

A photograph of a herd of bison in a field. In the foreground, a bison is looking towards the camera, its head and horns clearly visible. The background shows a large herd of bison and a wooden fence, with snow-capped mountains under a blue sky in the distance.

For Stewardship and Soil

STORY BY CHARLES POST



The thunder of hooves pouring across Zapata Ranch is as synonymous with this place as the melodic chorus of the meadowlark or the evening salute of the great horned owl perched in the ancient cottonwood. Bison have grazed these short grass prairies for thousands of years. Though, the natural order of things here in the San Luis Valley of Colorado was experienced more than a few generations without the thunder of wild bison, back when the insatiable thirst for progress determined these lands were preferable fenced up and free of the animals. As we won the West, we just about lost the bison too. Thankfully, a community of stewards took it upon themselves to preserve many of the remaining wild corners left in the West where, in some places, herds of wild bison remain.

The Phillips are one such ranching family who have taken it upon themselves to preserve a thread of the old West, a herd of 2,000 wild plains bison. Every fall, under the guidance of Duke Phillips III and Duke Phillips IV, aptly named “Big Duke” and “Little Duke,” the entire bison herd is rounded up, fit with or identified with ear tags, aged, pregnancy checked, vaccinated, and in some cases gathered and relocated to other herds.

If Big Duke invited you to Zapata Ranch, which is owned by The Nature Conservancy and managed by Duke’s family business, Ranchlands, you might notice something peculiar on the land: rather than great herds of cattle, wild bison roam in the shadow of the Great Sand Dunes National Park in the distance. The Phillips Family is unlike

many other ranchers. Ranchlands, the family business, leans on four generations of ranching history and a conviction that beef is not the sole intended outcome of this operation: it’s conservation, and a sense of belonging among a wild and thriving, working rangeland ecosystem.

Big Duke explains the balance with ginclear vision. In a recent letter to me, he wrote, “Firstly, we define our workspace, our landscape, as a shared place with wild animals. We view the animals that live here as equals, as partners, not competitors or adversaries. This is our philosophical outlook upon which we base our entire business; or, in other words, a cornerstone of our business.”





And it's not just bison that Ranchlands considers neighbors and allies, it's the entire ecosystem, from the badgers and coyotes to the bluebirds, prairie dogs, and sandhill cranes. And with this mindset, they steward nearly 300,000 acres of land in the American West from New Mexico and Colorado to South Dakota.

"As grazing is at the core of what we do, both from an economic standpoint and from a biological regenerative/conservation standpoint, we use our cattle herds — and specifically their hooves and mouths — as invaluable tools to accomplish conservation goals. Each cow will browse forage and inspire new growth, cycle organic material into the ground, and break the soil cap for seed propagation through trampling. We plan the entire season in detail, and that includes plans made around the needs of wildlife. For example, we stay out of nesting sites or birthing habitat with our grazing herds at pivotal times of the year for those species."

This sensitivity guides their operation, which shares fences with the Great Sand Dunes National Park. Rangeland health and the well-being of 2,000 wild bison are what's at stake, what binds Ranchlands to the land, now and into the future. When I asked Big Duke what he thought about the notion, "a good rancher is a soil farmer," he responded by saying, "Soil provides nutrients for all animals, including humans. It captures energy from the sun, water from the rainfall, and grows plant life. But it does it through processes that we have to be cognizant of in our management, processes that have evolved through time. The starting point for us is to recognize that we have to leave the land better than we found it, which for us means that we have to understand as best as we can how things are linked together, how things depend on one

another, the processes, and then emulate them as best as possible."

As an example, the bison of long ago formed gigantic herds that would graze, recycle nutrients from the grass they ate into dung and urine, and beneficially mix the surface



of the ground with their hooves. This process helps organic material decompose and return matter into soil, feeding the roots and microorganisms. But then the great herds would leave and not return until the soil had rested, with plentiful moisture and sunlight to harness the recycled organic material left behind by the herds. This balance is what Ranchlands aims to preserve with the annual round-up. It ensures the herd size never exceeds the ranch's carrying capacity, the number of animals the land can sustain.

