt them down.

Hereabouts, the animal is becoming all of the above, and then some. Yellowstone's bison injure tourists and threaten the cattle industry with a ruinous disease called brucellosis.

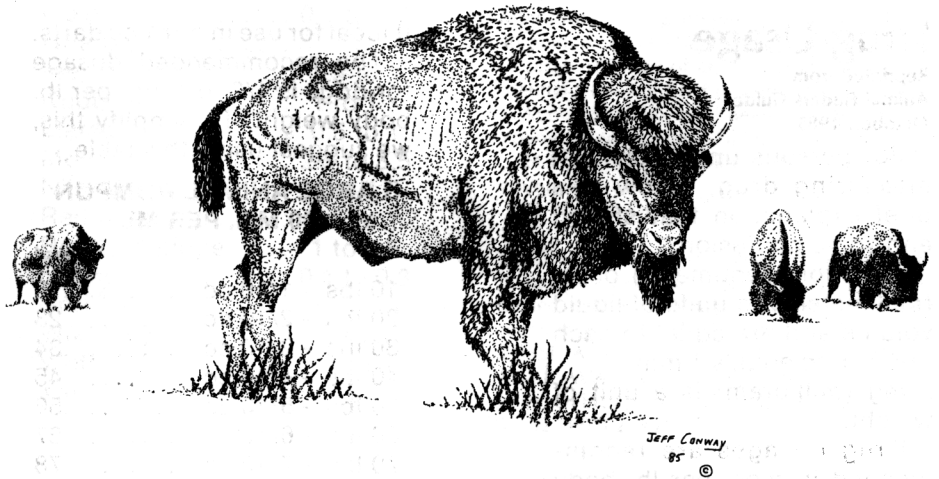
John Varley, Yellowstone's research administrator, notes that buffalo are by nature stolid, though subject to occasional alarm. "They appear to be tame animals because they become very swiftly habituated to humans and human activity," he adds. "But of course they are not tame. These are wild animals. This is not Disneyland."

In large measure, the bison has replaced the bear as the sizable park animal Yellowstone's visitors are most likely to encounter closely. Firm restrictions on feeding of bears, along with the closure of open garbage sites, have largely solved beggar bear problems that once plagued several national parks. With the bears back in the woods, earning what park workers like to call an honest living, the sort of people who used to feed them are likely nowadays to shoot snapshots of their kinfolk with the stolid buffalo. "We have had people attempt to put their children on the backs of bison," says Gary Brown, Yellowstone's acting chief ranger.

In one incident, a buffalo bull, spooked by a band of children, gored a hiker, Jack Lloyd, 62, of Fresno, in the right leg. "I got behind a tree, but he came around the tree," Lloyd explains. There were four gorings within a week in mid-July.

The youngest of this year's casualties, 9-year-old Christine Kim, had been urged by her father to within three feet of her buffalo when it attacked. She was not gored, however, and suffered only bruises.

Melvin Dietz, 46, a machinist at Littleton, Colo., scoffs at claims by park officials that the human is invariably the aggressor. "We were first in the campground up in the morning, and I went to the bathroom," Dietz says, recalling his June 1983 encounter. "When I came out, I saw him. He was right in the center of camp, the camp circle. I went over that way, about 25 or 30 feet from him, and he took me. He picked me up by the leg, and it just pulled the flesh right loose from the leg. Then, even though I was loose from the horn,



Sketch by Jeff Conway, 3612 Ralph Ave., Louisville, KY 40211

In the most usual script, the tourist with the camera urges his wife, child or friend closer and closer to a great and hairy beast.

Varley explains: "Every animal has a critical distance that no one can invade without provoking a reaction. It might be eight feet for one bison, for example. No one knows just what it is, but it is always there."

With those posing for shutterbugs, Varley adds, "It's, 'Move over! Move over!'" and pretty soon they're in the critical distance of the bison. The animal takes two or three steps and ducks his head and . . ."

This past summer, at least 12 visitors found themselves inside the critical distance, and then on the horns, and one of them died.

my leg was caught between the horn and his head. It just pulled the flesh right off my leg."

Some buffaloes have been destroyed because of persistent antisocial behavior. But the prevailing attitude within the park's bureaucracy is based on the premise that it is the people, not the animals, who are guests in the parks.

It is when buffaloes leave Yellowstone, however, that the park's most serious bison management issues arise.

This happens in winter and early spring, when the animals have trouble filling their stomachs from the park's limited meadowlands. Heading northwest out of the Lamar Valley, some of the 700 bison in the Lamar Valley herd have left Yellowstone each winter in recent years, moving onto private cattle pasture and national forest woodlands in Montana.


"They take out barbed wire fences as if they were no problem. They go where they want to go, and they can do a great deal of damage," Varley acknowledges.

Ranchers and others involved in the buffalo wars describe such physical damage as a major irritation. Fraznk Rigler, whose ranch is among those invaded, adds that buffalo and elk—also from the park and far more numerous in number—can consume huge quantities of grass and, when they can get at it, hay,

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destroying pasturelands in the process.

"They don't leave you much to make a living on," Rigler adds. "They'll eat sage brush. They'll eat rubber rabbit brush. They'll eat anything that's there."

Such problems pale, though, before the menace of a disease called brucellosis. Partial to ungulates—a class of hoofed animals that includes domestic cattle, buffalo and elk—brucellosis has no effect on the quality of meat produced by its hosts. It does, however, cause miscarriages, thus rendering commercial cattle raising impractical. As undulant fever, it is also a disabling affliction in humans.

Ridding the United States of brucellosis, then keeping it disease free, has been a major goal for many decades, and tens of millions of dollars have been spent in the effort.

Cattle, buffalo and for that matter, elk all get along fine socially. The buffalo and the cattle are even interbred to produce the beefalo. The fear is that the cattle will pick up the

brucellosis from intimate contact with the buffalo, from aborted buffalo fetuses or from the waste of infected animals.

"This is probably the biggest reservoir of brucellosis that is left in the United States," Charles Kane, president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association said in July. He called for a quarantine on Yellowstone buffalo and the posting of signs at park entrances warning of the disease.

Robert Barbee, Yellowstone's superintendent, dismisses Kane's suggestions as "a hysterical approach."

Varley adds that cattle have never caught brucellosis from cattle on open pasture land and that there is no evidence this can ever happen. (His qualification—the mention to open pasture land—is apparently necessary because, as Varley acknowledges, cows have caught brucellosis from elk with whom they were penned experimentally.)

Rancher Rigler disagrees. "I was just a kid, but when the buffalo came over here in the

'40s, they brought brucellosis with them, and our cows caught it."

Donald Ferlicka, Montana's state veterinarian, does take a firm position. "If you were a Montana rancher, you would have already been issued an order of quarantine, and it would be expected that you'd take charge of your livestock and keep them from mingling with cattle of other ownership or otherwise becoming a risk to human welfare," he wrote Superintendent Barbee in March.

The solution for the park, Ferlicka maintains, is to vaccinate its buffalo while eliminating those already infected. Barbee has rejected this advice, saying it is impractical and a violation of Yellowstone's philosophy of letting nature take its course.

As to practicality, Varley estimated that 85 percent of all park buffaloes would have to be slaughtered. Even this sacrifice would no doubt prove ineffective, he added, because the buffalo could be expected to be reinfected—by the park's multifarious elk.