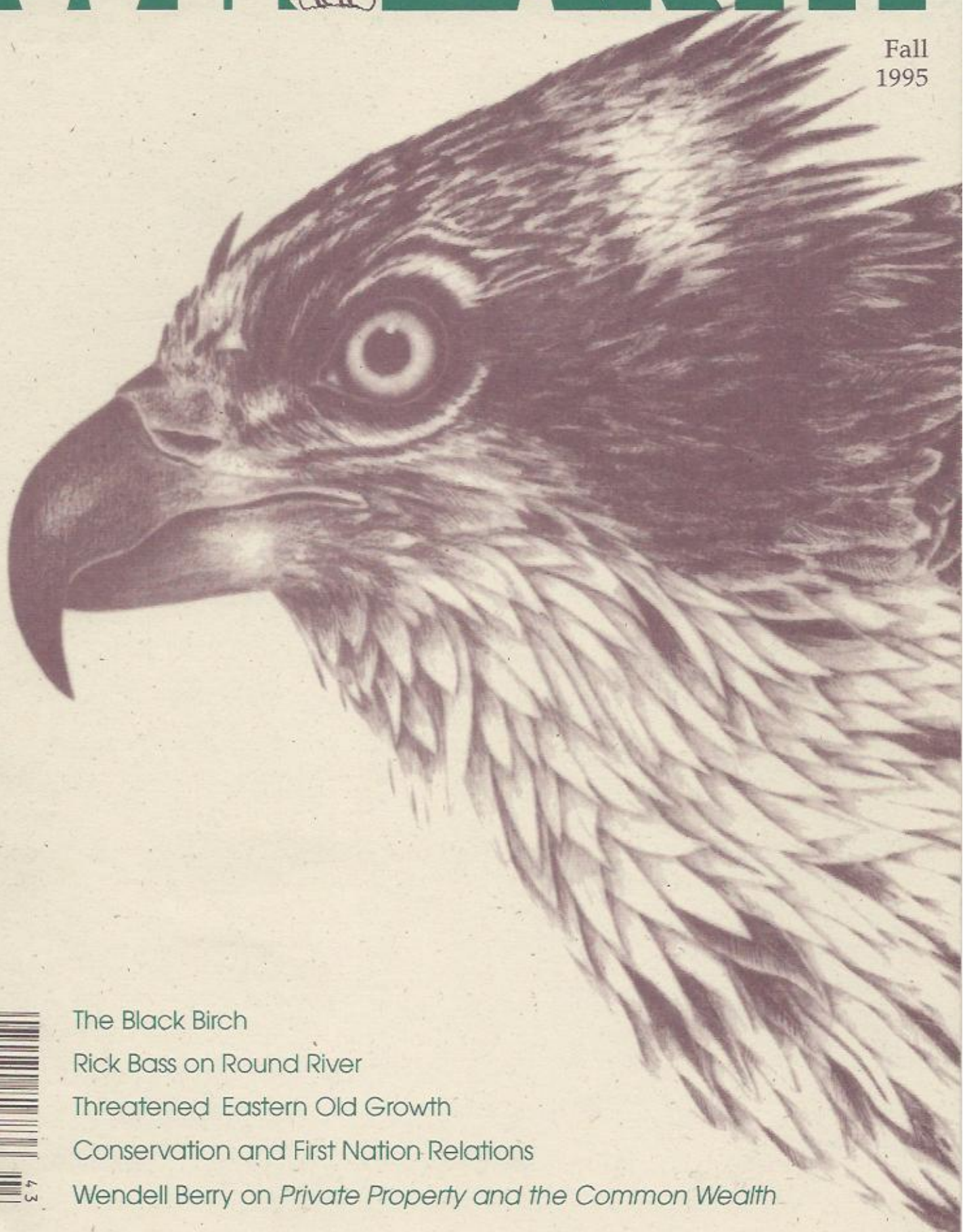


WILDEARTH



Fall
1995



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The Black Birch

Rick Bass on Round River

Threatened Eastern Old Growth

Conservation and First Nation Relations

Wendell Berry on *Private Property and the Common Wealth*



WILD EARTH



FALL 1995

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"Buffalo Commons"