Big Duke explains, "We emulate this process with our cattle by amalgamating our herds as much as possible and rotating them in a migratory fashion to ensure we impact the surface of the ground in the same way, and then rest it so the nutrients can feed the soil." This is rangeland management at its finest.

Rangelands comprise 53% of the American West. We often drive by these landscapes at 80 mph with vast herds of cattle blurred among the grasses and shrubs. Most of our rangelands are remote, well off the beaten path, intangible and often abstract to the suburban and urban collective eye. What we know is that these rangelands are among North America's last wild corners, previously spared by development because the land was too hot, too dry, too cold, or just too tough to make a living on. And what is often overlooked or misunderstood by the non-ranching community (roughly 98% of America's population) is that the men and women who live with and care for these working landscapes are some of the nation's greatest stewards.

Each fall, when crisp air settles on the valley floor, something remarkable happens at Zapata Ranch, something only photos or first-hand accounts can do justice. Imagine the audible deluge of bison

hooves pounding across dry soil, louder and louder until their thick, wooly coats become hidden in a plume of dust slowly rising overhead. Once a year, Duke invites biologists, National Park Service administrators, neighbors, vets, and a seasoned Ranchlands crew to take part in a great bison roundup.

Over the course of five days, Big Duke, his family, and a smattering of ranch hands round up, move, sort and process nearly 2,000 wild bison. Some will be loaded into eighteen-wheelers and hauled to another



ranch in South Dakota, and others will return to their 50,000-acre pasture in the heart of the Zapata Ranch. This operation leans on a symbiotic relationship between The Nature Conservancy and Ranchlands, who jointly steward these lands with a level of care and commitment that has received international recognition and praise from the wider conservation community.

These bison roam just as they did hundreds of years ago, long before North America was carved up, fenced and tamed. They are handled once a year, and are likely just as wild as their ancestors were. Planes, motorbikes, horses, trucks and patient hands get the job done. This roundup ensures the herd never exceeds the carrying capacity of the land. Today's world is not like it once was. Wolves, bears, and an open range extending to the horizon in all directions are a memory of the past, and wildlife and working landscapes need to be managed. A hands-off approach does not work in most settings in this day in age. Management efforts guided with a respect for the complete web of ecological workings are stewardship in its purest form.

One moment that stands out in my mind is with Little Duke, leader of Ranchlands'

agricultural operations at just 30 years of age. It's day one of the bison round-up, and he's sitting on a worn steel gate with eyes cast down the long dusty chute brimming with the chestnut fur and broad horns of two-dozen bison, which represent a sliver of their wild herd. He's watching tide after tide of bison running down the alley that connects the staging pasture to the series of chutes that will gently guide each animal to the vets and range managers collecting measurements, samples and data before they are either staged for relocation or released.

Little Duke has the unique privilege of leading Ranchlands into a future that will be met with a rapidly changing planet and a global population increasingly detached from, but reliant upon, resources from our natural world. His father once told me, "While beef is the currency of ranchers, conservation is the currency of Ranchlands." These words speak to the approach that has forged their signature on the land, one that leans on a company that celebrates their open-door policy to the public so that ranching may become an increasingly understood and socially valued cog in the vast wheel of conservation across America.

Stewardship and storytelling are the two ingredients that may spur a growing connection between the urban and suburban public and the wild and working landscapes that exist largely out of sight and mind. The bison roundup is one incredible example of an event that can transform your perspective of stewardship, of what goes into managing 2,000 bison and what it takes to ensure vibrant corners of the West remain.

As we wade into a future increasingly shaped by humanity's fingerprints, once-wild pockets of our planet will continue to disappear. Ranching operations that represent the pinnacle of stewardship may become a last defense for these working landscapes and rangeland ecosystems caught in the crosshairs of development and a thirst for near-term financial gain at any cost. We need to support Ranchlands, land managers, stewards and families leading by example, leaning on ecosystem-minded management, and those committed to leaving behind thriving, productive and wildlife-rich landscapes for future generations.