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BUFFALO IN YELLOWSTONE PARK

by
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Aside from the fact that buffaloes (Bison bison bison) were at least moderately numerous in the region embraced by Yellowstone when this became our first national park in 1872, we know little of the early history of those animals in this region. This is not strange when we remember that there were still millions of buffaloes roaming at large in their native haunts. The supply as yet seemed inexhaustible. The early explorers and visitors were attracted here by the expressions of nature in the hot springs, geysers, and other natural wonders. It was natural that only their impressions and interpretation of the unique were written. Upon verification by the Geological Survey that such geologic phenomena really existed here, this area was set aside as a national park in order that it might be preserved in its natural state by the government for the "benefit and enjoyment" of all the people, forever. The thought of making Yellowstone a game preserve was incidental to the main issue.

From the time of discovery until 1886 hunting was deemed essential to the success of any expedition to this remote area. Market hunters were well established in the northern section of the park as early as 1873. The first superintendent, N. P. Langford, recommended that hunting be restricted to the needs of residents of the park and its visitors, but for want of any salary he was prevented from residing here and seriously checking these activities during his five year term.

In the pioneering venture of creating a

national park, Congress overlooked the item of providing money for administration and protection; consequently for a period of five years no government funds were available and hunters had things pretty much their own way in Yellowstone. When money was first appropriated in 1877, the beginning of the end was in sight for the buffalo. At this time Superintendent Norris stated that thousands of hides had been taken out and that it was the practice of the hunters to poison the carcasses which were left as bait for wolf and wolverine. He predicted correctly that within the decade buffaloes would become extinct or exceedingly rare outside of this government area. It was estimated that there were three or four hundred head of the "curly, nearly black bison" (1) left in the park. They were described by Norris as being "smaller, of lighter color and with horns smaller and less spreading than those of the bison that formerly inhabited Colorado." (1). Figgins described the mountain buffalo (*Bison bison haningtoni*) as being much lighter in color, "notably in the head, neck, and forelimbs" (2) than the plains buffalo (*Bison bison bison*). Grinnell stated that the "Mountain Buffalo" (3) was abundant in Yellowstone Park in 1875 and called attention to the terrible destruction of these animals for their hides alone. These mountain buffalo were considered to be more fleet and intelligent than the plains animals. Their hides were also more valuable as they were darker, finer, and more curly.

In 1880 Mr. Norris estimated 600 buffaloes for the park, 300 of which were only summer residents and having their winter range to the west in Idaho. The other animals ranged in the eastern and northeastern section of the park. During the year a game keeper was employed to assist Mr. Norris in protecting the buffalo and other animals. By Superintendent's Order the buffalo was protected in 1879. Montana also provided a protection law that year.



From 1882 to 1885 we can learn nothing of the status of the buffalo in Yellowstone. Reports of slaughter moved Congress to replace civilian employees with

Cavalry troops of the army, the commanding officers acting as superintendents for a period of 30 years when the National Park Service of today was created. Protective work

was ineffectual as no suitable court or laws were provided for offenders. The work of the soldiers was augmented by civilian scouts acting in the nature of game wardens.

In 1886 all hunting in Yellowstone was prohibited by law but no court was provided to try cases, the only punishment being arrest and expulsion from the park and confiscation of outfit. This proved to be an excellent gamble for poachers with cheap outfits when a good head was worth \$400.

Captain Harris estimated 100 buffalo in 1837. The following year he dispatched a patrol on snowshoes to the winter range with the idea of finding out how many buffaloes were left. This patrol encountered only three head. A later patrol in March succeeded in finding signs of about 100 animals that had wintered in the vicinity of Mary Mountain. During the following spring several buffaloes were seen along the Firehole River whose range was thought to extend across the Madison Plateau to the southwest corner. Thee total estimate was then raised to 200 head.

Captain Boutelle became superintendent in 1890. He observed a scarcity of calves and thought cougars and lions were preying upon them. Sensing the perilous plight of the buffalo, appeals were sent to the governors of the states of Wyoming and Idaho for protection of animals that might drift from the park into these states. Wyoming enacted a good protection law the same year but Idaho ignored the request and continued to harbor the most notorious set of poachers known, in the vicinity of Henrys Lake near the western border of the park.

