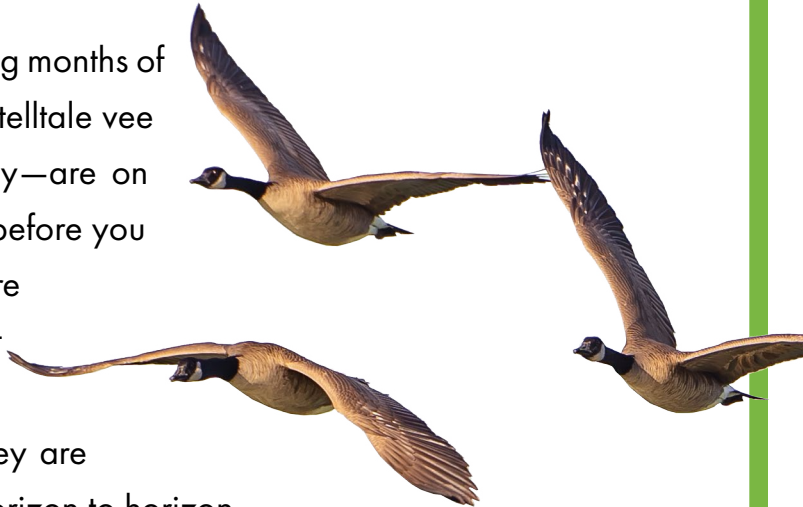


The American Bison: Facing Your Fears

If you look skyward during the autumn and spring months of the year in South Dakota, you'll often spot that telltale vee that means geese—Canada and Snow, mainly—are on the move. Frequently, you can hear them even before you see them, especially at night. The City of Pierre has them in such abundance that you can almost walk right up to them on the grounds of the Capitol. During especially busy times when they are migrating, the air seems filled with them, from horizon to horizon.



That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but there was once a bird in the Midwest which did just that, the passenger pigeon. They numbered in the *billions*—biologists estimate there were 3-5 billion of them—and a single flock could number in the millions. When a flock was moving overhead, people reported that the sky dimmed as they blocked out the light and that they could not see the flock's beginning at one edge of the sky or its end at the other. Hunters said that it wasn't even necessary to aim, just point your shotgun into the sky and pull the trigger and several birds would consistently drop.

That last anecdote was, in fact, the problem. Passenger pigeons were so easy to hunt—even with their vast numbers—that by 1900, the last one was seen in the wild. In 1914, the final captive one died in the Cincinnati Zoo. The passenger pigeon was-and is-extinct.

The same thing almost happened to one of South Dakota's most iconic animals, the American bison, i.e., the buffalo. (Its scientific name is kind of unimaginative: *Bison bison*.) Native Americans and the first European visitors to the Midwest reported that the American bison traveled in vast

herds across the Great Plains. Biologists estimate that they numbered 60 million, overall, in the 18th century. When a major herd was on the move, startled by weather or hunters, it was said you could feel the ground shake below you, like some sort of biological earthquake.

Then, by around 1890, only 541 buffalo were left. How could the population be reduced by 99.999% in just a century? Well, it was a combination of things. As domesticated cattle were brought into the Great Plains by settlers, they introduced bovine (cow) diseases to the bison, which had no immunities to them. Many Europeans and Americans loved hunting the bison because they provided a wonderful hide that brought a good price. A single bison provided large amounts of meat and a prized mount for taxidermy. Native Americans also hunted the bison, but the numbers of animals they took had been sustainable (they hadn't reduced herd sizes) for centuries. Finally, as American settlers arrived on the Great Plains, Plains Indian tribes resisted the loss of their lands, resulting in the "Indian Wars." One strategy for winning the war against the tribes, employed by the military, was the elimination of their food sources. Thus, wholesale slaughter of the bison began as a way to hobble the ability of the Native Americans to wage war, while also making them reliant on American food stuffs, provided in forts and on reservations. Professional hunters and amateurs as well would pick off bison from the back of trains, not even stopping to pick up the carcasses, just leaving them to rot where they fell.