An Encouraging Word



In the late 1980s and early '90s, Rutgers University demographers Frank and Deborah Popper cleared big ground in America. Proclaiming the emergence of a vast Great Plains empty quarter (*Planning Magazine*, December 1987), the scholars ignited the gray stubble of old-frontier thought—burned it off, revealing a green uncharted land. This they deemed a new frontier—a “Buffalo Commons”—suggesting initially that the federal government “take the newly emptied Plains and tear down the fences, replant the shortgrass and restock the animals, including the Buffalo.” As originally proposed, the essential task was “to restore large parts of the Plains to their pre-white condition, to make them again the commons the settlers found in the nineteenth century.”

But the federal government has not come forward to actualize this audacious vision, and subsequent comments by the authors raise questions as to what they actually meant when they coined the Buffalo Commons metaphor. Deborah Popper recently explained: “We are talking about a largely small-scale, entrepreneurially inspired bison uprising that does imply more Buffalo ranching, more conservation projects, more ecotourism and more creative thinking than the Plains have seen in some time.”

THE POPPERS HAVE succeeded in prying open the reluctant public mind, exposing it to their fertile, if uncultivated, vision. As scholars, though, they have sidestepped advocacy, often withholding judgment on the shapes their idea takes as it is tugged and pushed toward reality. To say that the Poppers have promised a new frontier without actually defining it, or showing us exactly how to get there, is not to fault them. Rather, it is to highlight the difficulty of finding the way ahead.

Buffalo Commons is a lush, tantalizing idea. Essentially it is virgin territory in the “geography of hope.” But by releasing their searing vision into a regional climate of uncertainty, even despair, the Poppers may be placing its fate in the wrong hands. That the dreams of capitalists drive the nation, not those of academics or struggling agriculturalists, is no mystery. For the money-makers, rumblings of a Buffalo Commons were quickly perceived as the sound of opportunity knocking.

by Douglas Coffman

Times have changed, of course, since earlier enterprise overran and destroyed the natural wonders of past frontiers. But our national psyche and extractive economic system have not changed much over the past century or so; and markets remain characteristically "blind" where the better interests of people and land are at stake. Because socioeconomic inertia will continue to impact Plains developments, caution is prudent. We must not assume that a hollow icon like Buffalo Commons will somehow inspire the social responsibility and environmental altruism of all those who would promote it. As the corporate wheels get rolling on the new frontier, it may be difficult to avoid another market-driven feeding-frenzy, with bison as the entrée.

If there is danger in corrupting the wild image of a Buffalo Commons, then there is danger to the Buffalo themselves and their Great Plains landscape as well. As a "keystone" species in the Great Plains, American Bison evolved with and are organically linked to numerous other species of the prairies. The well-being of a broad range of interdependent animal and plant species rises or falls with the shifting fortunes of the bison.

The unique hardiness and adaptability of bison enabled our own ancestors to endure the rigors of ice ages, dispersing with the large bovines throughout northern Eurasia and North America. Bison, humans, and grasslands have been closely linked in an epic of global survival for 100,000 years or more. Artful renderings of bison and other grazers on cave walls in Europe attest to this vital union. Only relatively recently have bison been pushed from our lives.

Unfortunately, recent developments would suggest that we are drifting toward an era of private bison ranching, not the holistic renewal envisioned in Buffalo Commons ideals. Commercial bison ranching is geared to short-term ends: exploitative, single-species production, rapid extraction of biomass, enhanced profits for those who would harness wild species to human desires. The process is industrial, not ecological, and is chronically subject to the demands and uncertainties of the marketplace. Furthermore, in order for bison ranchers to meet their objectives, herds must constantly be medicated, managed, and otherwise manipulated against their wild inclinations. As their behavioral and reproductive repertoires are thwarted, bison are put at risk.

Theoretically, we may be able to grow a bunch of Buffalo on a ranch pasture...for a time...just as we might grow a bunch of firs or pines on a tree farm. Try as we might, though, we do not produce a genuine bison herd any more than we create an old-growth forest. Trees, salmon, bison whatever—industrial monocultures of any species simply do not work well in the long-term biological sense. With bison, especially, the organic complexity and vast scale of their native habitat cannot be approximated within the confines of a commercial operation.

