

Where do the buffalo roam?

In Yellowstone; ranchers see them as threat

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N.Y. Times News Service

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, WYO. | The bison here are sporting their heavy winter robes as they nuzzle their noses into the snow in hopes of snagging bits of grass to tide them over until spring. The national park's robust herd of nearly 4,000 bison virtually guarantees that most visitors to Yellowstone will see a clump of them every time they round a bend.

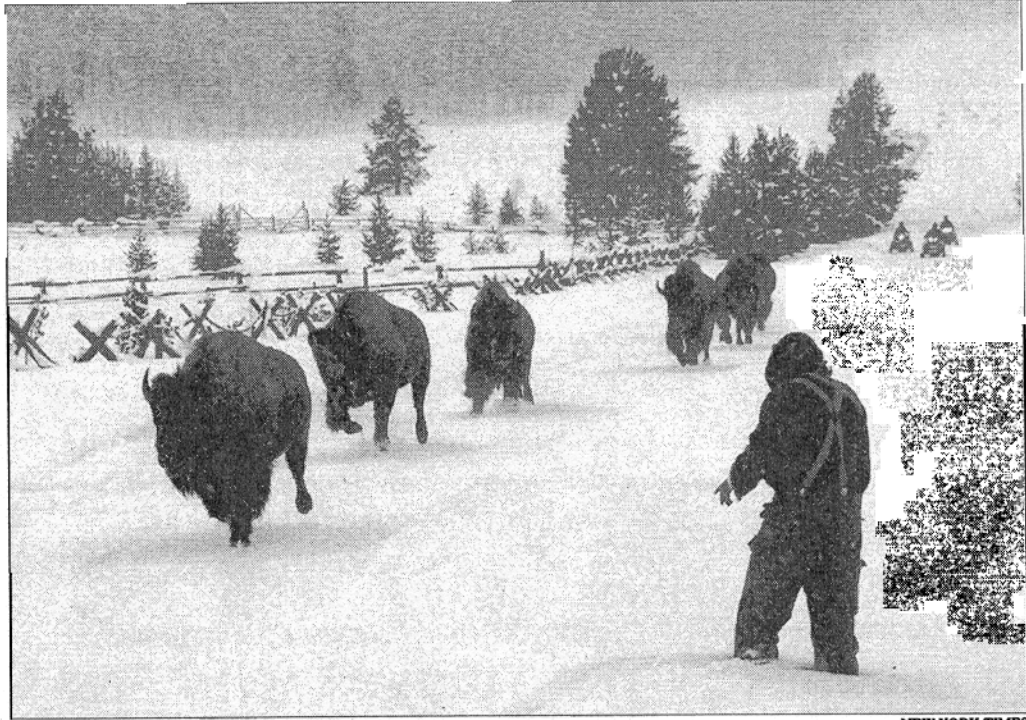
The bison have made a major recovery here after more than a century of slaughter that nearly drove them to extinction. But the bison may be a victim of their own success. The thriving herd — the only free-ranging bison in the country — is already 1,000 over what the park can bear, as estimated by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences.

And a tangle of competing interests here in one of the nation's most revered public settings means an uncertain fate for these iconic beasts.

Depending on the weather, the bison could face intense competition for food. So far, the winter here has been relatively mild. But heavy snows would probably drive the beasts to forage in lower elevations outside the park.

Once they leave Yellowstone, the bison can be shot, and not just by Montana livestock officials, as in the past. The National Park Service itself has agreed to help the state control stray bison by joining in the killing. (Last year, the state of Montana, with the park service, shot 202 bison; so far this year, they have shot four, but most of the killing comes in the early spring.)

At the same time, the cattle



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Bison that left Yellowstone National Park in search of food earlier this month are herded toward capture so they can be returned to the park. Yellowstone's bison population has rebounded far beyond what the park can sustain.

industry and federal agriculture officials are renewing their efforts to wipe out brucellosis, a disease carried by bison that does not harm them but can spread to cattle.

One curiosity of this situation is that no one has confirmed any cases in the wild of brucellosis transmission to cattle from bison. But there has been confirmed transmission by elk, as occurred last year in Idaho. But since elk hunting is a favorite sport in this region, elk are not singled out for methodical slaughter as bison are.

This leads some here to perceive a bias against bison that dates from the days of the Wild West, when the U.S. Army slaughtered thousands of bison as a way to undermine the Indians, who depended on them for food, clothing and spiritual sustenance.

Cows that get brucellosis can abort their calves, potentially decimating the livestock herds that graze on national forest lands outside the park.

The cattle industry is determined to eradicate the disease among Yellowstone bison by 2010.

Park officials oppose the plan, saying that it would mean slaughtering all the bison, a cure that would be worse than the disease.

A group of 52 Indian tribes has offered its own solution. The tribes have offered to take the park's excess bison and re-establish them on Indian reservations. But Montana officials object, saying the Indians would simply be spreading brucellosis.

The Indians say they would quarantine the animals for the required 18 months, through two birthing cycles, to make sure they are healthy. But no one is willing to let the animals go.

Watching every move is the Buffalo Field Campaign, a group that formed to protect the bison after a public outcry over a slaughter in the winter of 1996-97, when more than 1,000 buffalo were shot. Members of the campaign stake out the park boundaries from sunrise to sunset every day. If a bison leaves the park, they try to chase it back in.

As a result of these competing

anxiously watching the winter sky to see how bad the weather will be and if the bison will start leaving en masse.

"We're expecting a pretty large migration out of the park," said Todd O'Hair, the natural resources policy adviser to Gov. Judy Martz of Montana. "We have substantially more buffalo than Yellowstone National Park has the resources to carry. We could see a lot of buffalo come out of the park, and if that's the case, we'll have to take them."

The bison are a tiny fragment of the millions that flourished until the white settlement of the Great Plains. Their near extermination helped inspire the creation of Yellowstone, the nation's first national park, in 1872. But poaching and hunting continued, and by 1902, the Yellowstone herd had dwindled to 23 animals.

Over the last century, the size of the herd has fluctuated under different management plans that allowed for hunting and killings.

In the winter of 1996-97, in addition to the buffalo that were shot by the government or shipped to slaughter, many starved to death, putting the toll at more than 1,300.

After a series of lawsuits, the state and several federal agencies were forced into an uneasy truce and a management plan that has brought about the cur-

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