



Two buffalo prepare for a fight in a pre-match face-off.

Buffalo chip away at zoologist's time

By Martha Bohling

"The buffalo are coming back—there's a bison renaissance," said Harvey Gunderson, UNL professor of zoology.

Citing a buffalo population figure which has risen from 500 at the turn of the century to 30,000 today, Gunderson said that by the year 2000 the figure is expected to reach 500,000.

Gunderson said the bison has been taken off the endangered species list.

He attributed a resurgence of interest in the buffalo to interest in western history and pioneer life.

Romantic aura

"When you serve buffalo meat, you are partaking of pioneer food and that gives it a certain romantic aura," he said.

According to Gunderson, buffalo raising has become an "in" thing.

There are two privately owned buffalo herds within 25 miles of Lincoln, he said.

Many ranchers purchase buffalo at a roundup and auction held each September on every buffalo refuge, Gunderson said.

Excess sold at auction

The buffalo are rounded up, he explained, and the excess is culled from the herd and sold at auction.

Gunderson has been studying buffalo since he came to Nebraska four years ago.

"Ever since I was a kid I wanted to be with buffalo—work with them," he said, and added that there weren't any buffalo in Minnesota where he grew up.

Special permission

When he came to Nebraska, he was given special permission as a biologist to study buffalo herds at the Fort Niobrara reserve near Valentine, he said.

Gunderson said he spends much of his own time sitting in a car on the buffalo range, taking field notes, recording buffalo noises and taking photographs and movies.

An exhibit of several of his pictures is on display in the Jacque Gallery Bell Museum at the University of Minnesota through April 13. The pictorial essay will be displayed at UNL at a later date.

Recently, Gunderson said he has been concentrating on recording the growling and antagonistic noises of the males during the mating season.

Postures and sounds

He said that in the wild, a fight to the finish is rare between two animals of the same species because it is biologically unsound for the herd. Therefore, they have certain postures and sounds to avert a fight.

One bull will challenge another by bellowing, emitting a low grunting sound, and swinging his head, Gunderson said.


If the other buffalo takes a submission posture by turning its head to the side, the fight may be avoided, according to Gunderson, although the submission signal is not always recognized and acknowledged by the challenging male.

After a challenge, the animal who submitted will often wallow violently in the dirt, tearing the ground apart, Gunderson said.

"It (the wallowing) is such a powerful thing the air is almost electrified."

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