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Where The Buffalo Roam

— by *D. Morris Blaylock*

A small herd of plains buffalo has been at home on part of its ancestors' range for over sixty years—the Davison Ranch on the edge of the rolling red plains of Western Oklahoma east of Arnett. Several buffalo wallows on the ranch are known to have been made over a hundred years ago when buffalo herds roamed the country freely.

At one time, three sub-species of buffalo (Bison, bison) roamed the ranges of about a third of North America, from the Blue Mountains of Oregon east to New York and Pennsylvania. Their southwestern range started in Northeastern Mexico and went north to the Great Slave Lake in Northwest Territories, Canada, north of Albert Province. Their southeastern range started in Central Georgia, north to

Albert Province. Their southeastern range started in Central Georgia, north to the Tidewater section of Virginia and on to the Great Lakes.

The plains or prairie bison made up the tremendous herds that roamed the Great Plains. It has been estimated that once there were sixty to seventy-five million head of buffalo on the Great Plains. In 1871, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge rode for three days through a buffalo herd estimated to be 25 miles wide and 50 miles long. There were 15 to 20 animals grazing on an acre, and the total herd was estimated to be 5 million head.

It's generally accepted that the American buffalo came from Europe or Asia, arriving in North America in the middle Pleistocene Period. The plains buffalo and the prairie grasses on the Great Plains of North America probably developed simultaneously.

The plains buffalo like open range. They are primarily grazers, thus preferring fine, short, and mid-high grasses such as the grammas, wheatgrass, and buffalo grass. However, they will take sagebrush and little bluestem for variety and eat willow twigs and forbs during the winter.

Buffalo are somewhat different from other wildlife in temperament, preference for food, and protection of the young but are similar in some habits. Their large herd size, speed, herd instinct, body characteristics, and defensive attitudes have allowed them to compete very well with other wildlife in the temperate open spaces and timbered areas of North America.

Like caribou, the buffalo would travel two hundred to four hundred miles between their middle range to their summer range.

Like the wild horses, they water once a day and will travel 20 to 30 miles to water. Also like the horse, they seek windy hilltops to keep cool and escape the insect pests. Buffalo like to paw the ground and wallow in dust to obtain a soil covering to protect themselves from flies and mosquitoes—the results are a buffalo wallow and more hungry flies and mosquitoes.

Like sheep, buffalo string out in single file, moving from one place to another. An old mother buffalo cow is usually the leader of the family herd with the older bulls appearing to act as sentinels. Like musk-ox, the aged or disabled bulls are stragglers and may separate completely from the herd.

Buffalo calves are born in April and May. The mother will not leave the place of birth until the newborn calf can travel with her. Young buffalo are tan in color with brownish noses and brown around the eyes. The young calf grows a new coat of brown hair and sheds the tan coat. As the calf grows older, the hair becomes darker up to the age of about two years.

Woolly, long hair develops on the hump, shoulders, and front legs. On the head, the woolly hair may grow to about a foot in length. Both bulls and cows grow beards. Some bulls may grow beards that are eight to ten inches long. The beard and the increased size of the hump make the buffalo appear massive in the fore part of the body.

Both the male and the female have horns. Bull calves grow to weigh from 1,800 to 2,000 pounds. One record-weight bull in Kansas weighed 3,000 pounds. Cows are smaller, weighing 800 to 900 pounds.

The land of the buffalo was also the land of many tribes of native North Americans. The Plains Indians depended on the buffalo for food, shelter, bedding, and clothing. They abhorred waste and consequently killed the buffalo judiciously.

Many years ago, according to legend, Indians would burn off ranges in the winter to make fresh, lush grass available in the spring to attract buffalo to the area.

After the coming of the white man and horses, the Indians learned quickly of the advantages of horses and obtained them, thus becoming superb horsemen. The Indian horsemen would force the buffalo to mill and then surround the herd. The horseback hunters would then come in and select their targets and sink their arrows to the feathers. The horse was a great asset to the Indian buffalo hunter.

The coming of the white man brought something in addition to the horse—the greed to kill for small returns. Thousands of buffalo were killed for their tongues alone. Thousands were also killed for their hides to make robes and also for leather. White hunters were followed by skinners and horse-drawn wagons. Acres of carcasses were left on the prairies to rot.

In the 1860's, William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody shot several thousand buffalo to feed Kansas railroad workers. Later hunters killed thousands just for their hides, bringing the buffalo near to extinction. Buffalo Bill later became a preserver and

by 1890 had a show herd of eighteen head. His herd was the third largest in captivity at that time.

The Union Pacific Railroad, completed in 1869, divided the Great Plains herd into a Southern and Northern herd. By 1895, wanton waste had brought the number of the Northern herd to about 800 head.

In 1888, Colonel C. J. (Buffalo) Jones rescued a few buffalo calves from the Southern herd and kept some at his Texas Panhandle ranch and gave some to his neighbors. By 1903, only 969 buffalo remained in the United States.

In the history of the buffalo, it's significant that George Elbert Davison established a small herd on his ranch in 1921. He obtained the magnificent beasts from the Wichita National Wildlife Refuge in Southwestern Oklahoma. He had a strong belief that there should be a proper balance between range animal life and range plant life. He was very much interested in preserving wildlife.

The Davison Ranch cowboys drove the first eleven buffalo from the Medicine Park area of the Wichita National Wildlife Refuge to the ranch. Later Davison obtained a few more that were shipped in by truck.

Forty adult buffalo are now maintained on about seven hundred acres on the ranch. During the winter months, they are fed about two pounds of protein supplement per head each day. On an animal-unit basis, cows are counted as one animal unit; large, mature bulls are rated at two animal units each.

Buffalo ranching is different from cattle ranching in that the ranchers who keep buffalo must build and maintain better and taller fences. Marketing surplus animals is also not a problem. Buffalo are sold on a dressed-weight basis. Buffalo meat, when properly prepared and cooked, is delicious. Some patients have been recommended to use buffalo meat in their diet to maintain health and to prolong life.

Today, Francis Davison, present manager of the ranch, cares for the buffalo herd the same as he cares for domestic animals on the ranch. As long as we have concerned ranchers like the Davisons, buffalo will have a place to roam.

—adapted from the October, 1982 issue of RANGELANDS, a Society for Range Management publication—