It is profound ignorance, then, a social alienation from organic entities such as bison, that causes us now to grasp at ranching as a panacea, while ignoring the long-term plight of prairie species. The natural history of the Great Plains hides like some elusive "dark matter"; though it remains invisible to the eye, it is the very stuff that holds the world together. When we acknowledge bison as a unifying strand in this living tapestry, a troubling fact emerges: wild bison are essentially extinct in this country today. The species has been *reduced* to a state of semi-captivity. The primal American beast is now hostage to our technologic age, yet the public is unaware of the problem.

So far we have addressed only the "Buffalo" part of a dual aphorism; the "Commons" part also is problematic. The term sets land-ownership against common-use on the Great Plains, calling current land-use practices into question. Ownership, dry-land farming, private livestock ranching and other uses all become instantly controversial in the Buffalo Commons purview. History tells us why.

Today's uses of arid Western rangelands stem directly from the Homestead Era—a defining period in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. At that time, passage of several Homestead Acts created a frontier, pitting Plains settlers against the open range with the promise of ownership. Because the acts were unrealistic in the first place—out of touch with harsh realities of climate and landscape—they set the stage for cycles of misery and destruction. Subsequent attempts to fine-tune domestic Plains uses under the private ownership system have fallen far short. Continuing disillusionment and failure in the dry lands are signs

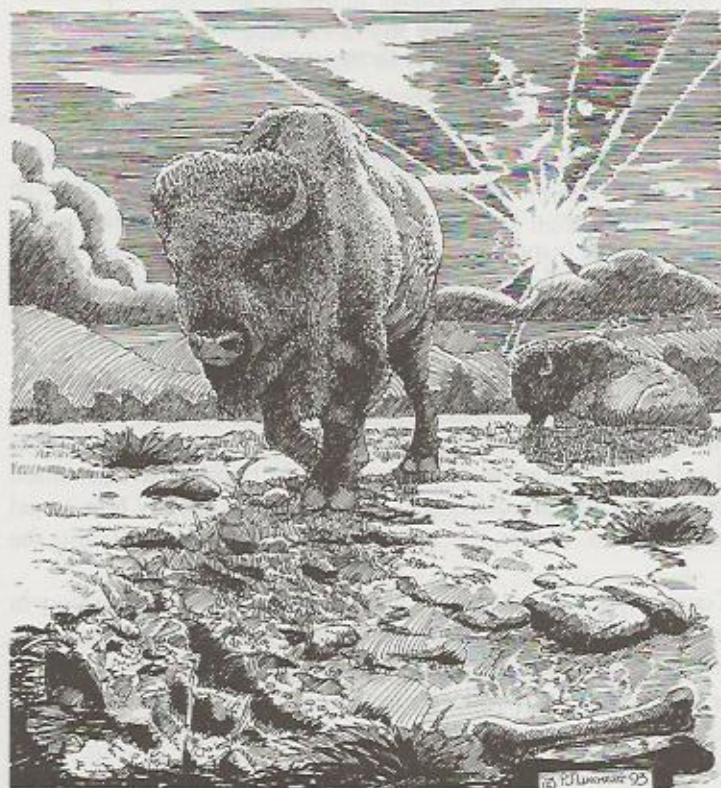


illustration by Peter Lucchetti

that the ghost of the homesteader is with us still. To this day, his star-crossed plan dogs the Plains dwellers, locking them in a futile struggle against the environment.

Like the "Buffalo" part, though, the "Commons" problem is not necessarily insurmountable. Land-ownership, competition, and rugged individualism are rampant in today's free-enterprise system, but cooperative rangeland institutions also have been part of the Western heritage from an early date. Even before bison completely vanished from the Plains, in the 1870s and '80s, cooperative grazing of cattle on vast short-grass ranges was in full swing. In the days of the open range, two or more ranches would run stock in the same area, cooperating in semi-annual roundups. Oversight of stock-sorting and ownership disputes was handled by representatives from each participating ranch. Eventually, stockgrowers' cooperatives arose to manage the larger affairs of the dry-land endeavor. This common-sense plan allowed stockmen to graze more animals over larger areas than they could possibly have fenced and controlled alone. Exclusive ownership of lands was unnecessary, since use alone served to establish access, and the benefits accrued to all. There is valuable precedent here. What was the open range but a vast commons, albeit one grazed by the wrong bovine?

