

Rare US bison roundup rustles up hundreds to maintain health of the species

October 5 2023, by Summer Ballentine



Chad Kremer, the bison herd manager for Custer State Park, left, and South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem ride alongside the bison as they are pushed to the corrals during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S., as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP

South Dakota cowboys and cowgirls rounded up a herd of more than 1,500 bison Friday as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the species, which has rebounded from near-extinction.

Visitors from across the world cheered from behind wire fencing as whooping horseback riders chased the thundering, wooly giants across hills and grasslands in Custer State Park. Bison and their [calves](#) stopped occasionally to graze on blond grass and roll on the ground, their sharp hooves stirring up dust clouds.

"How many times can you get this close to a buffalo herd?" said South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Secretary Kevin Robling, who was among 50 riders herding the animals. "You hear the grunts and the moans and (see) the calves coming and running alongside mamas."

Each year Custer State Park holds one of the nation's few [bison](#) roundups to check the health of the bison and vaccinate calves, park Superintendent Matt Snyder said.

As many as 60 million bison, sometimes called buffalo in the U.S., once roamed North America, moving in vast herds that were central to the culture and survival of numerous Native American groups.

They were driven to the brink of extinction more than a century ago when hunters, U.S. troops and tourists shot them by the thousands to feed a growing commercial market that used bison parts in machinery, fertilizer and clothing. Because bison were essential to Native Americans, the U.S. government also encouraged hunters to kill the animals as a way to force tribes to leave their homelands and move to reservations. By 1889, only a few hundred remained.



Nearly 1,500 head of bison were gathered up for the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP

"Now, after more than a century of conservation efforts, there are more than 500,000 bison in the United States," said South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a horseback rider who took part in the roundup. "The Custer State Park bison herd has contributed greatly to those efforts."

The park's [herd](#) began with 36 animals bought in 1914. A state ecologist estimated the park can currently sustain about 1,000 bison based on how

snow and rain conditions affected the grasslands this past year, according to Snyder.

The other 500 or so will be auctioned off, and over the next week, officials will decide which bison will remain and which will go. About 400 calves are born in the [park](#) each year.

"Each year we sell some of these bison to intersperse their genetics with those of other herds to improve the health of the species' population across the nation," Noem said.



A lone bison who tailed the herd is rounded up back into the corrals as the final straggler during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called

buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



The herd crosses the field during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S., as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



Thousands watch from the south viewing point during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



The herd rushes the field while the flag is displayed by a rider during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



The herd begins to push closer together during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffaloes in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



Chad Kremer, the Bison Herd Manager for Custer State Park, cracks his whip helping run the bison down a hill during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



The herd comes down from the hills towards the corrals the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP



The herd rushes across the field during the 58th annual Custer Buffalo Roundup on Friday, Sept. 29, 2023, at Custer State Park in Custer, S.D. Cowboys and cowgirls in South Dakota are rounding up a herd of more than 1,500 bison, sometimes called buffalos in the U.S, as part of an annual effort to maintain the health of the once-threatened species. Credit: Matt Gade/Rapid City Journal via AP

Corection note: This story was first published on Sept. 29, 2023. It was updated on Oct. 4, 2023, to correct that The Associated Press, quoting a state official, erroneously reported the event is the nation's only roundup of bison. Other organizations also hold bison roundups.

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