

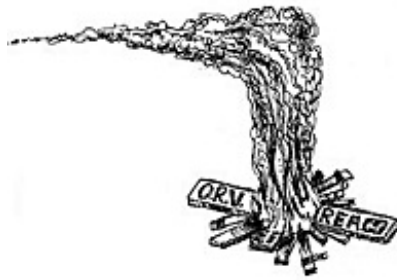


Plesitocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa

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Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Buffalo Are Gone

*Never seen a redder sunrise
Never seen a sunset so black
Men with guns along the railroad
See them coming down the track*

*They killed the Bison by the millions
They left them rottin' on the ground
The cries of death and destruction
Can't you hear that awful sound*

*The Buffalo are gone
The Buffalo are gone*
--words and music by Bart N. Koehler ©1986

My Crawford pioneer family came among the earliest settlers to southwestern Missouri, and other branches drove their heaped-up wagons in over the next twenty years. All the streams that came together to make my mother's branch of my family were farming on that edge between hickory forest and Tallgrass Prairie before the Civil War. Eye-stretching flocks of passenger pigeons yet darkened the skies to the east. And to the west, another thundering river of life flowed by in a leaping, roiled flood at times, then would go dry. The buffalo herds were here one year, there another. And they were many. At the end of the Civil War, there were some 50 to 60 million bison, 40 million pronghorn (wrongly called antelope), and over two million elk grazing on the Great Plains from Alberta to Chihuahua. In 1871, Wyatt Earp, famous lawman/less-famous outlaw, stood on a hill in Kansas:

I could see, twenty or thirty miles in each direction. For all that distance the range seemed literally packed with grazing buffaloes...the prairie appeared to be covered by a solid mass of huge, furry heads and humps, flowing along like a great muddy river...Clear to the horizon the herd was endless.[\[1\]](#)

But in 1869, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroad lines met in Promontory, Utah. With fast cross-continental shuttling began the great slaughter. Railroads hired hunters to feed the rail workers. One, Buffalo Bill Cody, boasted of having personally killed 4,280 buffalo in one year. The railroad hauled meat, hides, and bones east. With the butchery flowing out from the tracks, the tens of millions of bison on the plains split into two great herds.



Peter Matthiessen writes, "The southern herd was the first to go. Between 1872 and 1874, well over a million animals were shot yearly, and five years later a solitary survivor met its end at Buffalo Springs, Texas, on the cattle trail to Santa Fe."[\[2\]](#) Goodness only knows what that one, lone, last bison thought. In its mind, did it speak to the Texan, "I knew you would come."

The northern herd lasted a little longer only because the Northern Pacific Railroad did not give rail access until 1880. Then, wrote Matthiessen:

[D]efeated Indian tribes joined forces with the buffalo hunters. They worked toward their own destruction willingly and well, and in 1883 a mixed company of Crees and whites trailed the remnants of the northern herd to the Cannonball River of North Dakota. There, by cutting off access to water, the hunters accomplished the destruction of the entire herd.[\[3\]](#)

The buffalo was gone.

The great herds that had swept like a prairie fire from Chihuahua to Alberta had been slaughtered in a spree of gore and greed such as the world has never seen before or since. A few stragglers found shelter in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming and far up in northern Alberta. A handful of others hid away near Lost Park, Colorado. A few ranchers corralled one or two buffaloes or tiny herds.

1750. At least sixty million.
1869. Thirty to fifty million or more.
1884. A few hundred.
My god.



National Park

Teddy Roosevelt ranched in North Dakota in the mid-1880s. He wrote:

No sight is more common on the plains than that of a bleached buffalo skull; and their countless numbers attest the abundance of the animal at a time not so very long past. On those portions where the herds made their last stand, the carcasses, dried in the clear, high air, or the mouldering skeletons abound....A ranchman who at the same time had

© Dave Foreman, Bison, Theodore Roosevelt

made a journey of a thousand miles across northern Montana, along the Milk River, told me that, to use his own expression, during the whole distance, he was never out of sight of a dead buffalo, and never in sight of a live one.[\[4\]](#)

At the time that Roosevelt ranched in North Dakota, my grandfather's uncle, Billy

Crawford, rode through the southern plains from Missouri to Albuquerque, New Mexico.^[5] There were no living bison. Like Roosevelt's friend, he rode through a boneyard hundreds of miles long.

Our sad tale does not end here. For there are grim—even gruesome—deeds, little-known today, which make the buffalo slaughter even worse than you may have thought.