Today, ways of adapting to native plants and wild animals as an economic base will be somewhat different from those used on the open-range, but the clear advantage of cooperation remains. In the harsh environment of the High Plains, cooperation earns success. Had bison, rather than cattle, been the animal of choice back in those early days, an enduring way of life might well have emerged. As it was, exotic (imported) cattle were a weak link in the open range system; they could not withstand the rigors of the Plains without costly human interventions. Droughts, hard winters, greed, and plunging markets broke the back of the open range. In the end, the land itself was broken and fenced.

Not even homesteading, though, could break the compelling story of the open range. It pulls at us today through futuristic visions like Buffalo Commons, evoking a wilder past.

The Poppers' vision, of course, is not just a story; it is the bright wild-side of the American Dream. And at this place in history, it should be obvious that perpetuating dysfunctional dry-land models with private bison ranching or tourism is merely a prescription for continued failure. To avoid this pitfall, we must proceed on the basis of adequate diagnoses of our historical ills. The causes lie largely within ourselves—in the failure to incorporate geographic reality as a guide to socio-economic development. Fortunately, crisis brings corresponding opportunity. On the Great Plains, the need for comprehensive, biologically-based planning affords people a unique chance to seize the future by reintegrating their lives within a restored biome.

As with ecosystems, our own human prospects for lasting success in agriculturally marginal lands hinge upon integrity. In the vision before us now, "Buffalo" and "Commons"

must be kept together—unified, understood, and implemented as interactive parts of a practical unit. This is the large pill, as it were, which must be taken whole if it is to have the desired positive effect. Splitting the metaphor (as some current developments threaten) is splitting the world itself: bad medicine for an ailing land. Restoring free-ranging bison and their associates to the common ranges that generated and sustained them must be the paramount objective of the Buffalo Commons program. If not, Buffalo Commons becomes simply one more euphemism for "business-as-usual."

Fortunately, there are already signs that the Buffalo Commons is a healing vision. Bison and native animals and plants of the Plains retain much of their innate vigor to this day. Bison are proving themselves among the most resilient of North America's native grazers. Biologically-speaking, chances for their wild resurrection remain good.

On the human side, much is now being done locally in the Plains by way of bison conservation and habitat renewal. To restore and safeguard the native biodiversity, though, the stranglehold of strict land-ownership must gradually be relaxed. Far from signifying failure, easing our death-grip on the dry plains will greatly enhance the natural productivity of the landscape, thus improving long-range prospects for social and economic renewal.

The Buffalo Commons vision shows us the continuing hope of the dry Great Plains. There is still a chance in that rugged, rolling heartland to find a life that works; but no one should suggest this will be easy. Buffalo Commons presents real challenges to our national psyche. It presupposes vision, sensitivity, and awareness in our relations to the land and to other life forms. It requires coherence and comprehensiveness of thought and planning. It demands wisdom and restraint in our social and cultural development. Above all, it implies cooperation among people, and reciprocity between humans and the rest of the natural world. Buffalo Commons portends nothing less than a return to Nature.

A Buffalo Commons must be founded upon a holistic model, involving large-scale ecological restoration. Nature must be the chief architect, of course, but will do the job right only if left alone to do most of the carpentry as well. Humans might just stand and watch much of the time, though they too can be kept busy mitigating ravages of the past century, while inventing new lifestyles for the next. In this way, the transition to a cooperative, wildlife-based economy will occur gradually as the pace of restoration and the growth of grasses and wildlife populations permits. Institutions, lifestyles, and amenities will come in time—tailored to the awakening landscape.

Writer Doug Coffman (1445 Elkay Drive, Eugene, OR 97404) studies the history, ecology, and evolution of the American Bison.