

MEMBER REGISTRATION  
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FOR SUMMER FIELD SEMINARS!

I N S P I R E . E D U C A T E . P R E S E R V E .

Y E L L O W S T O N E

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# DISCOVERY

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

## CAN WE KEEP BISON WILD AND FREE?



By 1894, fewer than 100 bison remained in the wild. Photo: Dody Sheremeta, AlpenGlow Productions

**M**arch 1894, Pelican Valley: Two rangers follow tracks to a cache of six buffalo heads. They hear a shot, and stealthily cross the snow. One ranger sneaks to within a few yards of a poacher starting to skin his kill. He rises up, orders the poacher to stop, and Edgar Howell is captured.

Pelican Valley, one of Yellowstone's wildest valleys, sheltered some of the last free-roaming buffalo left in the United States. A few dozen remained outside Yellowstone in remote areas of Montana and Colorado; fewer than 100 bison total remained after the slaughter of 60 million others. By 1900, all wild bison outside Yellowstone would be dead at the hand of poachers—a fate that almost wiped out the few in Pelican Valley.

Howell's capture marked the end of easy poaching in Yellowstone because his arrest—and subsequent release—made national news. At the time of his capture, Emerson Hough, a reporter for the popular magazine *Field and Stream* and photographer F. Jay Haynes were at Mammoth Hot Springs to report on the winter wonders of Yellowstone and the risks to its wildlife from poaching.

So when word arrived that a poacher had been captured, Hough immediately wired the news to *Field and Stream*, and both he and Haynes joined the army patrol to meet the men bringing the poacher to Mammoth.

When the American public saw the photographs of Howell surrounded by his captors, when they saw the photographs of the buffalo heads in the snow, and especially when they found out that no laws existed to punish a man who had been caught killing more than one dozen of the remaining wild buffalo in the nation, a firestorm of outrage and action swept across the land.

By the time snows had melted in Yellowstone that spring, Congress had passed the Lacey Act—“An Act to protect the birds and animals in Yellowstone National park, and to

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### What's Inside...

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- YELLOWSTONE POETRY
- SPRING LODGING DISCOUNTS

punish crimes in said park, and for other purposes.” Under this law, anyone killing animals, damaging features, or removing natural items from the park is guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by fines and jail time. Many people consider this Lacey Act (the first of two laws with this name) to be the forerunner of the U.S. Endangered Species Act and the foundation for modern wildlife management in the United States.

Fast forward to April 2008, on the northern border of Yellowstone National Park. At noon on a cold, windy day, 90 people stand quietly in a circle at Stephens Creek. Chief Arvol Looking Horse speaks his native Lakota language as he conducts a ceremony, “Releasing the Spirits.” This ceremony honors more than two thousand bison shipped to slaughter, hunted, or otherwise killed that winter. Looking Horse conducted



When the American public saw photographs of bison heads, a firestorm of outrage and action swept across the land. Photo: NPS

this ceremony once before, in March 1997, for the more than one thousand

bison that had been killed in the first two months of that year. Through all of these bison runs the blood of the few bison who had survived poachers in the wild shelter of Pelican Valley at the end of the 19th century.

Why are bison being killed in the 21st century, in a place that protected the species from extinction and inspired the first law to protect wildlife in our national parks?

## COMPLEXITY

Suzanne Lewis, the superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, has said that bison management is the most complex issue she has faced in three decades with the National Park Service. The science is complicated; the philosophies of the managing agencies vary; and the controversy involves deeply held beliefs about wildlife that go back countless centuries.

## Invisible

The complexity begins with something we can't even see: a strain of the bacteria, *Brucella abortus*, that causes the disease brucellosis. This bacteria resides in some bison in Yellowstone. The livestock industry and state of Montana are concerned that the bison may spread the disease to domestic cattle; if that should happen, cattle must be killed and Montana ranchers lose money.

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### THE MISSION OF THE YELLOWSTONE ASSOCIATION

The Yellowstone Association, in partnership with the National Park Service, fosters the public's understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of Yellowstone National Park and its surrounding ecosystem by funding and providing educational products and services.

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