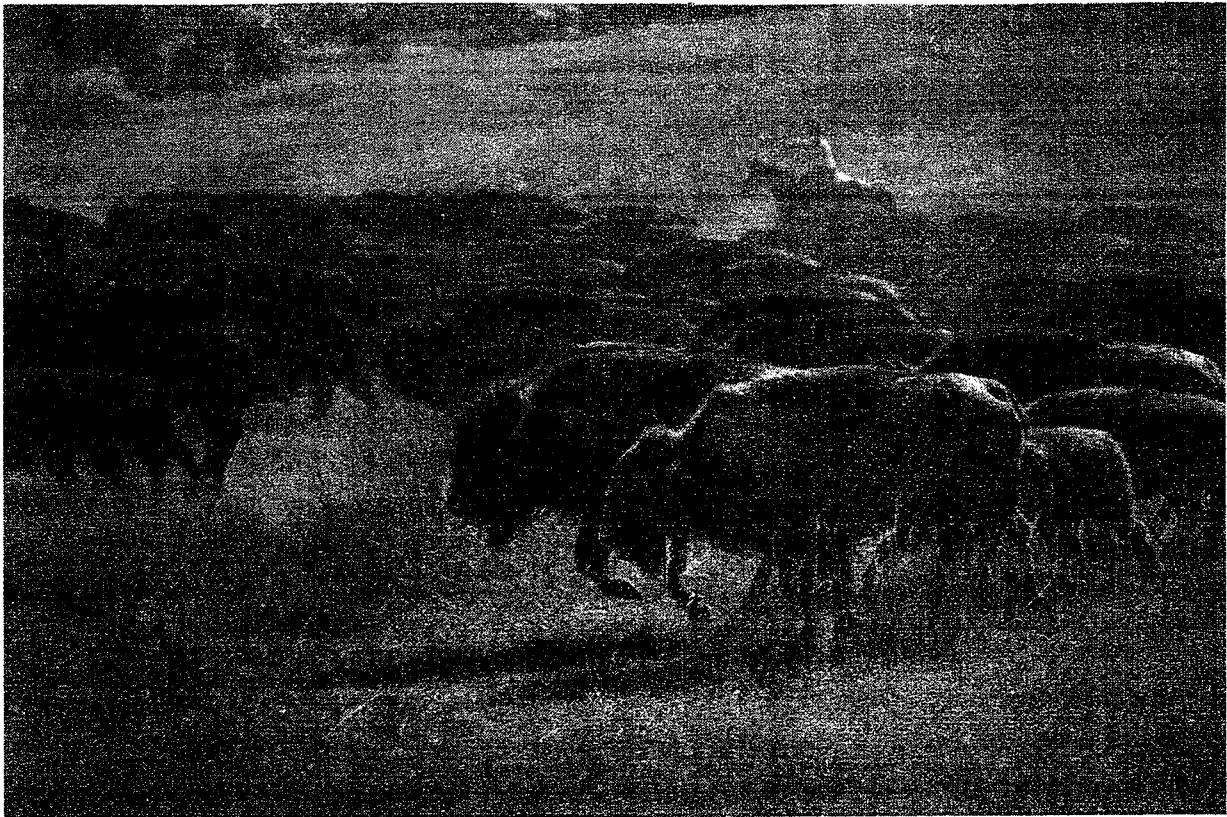


South Dakota's Annual Buffalo Roundup Grows Into An Epic Event



CREDIT: TRAVEL SOUTH DAKOTA/PHOTOGRAPHER BYRON BANASIAK

It's a well-known tale by now of how millions upon millions of the greatest land mammal in our hemisphere roamed for millennia over the Canadian Prairies and U.S. Plains states and beyond, until the *Bison bison* had been slaughtered for hides and sport and to further decimate the Lakota and other Indian populations whose lives revolved around the hunt. Thankfully, from a low of around a thousand by the late 19th century, the majestic ungulates were brought back from the brink of imminent extinction to number half a million today.

On a crispy late-September morning under blue skies, the grassy hills of Custer State Park are surely the last place you'd ever expect to find thousands of fans screaming and hollering for their favorite team, whether members be of the bipedal or four-legged sort. With dozens of cowboys and cowgirls herding some 1,400-1,500 grunting and bellowing bison through the verdant terrain and into corrals, South Dakota's annual Buffalo Roundup has become a huge and thrilling spectator event.

Following vaccinations and checkups, several hundred individuals will be selected from the Roundup to be sold at auction this month in order to keep the herd at a manageable grazing size, and to help build new herds elsewhere.