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And so, the American Bison almost went the way of the passenger pigeon. It might seem like you would only need two animals to save a species, but it actually takes more than that due to problems of genetic variation, unexpected deaths, and even the animals' willingness to mate. That the bison was saved and is today a somewhat familiar sight throughout our state and the Midwest is due in large part to two South Dakotans: James "Scotty" Philip and Fred Dupree.

Dupree ran a trading post at Fort Pierre in the 1830s and 40s. One popular and lucrative trade item was bison pelts. By the 1850s, Dupree was also a cattle rancher near Eagle Butte, S.D. He married Mary Ann Good Elk Woman, a Native American woman of the Minneconjou, and they raised 10 children. Because of the variety of his customers, he spoke English, Lakota, and French, but no one seems to know if he was literate. Between his trading post days and his cattle ranching, Dupree became a very wealthy man. One account reports his net worth at over \$1 million, which equates to approximately \$40 million today.

Part of his wealth came at the expense of the bison. Tens of millions of bison pelts had made their way through his and others' trading posts. Even then, they began to recognize that the tame cattle he and others were bringing into the area were sharing their diseases with the wild bison. He could see the effects the loss of the bison was having on his wife's people and the Lakota people as well.

Perhaps that is why, in 1883, Dupree and his hired hands set out to capture some bison to protect them from further decimation. Now if you're thinking capturing bison is a tricky endeavor, you're right. Some think they managed it by roping the animals while they were sleeping. Others that they built a very



Bison Hide

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strong corral, drove the wild beasts inside, and then released the ones they didn't want. Leave it to the robust South Dakota cattle rancher to take on such a job and succeed. In the end, they had five bison calves. Within a few years, the five had become 60.

One of the interesting things about the American bison is its response to danger. When cattle sense a predator is near or a violent storm is on the way, they flee from the danger. In a predator, like a wolf, that causes a chase or attack response. So, by fleeing, cows make matters worse. When the danger is a storm, by running with the storm, they actually increase the amount of time they are in it.

Bison don't act this way. Instead of turning tail and running, they face the storm and the wolf head-on. The adult males stand near each other and look directly into the threat. If that threat is a predator, the other animal now faces a wall of pretty imposing looking bull bison. If it is a storm, they let it pass over, lessening the time they find themselves beneath the storm clouds, driving rain, and lightning.



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Enter James "Scotty" Philip, a Kansan who had come to our state (still the Dakota Territory) during the Black Hills gold rush. That didn't pan out (yes, that's a pun) when he was caught by the Army for trespassing on Indian Territory, which the Black Hills were at that time. Philip turned to a number of other jobs before settling, like Dupree, on cattle ranching. And he was good at it, running 20,000 head at one point.

Dupree died in 1898 and, Philip, influenced by his Lakota wife, Sarah Larribee, bought his herd of about 75. Thirteen years later, it had grown to 900. Any number of buyers purchased the animals, including the State of South Dakota, which took on 36 of them, placing them in Custer State Park. Descendants of these animals can be seen in Custer State Park today but also on the Ray Houck ranch, the Ted Turner Ranch, and dozens of other ranches and parks and reintroduction programs across the Midwest and beyond.

These ranchers knew and respected the bison, and the fear of losing them completely drove their motivation to save them. Sure, they could have waited and hoped for someone else to do it while sitting idly by, but instead, they faced the storm and put in the work to restore and protect these great animals. When we experience danger or a threat of whatever kind, we might want to consider if it would be better to face it head-on like the great American Bison.



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Scotty Philip Buffalo Ranch, Fort Pierre SD



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Want to learn more?

If you're like most South Dakotans, you've seen bison around. Many ranchers raise them for their meat, and buffalo burgers are an iconic and healthy, lean treat. To really experience the American bison, though, try visiting the Buffalo Roundup they hold every year in Custer State Park. You'll see a large herd of the beasts being wrangled by true South Dakota cowpokes. The immensity of the animals and the impressiveness of them in a large gathering are worth taking in. When you do so, try to imagine 60 million of them pounding across the grasslands of the Midwest.