

High Country News

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Bison deserve a home on the range

*You sleeping relick of the past
if I but had my way
I'd cloth your frame
with meat and hide
an wake you up to day.*

– C.M. Russell

By TOM FRANCE

Montana cowboy artist and favorite son Charles M. Russell penned those wistful words beneath his sketch of a sun-bleached buffalo skull and bones poking through the prairie grass. When Russell put pen to paper, in 1908, returning buffalo to the Northern Plains had to seem as likely as reanimating weathered bones.

Russell's life – 1864-1926 – spanned the commercial slaughter and near-extinction of buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, and nearly every other edible, usable or annoying critter in the West. Russell lived barely long enough to witness the beginning of America's wildlife conservation movement. Perhaps he hoped, but surely couldn't predict, the extent to which that movement would succeed.

It's hard to overstate that success. Today we have abundant wildlife. We've brought back the big game, waterfowl, predators, furbearers, raptors and upland birds Russell and his contemporaries wrote off as gone for good. Here in Montana, they're all back except one – the buffalo.

Oh, we have bison aplenty in Montana, privately owned and raised as livestock or held captive behind high fences for tourists to photograph. And some 4,700 wild bison are hemmed in in Yellowstone National Park, confined not by fences but strict state policy. Nowhere in Montana – or North America, for that matter – do truly wild bison roam free in their native prairie habitat.

But change is on the horizon of eastern Montana's mixed-grass prairie.

Montana is taking the first step toward restoring wild bison. Montana's Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks recently completed a series of meetings statewide to identify public issues to include in an environmental impact statement and comprehensive plan for managing bison – as wildlife, not livestock or park escapees.

Meanwhile, in May, Montana presented the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes with 63 genetically pure bison captured from Yellowstone National Park to start a herd on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana. Those bison were welcomed to their new pasture with cheers and tears of joy.

Not everyone's cheering, though. Many ranchers oppose restoring bison, even on public lands. Some went to court, trying to block Montana's gift of bison to the Fort Peck tribes. Stockgrowers see wild bison as a threat to the cattle industry – a possible source of diseases, a destroyer of

fences, and a competitor for grass that cattle could eat. In a recent public meeting, one rancher likened the proposal to restore wild bison to the movie “Jurassic Park.”

Their opposition may be overblown, but ranchers have valid concerns. The National Wildlife Federation advocates bison restoration, but is making clear to ranchers that it hears and understands their concerns. NWF has pledged to work hard to resolve potential conflicts. We must ensure that bison restored to the wild present no threat of disease and, when crossing onto private lands, don’t create any more problems than other wildlife.

With that commitment, we should focus on where and how to restore wild bison, not whether to do so.

The “where” is easy. It’s hard to imagine starting anyplace other than the vast national wildlife refuge named after Russell himself.

The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge sprawls over 1.1 million acres of prairie and rugged breaks. This remote, wild, high-quality native bison habitat has the three things wild bison need: grass, water and space. The CMR is largely surrounded by public lands, and its primary mission is wildlife conservation. It’s just waiting for bison to make their comeback.

Ranchers can help guide restoration, but first they’ll need to take a seat at the table. Conservation and stewardship are matters of balance, not all-or-nothing approaches. Stockgrowers must know that better than anyone. Indeed, most ranchers believe that the “no livestock grazing on public lands” position espoused by some environmental groups is extreme, and it is.

But conservationists think that the “no bison on public lands” position taken by the livestock industry is equally extreme. Saying there’s no room for wild bison anywhere in Montana’s 147,000 square miles defies common sense.

We won’t see wild bison in great numbers or in many places. Even the West’s wildest prairies are too fragmented or developed for that. But just as we’ve done with other wildlife, we can restore wild bison to prairie habitat in the CMR and some tribal lands. We can do so while preventing and resolving problems for ranchers.

Restoring bison may spark debate now. But when future generations look back, nobody will doubt we did the right thing by finishing the job of wildlife restoration. We have an opportunity with bison that earlier generations could only dream about. It’s time to seize that opportunity.

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