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Normally, buffalo roam the whole 71,000-acres of Custer State Park. But just before Roundup, they are squeezed into a 640-acre zone. Plenty of fans—and there was a record 22,590 of them this year—sleep in their car the night before or begin arriving at 4 a.m. to grab a spot in either the northern or southern viewing areas; all that, even though the show doesn't kick off until 9:30 a.m. and lasts two hours at most.

Such is its popularity of the Roundup that for their live stream South Dakota Public Broadcasting sets up half a dozen cameras in various hilly sectors, like a TV crew prepared to catch every angle of NFL action. You can watch the delightful play-by-play of their anchors sharing anecdotal tidbits on the SDPB website.

The whole morning is actually quite choreographed—that is, to the extent that one can predict wild animals. In addition to rangers, there are more than a hundred volunteers ensuring a smooth event. Some sixty riders, who had to apply to be selected, include regulars and newcomers, each with their own look and style. You'll see plenty of glorious mustaches and facial hair and more than a few cowgirl pink touches to some chaps. And not to mention some gorgeous horses.

And then the show begins. One mass of buffalo that looks like so many dark ants way up on a southern rise dotted with ponderosa pine needs to be coaxed down.

Riders are divided into red and white teams who fully communicate over the air, just as sports coaching staffs do in the big game. But first, a few veteran administrators give the riders "pre-game" reminders at the corral about making sure that your cinch is tight, that you watch out when a buffalo tail goes up, and so on. After all, buffalo are not the lumbering animals you might expect, but, fleet of hoof, can sprint 35 miles an hour and are able to leap six feet high.

Another group will stream through the steep red rock cliffs of Movie Draw, a sort of mini-canyon where a number of westerns were filmed.

And like in every cowboy movie you've ever seen, riders under their neighing horses—including a few riding in a pageantry of U.S. and state flags—start whistling and whooping and cracking their whips. And in no time, buffalo hoofs are thundering, and the dust is flying.

Eventually, the herds are, well, herded through Cactus Flats. Before they all get tracked and routed back to the main group, a few straggler bison elicit cheers from the rooting spectators. Eventually buffalo and riders make their way through patches of cottonwoods and aspens that are turning yellow in early fall. Once they traverse Lame Johnny Creek and Lame Johnny Road (the name belonged to that of a Dakota horse thief and stage robber who was hanged by vigilantes), some buffalo pause to start grazing again and others wallow in prairie dog towns before the final push into the corrals.

Over the Roundup and especially in the corral, the occasional cinnamon calf is easy to spot, so named for the color of their hide. And such is the popularity of them that the first cinnamon born in spring will make the Rapid City news.

After the main event, fans can join in on a brisket sandwich lunch under tents. The park's burros wandering around are a hit, and will be looking for a snack from you too.

Just across from the corrals, a brand new and handsome \$5 million Bison Center in the shape of a barn has fine displays on everything you need to know about our official national mammal. And PS, don't get hung up on the difference between bison and buffalo—just say which you prefer and everyone gets it.

Credit for the genesis of the Custer State Park herd goes to the family of Quebec-born fur trader and cattleman Frederick Dupruis (or, Dupree) and his Minneconjou Lakota wife Good Elk Woman who in the early 1880s started with five calves that they had saved from a Montana hunt, and to Scottish-born rancher James "Scotty" Philip and his Lakota wife Sally who some years later acquired that growing herd and expanded it to some thousand. Descendants of that herd are found not only in Custer State Park but throughout the U.S.

And now Ken Burns is back to tell the story of many of those who saved the species in his two-part, four-hour *The American Buffalo* that premiered October 16 on PBS.

While South Dakota's Buffalo Roundup is a thrilling show, above all, it's an important range management process. Once you witness up close the majesty of the herd in Custer State Park, you'll appreciate that the next step in their and our well-being is the hope of bringing free-range bison somewhat back to their natural primary role as ecological boons to the landscape.

You don't have to time your Custer State Park visit exactly to the Roundup either in order to admire the herd. Anytime of year along the 18-mile-long Wildlife Loop Road, you could even get into a buffalo jam as cars stop to wait for however long it takes buffalo to cross the road, or as they decide to saunter down the lane divider themselves. It's the kind of natural traffic jam you should be thankful for.

The free Custer State Park Buffalo Roundup is held the last Friday of September. Next year's 59th version, which as always will include an arts and entertainment festival, takes place over September 26-28, 2024, with the official Buffalo Roundup itself on September 27.