

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

ZOOLOGY

In The Presence of Buffalo: Working to Stop the Yellowstone Slaughter

By Daniel Brister. 2013. WestWinds Press, P.O. Box 56118, Portland, OR, USA, 97296-0306. 115 pages, 16.99 USD, Paper.

As I read author Daniel Brister's book, *In the Presence of Buffalo*, I got chills from the visceral emotion it produced and the similarities that this book shares with some of my own experiences with wildlife research and protection. Like the author, I am from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and am more awed by the wide-open spaces and mountains of the west than I am from the beauty of the coastal, flat terrain of the east coast. Although I have studied carnivores (mainly eastern coyotes or coywolves as I call them) for most of my professional life, bison have always been one of my favorite animals, and I regularly travel to the park to observe and film them. In fact, in my book *My Yellowstone Experience* I devote an entire section to bison, and weave bison throughout the storyline. I briefly mention the absurdity of bison being kept in the invisible (to animals) boundaries of Yellowstone National Park (YNP) because of a disease, brucellosis, which they have *never* transmitted to cattle (yet the disease originated from non-native European livestock). But to gain a true understanding of the discrimination and mindless hate that bison have and continue to receive, one must read *In the Presence of Buffalo*.

If *In the Presence of Buffalo* doesn't anger and inspire you to take action for one of North America's most magnificent animals, then I don't know what will. Brister has dedicated the last 15 years of his life to the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC, www.BuffaloField-Campaign.org) to protect the bison, or buffalo as he prefers to call them, that live in and hopefully eventually around YNP. As Brister himself states, very few of the 2.5 million people who visit YNP and those who are awed by America's only continuously wild and genetically pure bison herd are aware that state (mainly the Montana Dept. of Livestock [DOL]) and federal agencies (including YNP) have engaged in the wanton slaughter of 3,500 of these magnificent animals in the past decade, solely because they wandered out of the delineated confines of YNP. In fact, more buffalo have been killed in the past decade than since the 1870s when they were nearly wiped off the planet, except for a small herd that hid within the protected confines of YNP, and which all of the bison currently living in the

park are descendants of. If you thought people like Buffalo Bill Cody, who claims to have killed 4,280 bison in a year and a half, were a thing of the past, then think again. Brister documents modern day agents who get tremendous joy and satisfaction of killing these great beasts. Yet the DOL refuses to discuss the motives behind the bison slaughter, especially considering that there is no evidence of wild, free-roaming buffalo spreading brucellosis to cattle. Considering that other animals, most notably elk, also carry brucellosis, Brister reveals that the true cause of the continued bison slaughter is bison competing for cattle for limited grass in country that is a poor habitat for cows.

In the Presence of Buffalo was written to document government misuse, see that the buffalo are honoured and respected, and stop the unnecessary slaughter. This short but inspiring narrative weaves personal reflections and stories of the present-day buffalo massacre with information gathered through historical, cultural, and scientific research. We see how Brister and other members of the BFC get arrested for standing up for buffalo on federally owned lands, while government agencies are seemingly immune to illegal activities like trespassing and disturbing protected species. The book has five chapters (92 pages) and explores the relationship between human beings and bison. Some of the accounts of government corruption, waste, and abuse will frustrate and no doubt motivate you to take action of your own. Most impressive are the 18 pages of notes and sources at the end of the book that cite and properly document this mistreatment, effectively making it fact, not opinion, that the American taxpayer has been cheated and ripped off by rogue government agencies, most notably the DOL. I learned so much from this book I took a page and half of notes, on a sheet of paper that I use as a bookmark, which is more than I normally write down for longer manuscripts.

Brister makes a strong case that the cattle industry believes they have entitlement to publically owned lands, and that they view the wild buffalo as unnecessary competition for their sacred cows. The hypocrisy of the cattle baron is very apparent as they want the government to not interfere with their lives yet they

are essentially the recipients of four forms of welfare through taxpayer-funded subsidies including predator control, drought and fire relief, fencing, and well below-cost grazing allotments on public land. In fact, taxpayers pay ten times as much (\$200 vs. \$20 Million) to support the grazing program around YNP than ranchers do through grazing fees. Worse, it takes 73 times the land to raise a cow in the Rocky Mountains surrounding YNP than it does in the more fertile Midwest. The question then remains, why are we allowing such a non-profitable and non-productive enterprise to occur on our federal lands surrounding the world famous YNP? After all, a publicly owned resource (bison) is being killed at taxpayer expense mostly on public land, all for a small special interest group.

