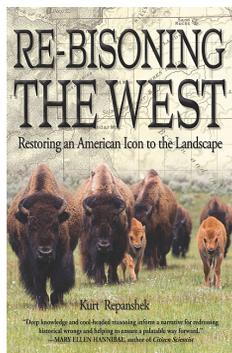


Re-Bisoning the West: Restoring an American Icon to the Landscape

By Kurt Repanshek. 2019. Torrey House Press. 248 pages, 25.50 CAN, 18.95 USD, Paperback.

I have always had an interest in American Bison (*Bison bison*) and feature them prominently in two of my books, *My Yellowstone Experience* (Eastern Coyote Research/White Cottage Publishing, 2013) and *The Trip of a Lifetime* (www.easterncoyoteresearch.com, forthcoming), so it was refreshing to find a person who shares my fascination with these pre-historic looking, shaggy-furred, woolly creatures. Bison have had more influence on man than all other Plains animals combined (p. 34), providing food, shelter, and warmth for many human cultures (pp. 9, 31). In this book, author Kurt Repanshek captures the past, present, and future of bison in North America. The author was well versed to tell this story because he is a former Associated Press reporter and is currently editor-in-chief of National Parks Traveler, the only editorially independent media organization that covers national parks and protected areas on a daily basis. This scholarly work weaves personal experiences of him visiting areas where bison currently live, along with combining science and history, into a very readable and detailed product containing 18 pages of endnotes and a nine-page bibliography.

Bison populations approached an estimated 60 million individuals historically (p. 56). While a great map on the introductory pages shows bison originally living across the country all the way to the eastern states, and from Canada to Mexico, it clearly is a species most closely associated with the Great Plains, a topographic tabletop that is 500 miles (805 km) east to west and 2000 miles (3200 km) north to south (p. 17). In the chapter *The Great Slaughter* we learn how the buffalo, as bison are often called in North America, population dipped down to ~100 wild bison before those were captured and brought into captivity (p. 153). Repanshek then explained in deep detail how just a half dozen forward thinking visionaries, including Teddy Roosevelt, saved the species from a “veritable tragedy of the animal world” (p. 91). They were kept in six herds, including one in New Hampshire (p. 147), and bred (p. 154). Because those bison came from diverse bloodlines and herds (p. 148), the species has a surprising amount of genetic diversity to this day (p. 129). In addition to these herds, a small population of about two dozen survived in Yellowstone National Park (pp. 71, 134). It is diffi-



cult to imagine seeing herds of bison so massive that they stopped river traffic when crossing streams, and even derailed trains that tried to roll through a herd on the Plains (p. 58). It is even more remarkable and difficult to comprehend that in just a couple of decades they were nearly exterminated (pp. 62–71) and had to be taken out of the wild to be saved. In the 1870s, people were shooting them from trains for fun, and toward the end of the Great Slaughter in the 1880s, they were getting killed in such astounding numbers that only their coats (pp. 70–71), or even their tongues (a delicacy; p. 62) were kept, with the body left to rot. The colossal ignorance and greed by European Americans almost resulted in their disappearance.

The lives of Native Americans and bison were intertwined, with different tribes having various names for North America’s largest mammal. Many origin stories for Plains peoples have to do with buffalo and natural features, such as the opening to the cave system at Wind Cave National Park (pp. 34–35). Because native peoples viewed bison with honour and dignity (p. 35), the period between 1846 and 1890 was a cultural catastrophe when bison were slaughtered to near extinction (p. 37). As white settlements grew, nomadic peoples were doomed with the conquerors dictating to the conquered where and how to live (pp. 38, 61). That economic blow continues today, more than a century after the Great Slaughter (p. 39), with many of those tribes still living in poverty.

