

Food Hotline

Not Such a Wild Idea

ONE MAN'S MISSION TO RESTORE THE GREAT PLAINS WITH BUFFALO

BY LINDSAY WILSON

In its commitment to offer customers the highest-quality products available, Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage continually strives to partner with family-operated, small-scale, sustainable producers. The following article is the second in a two-part series about sustainable buffalo ranches that meet, or exceed, our standards for naturally-raised meat. Natural Grocers is proud to support these ranches, their owners, and their products. In this article, we are happy to introduce Wild Idea Buffalo Company.

There is a saying among the Native Americans of the Great Plains that buffalo will offer themselves to those who have a pure heart. If that's the case, then Dan O'Brien must have a heart of gold. A wildlife biologist, falconer, writer, and buffalo rancher, O'Brien's deep respect for the grasslands of the Great Plains and the wildlife that thrives there led him to buffalo, or depending on how you look at it, led the buffalo to him.

It all started with a little herd of thirteen orphaned runts that O'Brien bought from a neighboring ranch after helping with the annual roundup. You could say that it was an impulse buy, as O'Brien had been a cattle rancher for twenty years and hadn't thought much about raising buffalo, although he had struggled to make ends meet as a cattle rancher and his intuition told him that cattle just weren't suited to the grasslands of South Da-

kota. But in this little derelict herd, O'Brien saw salvation. "I was desperate to rediscover purpose in my life...and those thirteen imperiled packages of fur and sinew seemed kindred souls. I wanted us all to move on to a better life, I wanted my ranch to be as balanced and healthy as it could be," O'Brien recalls in his memoir *Buffalo for the Broken Heart: Restoring Life to a Black Hills Ranch*. And so it began with those thirteen pint-sized buffalo, dubbed the "Gashouse Gang."

That was twelve years ago, and now O'Brien's herd has grown to more than 600 and his business, Wild Idea Buffalo Company, is thriving. As much a conservationist as he is rancher, O'Brien's philosophy is to "take care of everything out there, not just the product, because it's all connected. The reason we're doing this is for the grass. When the grass is healthy, the whole ecosystem is healthy." To O'Brien, the

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buffalo are more than a commodity; they are the key to bringing the grasslands he loves back to their native state.



WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

When I arrived on his South Dakota ranch in early summer, it was clear that O'Brien's mission was not that of a venture capitalist, but one of a preservationist. Nestled between the Black Hills and Badlands National Park and bordered by Buffalo Gap National Grassland, O'Brien's Cheyenne River Ranch is more than just a buffalo ranch; it has become a nature preserve. During my tour of the ranch, I saw the prairie through a wildlife biologist's eyes. As we passed through the sea of rippling grass, O'Brien pointed out a flock of baby grouse; a red tail hawk; a pair of white pelicans (which, to my surprise, are native to the Plains); two golden eagles; and a prairie dog town where we saw four burrowing owls emerge from the tunnels, which O'Brien explained don't eat the little burrowing rodents, but cohabitate with them. The prairie was teeming with life.

And then there were the buffalo. In a small open-air, all-terrain vehicle, O'Brien drove us into the midst of the herd, so close I could smell their sweet musky smell. There's something quite majestic about these beasts; they are at once wild, aloof, and sublime. And unlike cattle—which settlers brought to the Plains in the late 1800s after most of the buffalo had been slaughtered—they are native to the Great Plains.

"Buffalo may look a little like cattle, but they act very differently," O'Brien explains. Take grazing, for instance. "The grasses out here evolved to be grazed by buffalo; the way the buffalo graze for a bit and then move on, this movement is

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what allows the grass to thrive, and when the grass is thriving, the birds are thriving, the bugs are thriving, the mammals are thriving, the microbes in the soil are thriving," O'Brien says. "It's all connected. But now the grasses are being grazed by cattle and that's putting stress on the plant life, and in turn, the entire ecosystem."

In addition to their beneficial grazing patterns, O'Brien explains that buffalo easily endure what he calls the "animal-stress triumvirate" of the northern Great Plains—heat, cold, and wind. For example, a cow will start to lose weight at about zero degrees Fahrenheit, but a buffalo can stand temperatures up to minus 30 degrees, about as cold as it ever gets in South Dakota; the extreme temperatures just don't affect them. "The cattle can hardly survive in the cold, and the calves certainly can't," he says. "When you raise cattle—and I've done it—you're forcing a species into an

environment that they just aren't suited to." But the buffalo, they belong on this land.

O'Brien describes some of the changes he noticed in the environment once buffalo replaced cattle on his pastures in *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*:

"Unlike cattle, which dwell under trees for the shade in summer and wind protection in winter, we never found buffalo spending time in the wooded draws. As a result, the ground was not compacted and barren under the trees. The rare wooded plants of the prairie were not stressed the way they were when the pastures were grazed by cattle. In just one summer of buffalo grazing, the bushes grew more lush than I'd ever seen, and our grouse and songbird populations seemed to soar. The buffalo also refused to stand around water holes like cattle insist upon doing. The grass around the ponds was thick and unsullied. The water was not fouled by animal waste. The ponds became better places for other animals to live."



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