

# Buffalo Roundup

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Onion Creek Ranch

Fifteen riders raced down the mountain towards the immense herd of stampeding buffalo. Rumbling and grunting, the mother cows, weighing upwards of 1300 pounds each, kept their calves by their sides. They eyed the horseback rides threateningly, as if to say, "You better not..." A buffalo can out-run and out-turn a horse, something regular cattle cannot do, and mama buffaloes are, like most mamas, very protective. This was no ordinary cattle drive.

This was the Custer State Park Buffalo Round-up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The park uses the roundup and auction to annually reduce its herd to prevent overgrazing of the 73,000 acre park, which is home to not only the bison, but also to elk, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, mountain goats and wild donkeys. A cow/calf pair needs 17 acres of rangeland for grazing, so every fall the entire herd of buffalo is herded by horseback and pickup truck into holding pens, where they are sorted by age, vaccinated, wormed and branded in squeeze shoots. Surplus calves, about 400 of them, will be sold at auction in November for the development of private herds. The calves weigh about 350 to 400 pounds and are hot-iron branded with the state "S" brand and number indicating their year of birth. The public is invited to see all of this, a unique event that evokes the American West, and it is quite a sight to see. Buffalo are big, wild, sturdy, quick, intelligent in their environment and survival-oriented. They do not take well to being told what to do.

It is an adventurous task to wrangle a herd of 1500 buffalo. Park personnel, local ranchers and volunteer wranglers (and one writer), all experienced riders, began by gathering the buffalo throughout the park and pushing them towards the corral system. It takes two days, and on the second day, as 4000 spectators gathered on the hillside above the pens, behind double fences for safety, I joined 40 horseback riders in the early morning chill to hear the safety briefing.

The Park Superintendent read us the riot act on safety around the buffalo. "Stay clear, stay awake, don't be stupid, don't show off, take off at the first hint that a cow is eyeing you, pull back, be safe, don't crowd, ride smart," were basically his instructions. He also gave a lot of detailed directions of how to get the animals the last two miles safely up the hill and into the pens.

We had three teams—red, white, and blue, appropriately—and each team had a leader. My leader was Bill Hill, a no-nonsense Park Ranger with 11 years' roundup experience. We all had to have excellent cow horses. Since my horses were home in Texas, I'd had the good fortune to get one on loan from the Husted Ranch, a working horse and guest ranch. Jim Husted gave me Babe, a big gray quarter horse mare with speed, agility, stamina, strength, surefootedness, and plenty of "cow" in her. His only admonition was, "Take care of my horse."

Turned out she did most of the taking care of...me, fortunately.

## The Remarkable Buffalo

What they don't tell you about where the prairie meets the mountains is the little land mines of rocks hidden in the stirrup-high buffalo grass. What they don't tell you about buffalo is how lightening fast they can run and turn. They can run at speeds in excess of 45 miles per hour. They can pivot quickly on their massive front quarters. No wonder the Plains Indians revered them. Bulls can stand up to six feet tall at the shoulders and weigh over 2000 pounds. The early French called the American bison "*les boeufs*", meaning oxen. The name underwent several modifications until it became the present "buffalo". The creatures have adapted well to winter on the open prairie, developing thick winter coats and using their noses to brush aside and expose grass.

The American Bison came to North America by crossing the Bering Strait land bridge 20,000 years ago. At their peak, 60 million roamed the plains. There were so many that Lewis and Clark spoke of seeing the herds pass, a half mile wide, for hours at a time. "We could not see their limit either north or west. The plains were black, and appeared as if in motion." The Plains Indian tribes called them "*tatanka*" and depended on the meat for food, the hide for clothing, sinew for sewing, and bones for tools. There was no part of the buffalo that was not used. But by the 1870's, the 60 million had been reduced to a mere 600—near extinction. Routine massacre of the bison, combined with government action at the time to control Indian tribes by eliminating the buffalo brought the American bison to the edge of extinction. Today, fortunately, they are no longer an endangered species: there are 100,000 buffalo in North

America, and with conservation efforts such as South Dakota's, they are thriving.