1872 is a hallmark year for conservation because it was the year Yellowstone National Park was set up by law. However, 1872 is also a dark year for conservation because that year a bill to shield bison from slaughter died, although both houses of Congress had passed it.^[6] The bill was written by the Territorial Delegate from Arizona, R. C. McCormick, who had watched the wasteful shooting of bison on train trips across the Great Plains. On the floor of the House, McCormick scorned and slammed the “reckless slaughter of that noble and valuable animal, the American bison or buffalo.” He quoted a *Harper's Weekly* editorial that called the slaughter “neither wise nor sportsman-like.” By showing letters from Army officers on the Great Plains that were against the killing and called for keeping bison, McCormick smacked down those who said that bison had to be wiped out to tame the Plains Indians.^[7]

Other Americans, many of them sportsmen, were also angry over what they had heard of the slaughter. National hunting magazines started up in the 1870s, and they jumped into the fight against market hunting and fishing and for habitat protection. Sport hunters and their magazines raised a din against the crazy slaughter of the buffalo. Nonetheless, President Ulysses S. Grant let the bill die without his signature. Of all the things Grant did in his life, killing the bison protection bill was the worst. There were tens of millions of bison still alive in 1872. Had Grant signed the bill, the greatest animal slaughter in United States history would have been stopped and millions of bison likely would still roam o'er much of the plains as wildlife. Grant's smothering of the bison bill shoved many sportsmen into becoming conservationists.

The other bad happening for conservation in 1872 was Yellowstone National Park. No, not its designation. But that it was only a paper Park like so many in the world today. Yellowstone had no rangers, no armed wardens. After the slaughter on the Plains, poachers moved into Yellowstone where 500 big woollies had found what was hoped to be shelter.



© Dave Foreman, lone bison bull in Yellowstone National Park

The first national conservation club was not the Sierra Club (founded in 1892), but the Boone and Crockett Club, founded in 1887 by Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and fellow hunters. George Grinnell and the Boone and Crockett Club led the campaign to keep Yellowstone's wildlife sheltered from poachers' hot lead.^[8] The poaching in Yellowstone had cut the bison herd down from about 500 to only 200 or so.^[9] The public outcry about their poaching in Yellowstone National Park (where hunting was banned, but not enforced) prodded Congress at long last in 1894 to do something. Congressman John F. Lacey of Iowa introduced a tough Yellowstone Protection bill. It passed both houses of Congress and was signed by President Grover Cleveland on May 7, 1894.^[10] Teeth were at last put into in the no-hunting law for National Parks. The cavalry was sent in to protect the buffalo and other wildlife from the lowlife scum who had come from the blood-soaked Great Plains.

At long, long last the last buffalo were given shelter and a hope for life.

But oh, so, so close did the American bison come to leading the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet into that dark, dark night with no dawn.

--Dave Foreman

Staring wistfully at the little herd of bison on Sandia Pueblo on the north edge of Albuquerque



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Adapted from my forthcoming book *Conservation vs. Conservation*

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- [1] David Day, *Vanished Species* (Gallery Books, NY, 1989), 183-184.
[2] Peter Matthiessen, *Wildlife In America* (Viking, New York, 1987), 148-149.
[3] Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 148-149.
[4] Matthiessen, *Wildlife in America*, 150-152.
[5] Billy Crawford, then, would be my great-granduncle. He found his end a handful of years later when, as an Albuquerque city detective, he was gunned down by a sheep rustler.
[6] 1872 was also the year the Mining Act became law. This way-out-of-date bit of Manifest Destiny still runs mineral giveaways on the public lands. Of all taking raw goods from the public lands, mining is the most mired in nineteenth-century, pre-public land thinking.
[7] "Speech of Hon. R. C. McCormick," *Appendix to The Congressional Globe*, 42nd Congress, 2nd Session, April 5, 1872. I thank Robert Brulle at George Mason University for sending me a copy of McCormick's speech. The word *noble* was widely spoken and written in the nineteenth century to show that something was very good, indeed. It now hits me that perhaps the adjective *noble* somewhat held a meaning of something good-in-itself. Hint: digging into this would be a darn good thesis or dissertation topic.
[8] Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1997), 25.
[9] Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, *The Park Buffalo: Being an Account of the Role of Canada's National Parks in the Preservation of the North American Bison* (Calgary-Banff Chapter National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada, 1979), 16. I thank Canadian conservationist Harvey Locke for sending me a copy of Ogilvie's booklet.
[10] David A. Dary, *The Buffalo Book* (Avon Books, New York, 1974), 133.
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