From 1891 to 1897 Captain George S. Anderson served as military superintendent. He noted the activities of the merciless freebooters of Henrys Lake and learned of several heads being marketed in surrounding towns at from four to five hundred dollars. Several arrests were made in this vicinity, but no convictions were secured. During the winter of 1894 a notorious poacher from Cooke, Montana was arrested in Hayden Valley with six hides in possession. Scout Burgess and Sergeant Troike apprehended him in the act of stalking a small band of buffaloes. His final conviction was the first under the new protection law of 1894. A court was established that year in the park with John W. Meldrum as first United States Commissioner to try cases and assess penalties.

From 1891 to 1894 Captain Anderson estimated there were 400 buffalo left in the park when suddenly the estimate dropped to 200. Seventy

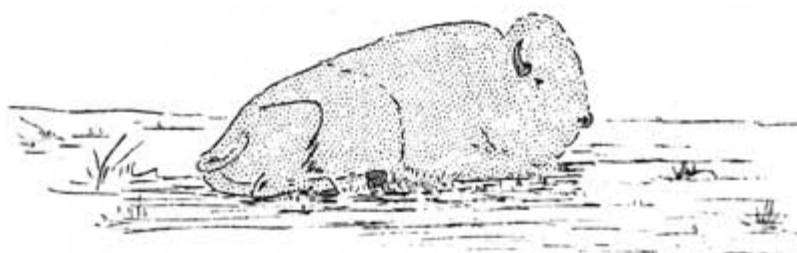
five were counted on the west side and reports of many more in 1891. Evidently, the Idaho poachers were quite successful, for in the year 1896 it was estimated there were only 25 or 30 head left in the entire park, and doubts were expressed that they could be saved. Attempts were made to capture a few of them by providing hay in a corral in Hayden Valley but with no success. Hay was cut and stacked in Pelican Valley in hopes the buffalo would find it. Winter snows covered it so deeply, however, that even the scouts could not locate it. Special money was made available by the War Department in a final effort to save the buffalo from complete extermination. Experienced hunters and other mountain men were employed to assist the scouts and soldiers but their efforts were of no avail as the damage was nearly complete. Only the carcasses were left as evidence of the fact that buffalo had inhabited the southwestern and western sections of the park. Poachers had reduced the herd to an estimated 22 head by 1902.

With buffalo so near to extinction, it was decided to import an entirely new herd, and gradually release some of these animals, thus introducing new blood into the wild herd. Accordingly, 18 cows were secured from the Pablo-Allard herd in Montana and delivered by Howard Eaton. At the same time, 3 bulls were secured from the Goodnight herd in Texas by C. J. (Buffalo) Jones who was employed as game warden in charge of buffalo. These animals were kept in a large enclosed pasture one mile south of Mammoth until 1907 at which time the herd had grown in number to 61 head. Three calves were captured from the wild herd and raised by domestic cows. The pasture proved insufficient to meet the needs of the ever-increasing herd so a new site was selected on the present location of the Buffalo Ranch in Lamar Valley at the mouth of Rose Creek. Here a portion of the valley bottom was fenced off to protect the wild grasses which were harvested in the fall for winter feed. The north slopes of the valley including about 600 acres were fenced for summer pasture land. Comfortable living quarters were provided for the buffalo keeper at the present site.

As early as 1908 it was felt that there were too many bulls in the herd. They were constantly fighting and endangering the lives of the calves. In order to relieve the condition, fourteen bulls were separated from the herd and driven to Mammoth as the first show herd. Late in the fall they were returned to the main herd. The practice of maintaining a show herd at Mammoth continued until 1935 when a more suitable location on Antelope Creek was selected. Hundreds of

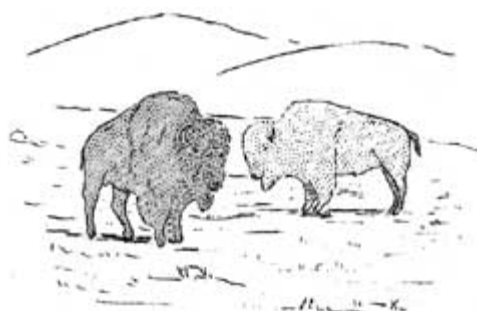
thousands of visitors have thus been benefitted; as buffalo could rarely be seen by them on the inaccessible summer range.