### **Head 'Em Up!**

Our phalanx of 15 riders galloped madly towards the herd to turn them. They were coming straight at us, like a river of dark water flowing down the hill. As we got closer, I could hear the steady grunting they make as a herd as they run. I could feel the ground shake at their approach. Suddenly, instead of being to their side, the whole herd turned straight towards me. I punched Babe into a full-out run to get out of the way. We leapt an arroyo and headed up a hill. I heard Bill Hill and the other wranglers whooping and hollering and beating their legs with coiled lariats to turn them. Half the buffalo headed into up into the pine breaks, the other half loped through the grassy valley towards the spectators. Now our job was to go get the stragglers. Wheeling Babe around, I galloped down one hill and up the next towards the trees. Suddenly, the stragglers burst out of the pines, and I got beside them. One cow cast her eye at me, her tongue lolling out as she ran. They streamed down the mountain towards the rest of the herd. We came in from behind and the other two teams gathered them together and slowly began to push them towards the crowds. At the very front, I saw a white SUV roaring around, herding the buffalo. It was Governor Bill Janklow, who seemed to be getting more fun out of this buffalo drive than anyone else. He leapt a dry creek full blast; I winced as I heard an oil pan crush. The Governor had his arm out the open window, beating the side of the door, moving the buffalo out of the way. In the seat next to him sat his daughter and grandson, big-eyed and grinning. They sell that truck the Governor uses in the Buffalo Roundup...word is, they can't return it to the lot.

Our group galloped on, staying together as much as we could, till we saw the open gates of the corrals. As we pushed the big herd through the gates and into the pens, the crowd of 4000 spectators burst into applause and yelling. The buffalo began to mill, slowing down, and drinking at the tank in the corral. I gave Babe a stroke on the neck and told her I was very grateful for the fine job she did. We rode on to the chutes, where already the State Veterinarian was starting to inoculate the yearlings coming through. The crowds came to watch as I unsaddled my horse and headed for the barbecue tent.

### **An All-Round Event**

The Buffalo Roundup draws an appreciative crowd every year not just because of this wonderful, unique event, but because the whole area is a special treat. Custer State Park is a treat—with the beautiful Black Hills covered in golden aspen and ponderosa pine, wild-

life watching is a favorite activity, but you can also hike, mountain bike, camp, fly fish, horseback ride and enjoy park programs such as gold-panning. Four lakes offer water sports and fishing par excellence. Custer is a popular rock climbing area, and lessons are available for novices. Jeep rides into the back country bring you face to face with the park's famous inhabitants, the buffalo, and with the adorable herds of spotted donkeys, escaped from the miners and gone feral. In the park, established in 1919, is the comfortable State Game Lodge, and four others built by the CCC—also available are several RV and one horseback campsite in which to stay.

The magnificent Black Hills are a bandana-sized version of the Rockies, surprising in a state that conjures up visions of the Little House on the Prairie. The area around the Black Hills holds inspiration: Mount Rushmore, with Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln; and the Crazy Horse Memorial. This one was a surprise to me. I'd seen a documentary once on PBS about the Polish American sculptor from Boston who was asked by the Sioux to make a memorial out of a granite mountain of their tribal hero Crazy Horse. It's the largest sculptural undertaking in the world, towering 563 feet. Korczak Ziolkowski, the sculptor, worked 35 years to complete the head, then died in 1992. His wife Ruth and seven of his ten children continue the work, blasting and jackhammer-finishing the mountain into a sculpture of Crazy Horse, the only Native American chief never to sign a treaty with the white man.

In addition, the Badlands are astonishing in their Moon Surface appearance, with their haunting topography of nature-sculptured gullies, gorges, spires and buttes. It's either a dramatic example of 35 million years of erosion, or God's giant sand castle playground, depending on how you think. Either way, it's breathtaking and strange and like nothing else you've ever seen.

So much else exists here—Hot Springs Mammoth site, Jewel Cave and Wind Cave, with 75 miles of mapped passageways underground; Deadwood, the wild gold rush town that holds the gravesites of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok; and my personal favorite, the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary, where 400 Mustangs roam free and wild, thanks to founder Dayton Hyde, who will cheerfully take you on a personal guided tour.

People come from all over the world to see the peerless buffalo and the splendid beauty of South Dakota. It's a memorable phenomenon. South Dakota takes you by surprise—it conveys a feeling of the heartland of America. It conveys unexpected majesty in the Black Hills, unexpected inspiration in its mountain memorials, unexpected love for the American bison—unique, powerful, ornery, independent survivors. Hey! Just like us.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

**South Dakota Board of Tourism**

*Telephone:* 1-800-952-3625

**Custer State Park**

*Telephone:* 605-255-4515

*Website:* [www.state.sd.us/sdparks](http://www.state.sd.us/sdparks)

**Custer State Park Lodges**

*Telephone:* 1-800-658-3530

*Website:* [www.custerresorts.com](http://www.custerresorts.com)

**Mount Rushmore**

*Telephone:* 605-574-2523

**Crazy Horse Memorial**

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**Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary**

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**Husted Ranch** (guided wilderness rides and ranch vacations)

*Telephone:* 605-673-2094 or 605-673-5363

*Website:* [www.ridesouthdakota.com](http://www.ridesouthdakota.com)

**About the Author**

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.

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