

Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner

Unless America's hunters get involved, any hopes of hunting wild, free-ranging bison will remain an unattainable dream.

When most Americans think about the tremendous hunting opportunities in Montana, they focus on the rugged backcountry of the Bob Marshall Wilderness or the remote peaks surrounding Yellowstone Park. Yet some of the most productive wildlife habitat in the Big Sky state actually lies east of the Rockies, in and near the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR).

The CMR, which straddles the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir, boasts 1.1 million



THE BUFFALO HUNT BY CHARLES M. RUSSELL

acres of lush river bottoms, forested canyons, sagebrush flats, native prairie and steep, jagged breaks. It's home to all sorts of gamebirds, including turkeys, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, doves, sage grouse, Hungarian partridge and sandhill cranes. Twenty-nine species of ducks and geese visit the CMR, as do osprey, falcons and eagles.

On the big game side, there are whitetails, mule deer, moose, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, black bear and elk. The elk hunting, in particular, is tremendous, as the Missouri River Breaks offer some of the finest public land elk hunting in North America.

It would be a mistake, though, for me to describe the CMR as little more than a buffet table for American sportsmen. We shouldn't try to reduce the refuge to a list of game species or habitat types – not if we hope to do justice to a

unique landscape that's inspired generations of cowboy and Indian day-dreams and any number of original C.M. Russell paintings.

There's only one area where the Refuge falls short (though through no fault of its own) and that shortfall is showcased in the famous CM Russell oil painting titled *When the Land Belonged to God*. The painting details an endless herd of bison fording a wide, placid river – the Missouri? – and then cresting a tall, grassy hill. Wolves lurk in the foreground, while in the distance the pristine landscape unfolds



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The wolves, of course, have returned to Montana’s vast open spaces, as have the elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep. But no wild bison (or buffalo, if you prefer) grace the CMR. And that’s a shame.

Hunters and conservationists have restored or protected every major big game species native to Montana. Every species save one. While elk, deer and pronghorn roam wherever they please, bison occupy only a tiny fraction of their former home range. There’s not one single free-ranging, huntable herd on state or federal land here in Montana. Which begs the question: why not?

Well it’s not because bison don’t do well in Montana. They’re far better adapted to their native landscape than the cattle herds that replaced them. And it’s not that they aren’t worthy of fair-chase hunting – they are. By all reports, the wild bison down in Utah’s Henry Mountains have grown wary of man and challenging to hunt. As for the quality of their meat . . . well, let’s just say that I could eat bison for a month straight and never complain. They’re absolutely delicious.

No, it’s politics. While there are bison in Yellowstone National Park and on some tribal lands, and while there are landowners who own private herds, those of us who want to hunt wild, free-roaming bison on public lands have been shut out of the political process. Or maybe I’m wrong about that. Perhaps it’s not so much that we’ve been shut out of the discussion, as that we’ve never gotten up off our posteriors and done the work – the hard work – to restore the West’s most iconic game species to its original habitat.

Which brings us back to the CMR. If there’s one place in Montana, or in the West, where bison truly belong, it’s the refuge. The terrain is perfect, and at more

than a million acres it’s big enough and wild enough to host a herd.

Unfortunately, the fact that we have an ideal home range for bison doesn’t mean that restoring them to the CMR will be simple, or easy. The federal and state agencies that have the final say on the matter are masters at figuring out which way the political wind is blowing – and right now, the wind is blowing the wrong direction.

Unless America’s hunters get involved, and unless we push hard to finish the big game restoration work we started decades ago, our quest for wild bison will remain an unattainable dream, held hostage by people who don’t want to see us hunt “buffalo” here in the American West.

A few years ago I spent a couple of days wandering around the CMR with Jim Posewitz and a handful of other hunters. Jim, who’s the founder of Orion – The Hunter’s Institute (and the author of *Beyond Fair Chase: The Ethic and Tradition of Hunting*) is a legendary conservationist as well as an iconic sportsman here in Montana. As you might imagine, we talked about restoring bison to the CMR and Jim mentioned that we had a golden opportunity to expand hunting for future generations. He also pointed out our deep-seated “moral responsibility” to right a wrong and return bison to their native landscape.

So now it’s up to America’s hunters. Do we continue to sit this one out, content with the knowledge that we’ve already restored so many other species? Or do we stand up for our right to stalk wild bison under Montana’s Big Sky? Perhaps a bit of wisdom that my mother first shared with me 40-odd years ago is worth considering:

“If a job is once begun, never finish till it’s done. Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all.”



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