



T H E A M E R I C A N
B I S O N

OUR OFFICIAL NATIONAL MAMMAL IS CELEBRATED IN A NEW BOOK BY AUTHOR CHASE REYNOLDS EWALD '81 AND MONTANA PHOTOGRAPHER AUDREY HALL. *Bison: Portrait of an Icon* HONORS THIS MAJESTIC ANIMAL, ITS NEAR EXTINCTION, AND ITS REMARKABLE COMEBACK. IN THIS PIECE, EWALD SHARES THE STORY OF HOW SHE FIRST BECAME FASCINATED WITH BISON AND HER RESEARCH LEADING UP TO THE BOOK.

BY CHASE REYNOLDS EWALD '81 • PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUDREY HALL



Imagine you're picnicking at a table next to the Yellowstone River on a sunny summer day. Suddenly aware of a disturbance, you turn only to see a mass of heaving, snorting, splashing creatures swimming forcefully, inexorably, and directly at you. Retreating to cover is not an option; you're already becoming engulfed in a powerful mass of animals whose soft grunting and collective rumbling and scrabbling hooves momentarily drown out the sounds of birdsong and rushing water.



They pass by so closely you could reach out and touch their prehistoric-looking leathery sides. Then they move on, ignoring you, singularly focused on staying with the herd, following their leader to some unknown destination.

This actually happened to me one day. I was chaperoning some guests from the nonprofit educational guest ranch I ran in Wapiti, Wyoming, through the park, and we'd stopped for lunch. You always expect to see bison in Yellowstone, maybe even feel them brush up against your car on the road during one of the park's famous 'bison jams,' but you don't anticipate them practically running you over when you're eating a sandwich at a picnic table. I can't say this moment was when I became fascinated with bison, but it was one of the

reasons that when I was offered a chance in 2019 by my longtime publisher, Gibbs Smith, to collaborate on a book about bison, I immediately accepted.

I have been writing about art, design, food, travel, traditional craftsmanship, rustic style, and the American West for more than 25 years and have authored 14 books. But writing about these charismatic icons of the plains was a bit of a departure — albeit a welcome one.

Bison are creatures of contradiction. They may look like a cartoonist's vision of a prehistoric animal, with their dense, humped, compact bodies on overly short legs; their curved horns and jaunty beards; their robe's worth of fur (impossibly luxurious in places, but in others hanging off their bodies in ragged strips); and

those ageless, knowing eyes. But bison are nimble, fast, and strong. They're capable of sprinting 35 miles an hour, clearing fence-high obstacles, fording glacier-fed rivers with their calves during the height of spring run-off, and — as anyone can witness by watching the warning video on Yellowstone National Park's website — tossing a tourist with a mere flick of their massive heads.

The animals are tough, durable, resilient, and smart. They have matriarchal leaders who employ the strength of the group to protect its young. And they evolved over millennia in perfect adaptation to life on the Great Plains. These evolutionary strategies include a metabolism that slows down in the winter so they need less forage, and a habit of walking into and through storms instead of drifting with them, which prolongs exposure.

The immense size of the herds and their patterns of movement and intermittent grazing behavior actually helped shape the grassland ecosystem itself. Yet in a short couple of decades late in the 19th century, these iconic creatures barely survived an assault that took their numbers from an estimated 25 to 60 million to fewer than 1,000. Bison came within a horn's width of disappearing forever, and this makes their comeback all the more remarkable.

As photographer Audrey Hall set about

Chase Reynolds Ewald '81
pictured (standing) with
photographer Audrey Hall

examining a life's worth of bison images and planning trips to capture new photos, I began my research. I read multiple books on the subject and scoured historical references, but I also wanted to include current voices in the narrative to help illustrate that the bison are not some vestige of the past but play an important role in the future of the West. Accordingly, we obtained contributions from a variety of leaders around the region: former Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell; the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History's director Kirk Johnson; Patagonia-founder Yvon Chouinard; and Montana's former Poet Laureate Henry Real Bird, among others. I also spoke to dozens of people involved with bison on various levels — policymakers and artists and industry executives and range biologists — in an attempt to get my arms around the current political status of bison, the part they play in increasing biodiversity, and the crucial role they fulfill in traditional culture.

In this pursuit I relied on the experience of people like George Horse Capture Jr., a guide and interpreter of native culture on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation; Shawn Henderson, the manager of the bison herd of the Quapaw tribe in northeast Oklahoma; and Emmy Award-winning costume maker Cathy Smith, who grew up in South Dakota's Black Hills amongst the Lakota Sioux.

