

# Where Seldom is Herd

**“They are hearty and use the grass more efficiently than cattle.”**

by Abbe Homan

“**O**H GIVE ME A HOME WHERE THE BUFFALO roam...” We all are familiar with the “Home on the Range” lyrics, or at least we could hum along with the tune. The roaming buffalo have a history that is closely linked to that of South Dakota and many people throughout the state are reaping the benefits of owning or just eating buffalo.

At their pinnacle, an estimated 60 million buffalo roamed the plains of North America. “The moving multitude...darkened the whole plains,” wrote Lewis and Clark, who came upon a herd at South Dakota’s White River in 1806.

The enormous number of free roaming buffalo was reduced to an estimated 600 at one time. According to the South Dakota Department of Tourism, due to conservation efforts, along with the maintenance of privately owned herds, today more than 100,000 buffalo are present in North America.

But instead of the enormous herds roaming far and wide across the plains buffalo in South Dakota are now in much smaller groups dotted throughout the state. Most of the reservations own herds; one of the largest herds belongs to the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.

The tribe’s Game, Fish and Parks manages the

herd, numbering about 1,500 head, under direction from the tribal council. The tribe started the herd in the mid 1970s with buffalo from Custer State Park. The buffalo are mainly for tribal members use, but the Game, Fish and Parks Department also hold auctions and organized hunts.

The tribe owns a slaughter facility about 45 miles east of Eagle Butte, S.D. Members of the tribe request the hides, skulls and meat. They also want some of the animals for ceremonies and Pow-wows. Any of the revenue that is brought in by the sale of the buffalo goes right back into the management and upkeep of the herd.

The upkeep on buffalo is very minimal. According to Joanna Murray, a wildlife biologist for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Game Fish and Parks, the management approach to the buffalo is, for the most part, “hands-off.”

“Any decision we make concerning the buffalo has to be approved by the tribal council, but for the most part we tend to leave the herd alone,” said Murray.

Other than constructing 35 miles of buffalo fence on 20,000 acres, outside of Bullhead, S.D., Ron Brownotter and family have little



daily interaction with their 500 head of buffalo. After his wife, Carol, finally agreed, they started raising buffalo in 2001. The Brownotters purchased five buffalo from Custer State Park, then added to their numbers with animals from various locations such as Catalina Island, Calif., and Mandan, N.D.

“We’ve been very fortunate,” Brownotter said about the past six years of raising buffalo. “Our family has been blessed and we have been given the chance to help a lot of other people from around the area.” He has hired individuals to help put up fence and other seasonal jobs.

Not only does Brownotter enjoy the fact that he is helping others, he also enjoys raising animals that are so proficient.

“There are lots of positives that go along with raising buffalo,” said Brownotter. “They are hearty and use the grass more efficiently than cattle.”

Kevin Stormo, of Lake Norden, S.D., also likes the fact that buffalo are low maintenance.

“I’ve always had an interest and fascination with buffalo,” said Stormo. The herd, which he has had since 1988, “is a lot less maintenance than cattle.” Stormo used to have both cattle and buffalo but now strictly raises buffalo.

The privately owned herd hasn’t always been a “cash cow.” Just like any industry, profiting from the meat and hides has had its ups and downs.

“The industry went through a tough period and now is beginning to bounce back,” said Stormo. “It’s a niche market, it will never replace cattle.”

Stormo keeps about 50 head and usually sells off the calves to local individuals. He receives requests for the hides and he has some of the animals butchered for meat.

Historically, the Lakota people relied on buffalo for food, clothing and shelter. Now, more and more people are giving buffalo meat a try. The all-natural meat that comes from the Brownotter’s grass-fed buffalo which has no hormones. The family, along with other buffalo meat producers, are working to establish a mobile slaughter facility, which, they believe, produces higher quality meat than that of transported product.

Buffalo meat has also been a hit with tourists to the state.

“Tourists want to try something different and there is a pretty loyal following of locals too,” said Dee Geddes, manager at Al’s Oasis in Oacoma, S.D. The restaurant has a steady market of buffalo consumers. It sold 4,331 buffalo burgers in July 2006 and orders 10,000 pounds of ground meat per year.

Tourists who visited the restaurant in past years used to think that buffalo meat would be like other wild game meat, not understanding it’s more like beef. In recent years, the popularity of buffalo meat has been increasing. The menu now states the nutritional benefits.

“The public seems to be much better informed,” said Geddes.

**Opposite:** Part of Ron Brownotter’s 500-head herd of buffalo roam rangeland on his Bullhead, S.D., ranch. Other than constructing 35 miles of buffalo fence on 20,000 acres, the Brownotters have little daily interaction with their herd of buffalo. The Brownotters began their herd in 2001 when they purchased five buffalo from Custer State Park, then added to their numbers with animals from various locations such as Catalina Island, Calif., and Mandan, N.D. *Photo Courtesy Roger Lawien/Moreau-Grand Electric*



A buffalo scans its surroundings during the annual Buffalo Roundup at Custer State Park. **Top:** The restaurant at Al’s Oasis in Oacoma, S.D., has a steady market of buffalo consumers. It sold 4,331 buffalo burgers in July 2006 and orders 10,000 pounds of ground meat per year. *Photos Courtesy South Dakota Tourism*

Whether it’s raising, managing, serving or eating buffalo, “Seldom is heard a discouraging word...” So, even if you aren’t interested in owning your own herd, you could at least give a buffalo burger a try.

## Benefits of Buffalo

**Buffalo meat is lower in cholesterol** (an average of 50 percent less) than beef – in fact buffalo has less cholesterol than skinless chicken or even most fish. It has fewer calories yet is higher in iron and protein than beef. Buffalo meat has no growth hormones or steroids; there are no known human allergies and no problems with E-Coli.