The Lamar herd had grown until in 1910 it numbered 121 head, 61 males and 60 females. The original summer pasture proved inadequate so the herd was turned out each morning to graze. At first they were herded carefully and driven into the enclosure every two hours in order to accustom them to being handled. Later they were herded during the daytime and returned to the pasture at night. This practice of day herding was continued until 1915 when it was thought to be unnecessary. Since that time, the herd has gradually reverted to a wild state until today the Yellowstone buffalo are perhaps fully as wild as the plains buffalo of old.



In December 1911, just after the buffaloes were taken from the range where they had been day herded during the summer, 22 of the younger animals (15% of the herd) died. Blackleg was at first suspected and fear of losing the entire herd prompted quick action. The disease was found to be Hemorrhagic septicemia, a blood disease for which the entire herd was vaccinated in June of that year. There was a recurrence of the disease in 1919 when 26 of the buffaloes died in spite of previous vaccinations in 1917 and 1918. A third attack of the disease threatened the herd of 578 in 1922. Fifty two of the animals died before serum could be secured from the Bureau of Animal Industry. The new serum of 1922 proved to be 100% effective in immunizing buffalo against the disease and from that time until the present a fresh supply has been available at the Buffalo Ranch ready for instant use.

In the meantime, the original wild animals were not molested by poachers. They ranged widely over the park country east of Yellowstone Lake and River, so wild that they were seldom seen even by the scouts or later by



the rangers, except when special patrols were made. Seventy two head were counted in 1916 and 67 in 1917. Since that time there has been a gradual overlapping of the ranges of the two herds until at the present time they have thoroughly intermingled. There is still a tendency for the animals to winter in distinct herds. The main herd at the Buffalo Ranch is fed hay during the hardest part of the winter. Another group varying in number to as many as 300 animals, winters in the valleys east of Yellowstone Lake without artificial feed. During the past two two small herds, numbering 36 and 35 were separated from the main herd and turned loose in Hayden Valley and the Lower Geyser Basin, respectively, in order to reduce the main herd and at the same time establish the buffalo on his former range. These animals seem to be doing well in their new locations. Twenty eight were counted in Hayden Valley in September while thirty were seen in January in the Lower Geyser Basin.

The early problem of surplus bulls in the herd was partially met by establishing a show herd at Mammoth, through live shipments, to public parks and zoos and to private estates for exhibition purposes. As early as 1904, attempts were made to rejuvenate the wild herd with new blood by liberating one of the new bulls in Pelican Valley. This venture was a failure as the bull was found dead near Thumb station the following spring. Subsequent attempts were made to reduce the number of bulls by driving them from the Buffalo Ranch anticipating that they would join the wild herd, but fortunately for the wild herd they always returned to the Ranch. Finally, permission to slaughter and sell the meat of surplus buffaloes was granted by Congress to park officials so in the event that live shipments do not balance the herd against feed and available range, there is always a way provided for a sound management program. It has been established that facilities in Yellowstone are adequate for approximately 1000 buffaloes and for the best interests of the park as a whole this figure has been adhered to rather closely during the past few years. In 1918, 66% (44 head) of the male calves of 1917 and 1918 were castrated during the vaccination of the herd for Hemorrhagic septicemia. These steers and others following were slaughtered at the Buffalo Ranch, the meat in later years having been donated to relief organizations and Indian agencies in the states bordering the park. Total live shipments to zoos and reservations from the park number 1351 to date.

From the small herd of eighteen cows and three bulls established in Yellowstone in

1902 plus the remnant of the original herd which was assimilated in later years, the present herds total approximately 1000 head, while a total of 2182 surplus animals have been disposed of. Many fine herds have been establish throughout the country from the Yellowstone surplus.

Under the sound agement program of late years, the future of the buffalo in the park has never been brighter.

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