Chapters three and four can be hard to stomach as the reader is taken into what I perceive as a dark time in our nation's history. In the chapter *Inseparable Destiny*, we learn of the disgusting discrimination and disrespect that Native Americans have received up to present times. We learn of the US government repeatedly breaking treaties and slaughtering Indians, as well as killing bison as a deliberate attempt to dis-empower native peoples. Modern day DOL agents are pictured laughing at an elder Lakota for praying over the bodies of slain buffalo. We also see the bison slaughter as a clash of cultural values. For Euro-Americans human comfort comes before animal survival, whereas Native Americans see all animals as equal to people.

In the chapter *Cattle and Control*, we see even more of the DOL's mistreatment of bison. Brister often gets the urge to run out and interfere with the DOL's hazing operations but realizes that his work requires control. If he acts out of spite or insult, he realizes DOL agents will only make it harder on the buffalo and it might erode their efforts to gain public support. In this section, Brister also goes back and discusses historical efforts to eliminate bison and adds that the fur trade, where millions of furs were shipped to the east coast via railroad, helped contribute to the near eradication of bison. He somberly notes that millions of buffalo were gunned down for the skin on their backs, their carcasses discarded and left to rot where they'd fallen. The 1870s was the bloodiest decade for buffalo, and it is also when there was an exponential rise in the number of cattle on the Great Plains.

Brister depicts graphic accounts of the cattle barons claiming public lands as their own and forcefully evicting or even killing homesteaders who tried to claim land. In fact, organized attempts by stock grower associations had militias go assassinate people that stood in their way, in order to maintain power and control. These thugs became so powerful that many of these murderers went on to become elected officials. In fact, the live-stock industry's use of intimidation and slaughter to eliminate bison and other competitors (including people) has continued to the present day, most notably with

their war on predators including wolves and coyotes. Amazingly, some in the modern day inter-mountain west still use threat and intimidation to get their way, even though much of what they do is being subsidized by the taxpayer on our public lands. Brister comments that he has never seen such horrendous human behavior than the way that the DOL treats such a beautiful, spiritual being, as the bison. Perhaps worse, even YNP – charged with preserving natural resources unimpaired for future generations – is now more likely to arrest citizens for trying to protect buffalo than to stop the unnecessary actions of the DOL.

In my own work to better protect carnivores, I have been told, "To care – as we do – is to be angry and discouraged and outraged by the unending attempts to water down any victory for wildlife." In this vein, I can't imagine what Dan and the rest of the BFC feel when they see our tax-payer's dollars being not only wasted, but literally abused as bison are chased, harassed, and persecuted all for leaving the confines of YNP. Most of the time they are harassed for being on public land that all Americans own. I can't help but think of the hypocrisy of this occurring in supposedly fiscally conservative "red states" all to benefit a small minority of people.

So, the question you might be thinking is, what can be done, or what can I do to stop this madness? Well, for starters, I haven't purchased beef for years now and in addition to ethical and environment issues, the way that bison are treated is a major reason for me — even though only a fraction of cattle that feed the nation come from the states surrounding YNP. Second, I strongly advise all readers to contribute to the BFC, or at the very least get on their email list. They send out important action alerts where you can make your voice heard and comment to decision makers to help reign in the DOL and provide bison with the respect and treatment that they should be granted as native wildlife, just like all other wild animals are afforded. It is really easy to send an email to elected officials – make your voice heard! I know one of the first things that I am going to do is send this review to politicians who should do the right thing by reading this book, and then stopping the ongoing hatred and mistreatment that bison receive. One can start by removing the DOL from having authority over bison management and allowing state and federal wildlife agencies to take over, and by providing protections to bison until ecologically viable populations are established in more areas where they are native. Lastly, I believe that every United States legislator should be given a copy of *In the Presence of Buffalo*, so they can vote with their minds and hearts, and not politics, to better protect America's last truly wild buffalo.

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