

BOOK REVIEW

Lott, Dale F. 2002. *American bison, a natural history*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California. 229 pp. ISBN 0-520-23338-7 (cloth: alkaline paper).

You gotta read this book. Since you are already browsing a review in this journal, you are almost certainly the audience to whom it is directed (natural historians and conservationists broadly defined) and you will appreciate the style. In this book Dr. Lott tells enough about the natural history of bison to whet the generalist's appetite and yet to engage the specialist in thinking in broader concepts. I learned more of the basics of buffalo, a term he prefers to bison in many applications, than I thought I would ever need. But now I feel I better understand the history of this animal that filled the grassland sea of the continent's midsection.

Clearly, Dr. Lott knows that of which he speaks, yet doesn't flaunt it on the pages like the pompous academic most of us can become at times. As he unfolded story after well-woven story of these creatures and those with which they share (shared) the prairies, my eyes flew across the pages in anticipation of the next homey turn of words, like "from grass to gas and chips" to describe the digestion process of these ruminants. Or, "even when they're getting serious, cows' clashes seem more comic than cosmic. I've seen cows urinate thousands of times and wallow thousands of time, but only once have I seen a cow put urinating and wallowing together as a threatening bull would do." Or, "It's a sobering fact that 12 to 13 percent of a bottle of Dom Perignon Champagne is bacteria pee." Or, in speaking of a particularly well-preserved 36,000-year-old bison that was frozen in blue coppery mud, "the tooth and claw marks in his hide were still so clear that Dale (Guthrie) could take an American lion's skull, place its canine teeth on the marks left by the killer's

canines, and see a perfect match. Even the flesh was so well-preserved that when the corpse had yielded all its secrets Dale and his colleagues made an acceptable stew with a bit of the meat."

Dr. Lott spent his earliest years on the National Bison Range in Montana, and by his own admission his first encounters were of bison not as symbols of the West, the squandering of a natural resource, or a conservation triumph. They were simply the animals he had seen most frequently as a youngster. The sense of wonder in this gray-haired youngster is still evident when he describes bulls fighting: "I once saw a bull somersaulted backward by such a charge: 2,000 pounds of bull flipped upside down like a lawn chair in a gust of wind." You might think gems like this would only pepper the prose, but waits were short to the next one and were welcome to me, just as the words I've heard from master western storytellers huddled around smoky sagebrush fires on a hundred hillsides of the West.

I loved how the honest, open style flowed while facts were wound around each other to present an image of the objectivity that science needs. The openness might inspire skepticism in some about "observed reality" in these beasts, but that cynicism should disappear in respecting the mantra hymn of his flinty-jawed ecologist friend, Steve Minta: "'Where's the data?', and all the lyrics just repeat the title." I believe Dr. Lott presents the data fairly, and those who want to check up on that can comb through the bibliography of reasonable length and coverage near the end of the book.

He also notes at length the several controversies that face the bison and its ecosystem, foremost the brucellosis dilemma of the Greater Yellowstone System and the potential loss of wild bison through introgression with domesticated bison he dubs "buffattle." Recognizing that somehow wild buffalo, commercial buffalo, and commercial cattle need to share some

Great Plains resources, he nonetheless laments, "The public is more than willing to lose money raising wild bison . . . and we should be willing to consider resolving this paradox: *Bison bison* is the only wild animal in the United States that is not allowed to live as a wild animal . . . anywhere in its original range." Lest someone charge him with one-sidedness in his fascination with bison and his advocacy of their protection and restoration, he defuses with, "At bottom, wildlife management in our society uses biological knowledge to implement individual values as they are expressed through our political system. I *am* an expert on my own values, and I don't hesitate to advocate them." This is a clear enough statement on advocacy yet leaves the political implementation open to public debate.

Public debate occurred in the late 1800s and herds declined from millions of individu-

als to tens. Advocates for and against bison were vocal then. The Great Slaughter "choice" was taken then and the gene pool was bottlenecked severely. This narrowing has shaped the possibilities of what we can hope to accomplish with bison conservation now. Attitudes must be plumbed and a reasonable solution or solutions to the issues addressed soon. This book will serve well to popularize at least some of the possibilities. It should also be a model as each of us addresses our own advocacy issues in the conservation or eradication of our favorite plants, bugs, birds, and bacteria. You gotta read this book.

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