Unfortunately, the racism (p. 60) and prejudice (p. 138) that fueled the bison’s downfall is alive and well and has slowed bison recovery. Montana’s position of not allowing bison to be quarantined or roam outside of Yellowstone National Park is perhaps the most blockheaded and illogical of all (p. 43). I have previously documented the hypocritical stance of rural states blocking level-headed strategies for allowing bison more room to roam on federal land that all taxpayers pay for (Way 2013), so I was glad that the author covered this at length, repeatedly touching on the political, prejudiced actions taken against Native Americans. Agencies use diseases such as brucellosis as a scapegoat for not wanting bison to be treated as wildlife yet leave other species, most notably Elk, alone even though they have a higher frequency of the disease (p. 50). This has led to modern day slaughters of upward of 1000 bison during particular harsh winters. Repanshek eloquently describes how the boundaries of parks don’t take into consideration the migratory nature of wildlife like bison (p. 120), which hamstring the National Park Service to local politics

and political boundaries. Fortunately, the pressure is increasing on Montana to compromise for the good of the bison (p. 52).

There are currently about a half million bison residing in North America with these animals divided into commercial and conservation herds (pp. 13, 129). Most commercial herds are raised more or less like livestock for meat and hides, although some can live relatively similar to animals in more wild settings. For example, Ted Turner owns 51 000 head of bison on his combined properties (p. 13) and a few of them are larger than some of the US's national parks that contain bison. The second half of *Re-Bisoning the West* focusses on modern-day conservation herds and the potential to establish bison in additional areas. These are the bison living in national parks like Yellowstone, Badlands, Wind Cave, and Grand Teton, as well as in state parks, land preserves, national wildlife refuges, and, increasingly, on Native American reservations. However, without room to roam, conservation herds are limited and are often capped at a certain number based on how many animals the land can support (p. 14). Only about 4%, or 20 000 bison, exist as conservation herds living at least a semi-wild existence within those reserves. The author makes convincing arguments to restore the wild, ecological function of bison on additional landscapes as it is a keystone animal influencing the survival of other species (pp. 15–16). Critical to that is to increase existing herds and establish populations in new areas (p. 199), with the goal of increasing bison numbers to over one million (p. 13). We owe it to bison as they “deserve the opportunity to regain a more solid footing, to leave some wallows on the open plains” (p. 200).

The book concludes with a couple of encouraging chapters detailing how some states like Utah and Indian reservations, such as the Wind River, Fort Peck, Blackfeet, are establishing conservation herds on their lands (pp. 156, 164, 178). Repanshek also describes how current federal lands, like national grasslands, can house bison. Some surround national parks (e.g., Buffalo Gap enveloping Badlands) and could be used to expand the area that bison are able to roam. The managers of American Prairie Reserve in eastern Montana have a vision of linking protected land to create a 3.5 million-acre (1 416 400 ha) reserve that might accommodate up to 10 000 bison. These bison are in addition to the 19 herds managed on Interior

Department lands by the National Park Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and United States Fish and Wildlife Service (p. 156). The author states that bison populations need to be large (ideally over 1000; p. 159) and connected to maintain genetic diversity and ecological functioning. To succeed, bison need to be given room to roam and not be treated like livestock (pp. 167–168, 195) as they are the key missing element of the Plains ecosystem (p. 171). Repanshek argues that because bison are the US's national mammal, they should be given more respect with a paradigm shift away from viewing them as livestock (p. 195). To be specific, the author details 13 additional locations where bison could live, including Great Sand Dunes National Park and Agate Fossil Beds (p. 173), and notes that Wyoming, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma have vast spaces held in public domain that could have bison (p. 175).

I really enjoyed this book and highly recommend it for anyone interested in wildlife conservation, wildlife restoration, the western United States, environmental justice, and the US's national parks. It is well written yet contains repetitive information at times, such as discussing population numbers from certain places (e.g., pp. 71, 134, 167, 189) and historic events like Yellowstone's enabling legislation (pp. 71, 130). But these did not necessarily distract from the read because when the author discussed the history of bison in the first half of the book, he also detailed recovery efforts now happening in many of those locations. He eventually circled back to those locales in more detail, which made the book more engaging even if containing a non-linear flow. My only legitimate complaint was that there was no index. I took 1.5 pages of notes and still at times had to search through highlighted passages to find information, such as specific places, which was often challenging because of information that was repeated in multiple sections.

Literature Cited

Way, J.G. 2013. [Book Review] In the Presence of Buffalo: Working to Stop the Yellowstone Slaughter. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 127: 366–367. <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v127i4.1498>

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