I visited with Dr. Ian Thompson, tribal historic preservation officer of the Choctaw tribe, who with his wife, Amy, founded a family farm, Nan Awaya Heritage Farmstead, seven years ago. The name refers to the tribe's creation story, in which the people were given rules for how to live in balance with the land and with other people. When the couple bought their property, Ian Thompson said, "It was almost nothing but ragweed and goatweed. The land was so heavily grazed that certain keystone plant species



were gone. It was out of balance."

The farm's goal, he said, is "to heal our land, support our community, and bring to light the traditional knowledge of our Choctaw ancestors. One tool we have for doing that is bison."

Thanks to letting their property lie fallow for a year and then introducing bison and carefully managing their movements, the

land is bouncing back. The Thompsons now count 120 species of native prairie grasses and forbs. "When you think about indigenous cultures," explains Thompson, "they're based on 15,000 years of living on the land. They contain timeless insights that can help modern people have a higher quality of life. Food is the most direct connection between

people and the land. Societies managed to live on the land without degrading it for thousands of years. In 200 years of industrial agriculture, we've obliterated it in huge chunks in the world. Our goal is to connect our farm with the broader cultural revitalization and hopefully get people interested in indigenous foods and in doing things that bring balance and sustainability to the community."

Ron Brownotter, who is of Lakota-Yanktonai descent, works toward this goal every day. He runs 600 head of buffalo over 20,000 acres on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation on the border of North and South Dakota. After two decades of bison management, his land is flourishing. "We have birds, insects, snakes, coyotes, badgers, deer, skunk, even wolves and moose, prairie dogs, eagles, and hawks," he said. Brownotter finds the ultimate fulfillment in raising bison, he says. "I describe it like putting on a glove; it fits my hand. My culture, the land, the buffalo, are all mixed together. My mission today is to bring them back and be a help to my community, my family, the reservation as a whole—and to know that the buffalo have returned."

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SALLY JEWELL,
FORMER SECRETARY
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It was a humbling experience to speak to so many passionate people willing to share their knowledge. Audrey Hall's art photographs, largely taken on solo trips during the pandemic, showcase the majesty and timelessness of the animal in all seasons and all types of terrain. I did my best to illustrate their significance and their importance — and not just to people of the West. Bison represent an important part of our shared history, stand as a symbol of the wilderness still intact across large swathes of the continent, and play a key role in a healthy plains ecosystem.

As Former Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell writes in the book, "For millennia, the American bison shaped the landscapes of North America and the cultures of many American Indian tribal nations. With settlement, this majestic animal — the largest land mammal native to the U.S., once numbering 40 million — was all but wiped out, slaughtered at the rate of one creature every 30 seconds for 40 years. In shaping our landscapes, this amazing creature, brought back from the brink of extinction, can once again lead us on a path toward a more sustainable future." **H**





INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

BISON: WHERE TO OBSERVE

One could argue that the most iconic views of bison in the wild are found in Yellowstone National Park: bison crossing the Madison River; bison coexisting with elk and wolves; bison grazing by Yellowstone Lake while whorls of steam vent from the ground around them. But for those interested in getting off the beaten path, the vast American Prairie Reserve in north-central Montana gives visitors a true sense of what it must have been like to encounter bison on the open plains prior to the influx of ranchers and farmers throughout the West. (It's not easy to reach the APR, but once you've arrived you can enjoy accommodations ranging from campgrounds to luxury yurts.)

Bison can also be viewed on Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake, in numerous other parks in the U.S. and Canada, and on tribal lands such as those of the Blackfeet, whose bison herd grazes against a spectacular, snow-draped mountainscape on the edge of Glacier National Park.

BISON: WHAT TO READ

There are many excellent books on bison, but one of the most engaging and interesting is *Buffalo for the Broken Heart* by Dan O'Brien. O'Brien is a writer and writing teacher by profession, but his narrative explaining how he turned a broken-down cattle ranch near the South Dakota Badlands into a thriving bison ranch with replenished biodiversity would be both gripping and educational even without the beautiful prose.

In *Re-Bisoning the West: Restoring an American Icon to the Landscape*, Kurt Repanshek tells the bison story from their Ice Age ancestors right up to the complicated landscape that determines their future today. Michael Punke's *Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, The Battle to Save the Buffalo and the Birth of the New West* describes the decimation of bison in the U.S., the movement to save them, and the birth of the modern conservation movement.