

Bison Roundup

In 1991 I lived in a remote part of the Nebraska Sandhills. That's in Big Sky country. Covering nearly thirteen million acres, it's the largest grass-covered sand dune formation in the western hemisphere. Hardly anybody lived there—and I was one of those fortunate few.

One day, a neighbor called to tell me about a volunteer opportunity, helping the cowboys at a nearby nature sanctuary with their annual roundup. The preserve uses a herd of bison to help them manage and protect 56,000 acres of virgin prairie. The buffalos' grazing and hoof action helps keep the grasslands from thatching over and creates bare patches where new grasses and wildflowers can grow.

During the roundup, riders brought the animals into a holding area, where staff would administer state-required vaccinations and sort them for the annual sale that kept herd numbers in check.

On a cool, cloudy morning I showed up bright and early at headquarters. The trail boss assembled the volunteers for a safety reminder before handing out assignments.

"Bison are wild animals and they can be dangerous," he said. "The bulls weigh two thousand pounds, and the cows are nearly as big. They look warm and fuzzy, but they can be mean, especially when they're nervous. People have been killed and maimed by them. These bison will be on the move and feeling stressed. Stay in your vehicles or on your horses, and remain alert at all times. Never approach these animals on foot."

The boss assigned me to drive a beat-up four-wheel-drive pickup with a staffer named Darren in my passenger seat. Darren knew the preserve like the back of his hand, so I had no fear of getting lost. We bumped across the prairie at a rapid clip along a sandy two-track trail. My companion told me that if we slowed down at all, we'd get stuck, so I made sure to keep us moving. We soon left the trail and headed cross-country. Darren guided me, helping me avoid the many sand dunes that might have bogged us down.

At first, an immense sea of grass all but hid the bison from us, but finally, a couple hundred animals came into view. A half dozen horseback riders seemed to have the roundup under control as they spaced themselves alongside and behind the herd. I felt caught up in a scene from the Old West as I watched the riders with their cowboy hats screwed on tight and red bandanas shielding their faces from billowing clouds of dust.

Our job consisted of following the left flank of the herd as the cowboys guided them toward the enclosure. When small groups or individual animals strayed, I drove the pickup at an angle to cut them off, encouraging them to return to the main herd. Occasionally, Darren jumped out of the pickup and waved his hat at a lagging animal, being careful not to get too close. Two other pickup crews flanked the right side and brought up the rear.

A sudden movement on our side of the herd caught my attention. I couldn't see what startled them, but a dozen of the shaggy beasts broke into a run, and veered off to the left a couple hundred yards ahead of us. I pointed the pickup in that direction, and Darren yelled, "Let's move—we're gonna lose them!"

Just as I hit the gas, the breakaway group turned and angled toward us. Another contingent of the main herd saw them and followed—there must have been about fifty, total. I wrestled the steering wheel, trying to keep our pickup on the outside so we could turn them

back. We went over a short rise and dropped off the other side, directly into soft sand. And there we sat, tires spinning.

I reached for the door handle, but Darren grabbed my arm and pulled me back, saying, "We'd better sit tight. We're not getting out of this any time soon, and we're safer in the cab."

We rolled up our windows and waited. It seemed like a slow-motion movie as the stampede moved toward us. I could see magnificent bison muscles flex with each stride, and steam puffed from their gaping mouths into the cool air.

I'm sure my eyes were as big as pies as I watched the mob of America's national mammals approach us at a dead run. As they neared our truck, I could see their nostrils flaring beneath their wide brown eyes. The ground trembled under us and I hung on tight to the steering wheel.

Just as I thought they were going to run us over, the herd parted like magic and went around us on both sides. The noise was deafening, and the choking dust seeped in through the closed windows.

And then, silence. I looked in awe at Darren, who just sat, shaking his head.

After the dust settled, we exited the pickup and took stock of our situation. I'd managed to get us perfectly high centered on the lee side of a small dune. Darren tried the pickup's two-way radio, but we were stuck in a hole with no signal. We found a shovel and a jack in the bed of the pickup, but after a half hour of using them we weren't any closer to getting free.

Darren said, "We're at least four miles southeast of headquarters and three miles from the nearest county road." I felt grateful for his presence, since the overcast sky prevented me from figuring out which direction was west.

We started walking, our feet slipping and sliding in the soft sand. I kept looking over my shoulder, hoping we wouldn't encounter any more bison.

Not long afterwards, a lone horseback rider caught up with us. He had a hand-held radio and rode to the top of the nearest dune, where he called headquarters. He trotted back to us.

"We got the herd into the enclosure," he said. "You guys may as well go back to the pickup and wait. Doug and Mike are coming with a winch."

And that was my first (and last) bison roundup.