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# PHOTOGRAPHY



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A journal of my experiences and travels

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# Where The Buffalo Roam

*The near extinction and the recovery of the American Bison is quite remarkable*

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By  
*Randy C. Anderson*

The natural history of the American Bison while tragic, is also quite a remarkable story. As a species, bison have survived attacks from many sources throughout the ages, and have managed to survive them all.

Besides the laws of natural selection by predation, disease, and natural disasters such as floods, fires, and severe storms, the plains buffalo thrived. In fact, the laws of natural selection kept their environment and their species healthy. The environment was replenished every time a wildfire swept across the plains – cleansing the grasslands of invasive weeds and other undesirable plants and trees. Nutrients resulting from fires returned to the soil and fertilized them.

Numbering in the thousands, large herds of buffalo would disturb the soil, churning it up with the sheer number of their heavy hooves pounding it. These disturbances of the soil had benefits; they aerated the soil and acted somewhat like a plow. This ecological cycle was perfectly made to benefit all the creatures who called the plains home. North America's herds of bison numbered into the millions, and herds ranged from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Caroli-

nas in the east. Northern Mexico was their southern boundary while northern Canada was the northern boundary. Before the nineteenth century, the great plains of North America had so many large herds of buffalo, antelope, deer, and elk that it surpassed the African Serengeti in size and number of animals. The predators that followed these herds included grizzly bears, wolves, and coyotes. While the buffalo have survived, most of these predators have disappeared from the plains. So what happened?

One of the most devastating onslaughts came from man – on three fronts. First, market hunters greatly reduced herd numbers. These hunters found it easy to shoot dozens of the beasts with long -range rifles. The famous Sharps rifle allowed a hunter to stay out of sight and pick the animals off one by one. It took more than the sound of gunfire to spook an entire herd. It was easy money for hunters who could stomach the slaughter. The ever-expanding nation provided plenty of demand for the meat and buffalo robes.

As the United States steadily expanded westward the demand for land increased as the country rushed to conquer “the frontier”. The railroads were tasked with connecting the country from east to west, and were given vast land grants to do so. The railroad companies could in turn use these lands to entice settlers to go west (on their trains) to settle and farm land that had never seen a plow before. The land was so fertile it was hard to believe. This huge influx of people caused huge problems: It created a deadly clash between



Bull bison on the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve near Pawhuska, Oklahoma.



Native Americans whose way of life depended on the buffalo, and the farmers and settlers who wanted that fertile land to grow crops. This clash between two cultures would bring about the near extinction of the American Bison. The United States government instituted a scorched earth policy to eliminate the buffalo from the plains, thus depriving the plains tribes of their number one resource for survival. By doing this, the government reasoned it would be easier to control the tribes – force them onto reservations and make the tribes dependent on the government. A bounty was paid for every buffalo killed. The plains herds were besieged by hundreds of hunters seeking to make their fortune hunting and killing buffalo. While this policy worked to force plains tribes onto reservations, it almost wiped out the North American Bison – forever.

The final attack came from the farmer's plow. In roughly seventy-five years, the Great Plains would be plowed under. Great seas of grass that had stood untouched forever would decades later, turn into a dust bowl. Any remnants of buffalo that might have remained disappeared. With the advent of barbed wire the fate of free-ranging buffalo was

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sealed. A few conservationists did manage to save a few hundred animals and place them in private collections to try to preserve the species.

While the above plagues on the buffalo should have wiped them out, they did not. The survival of the North American Bison as a species was now in the hands of the few naturalists and conservationists that saw the need to preserve them. It would take decades before their work could be appreciated and to see any positive benefit to the bison.

Having withstood all of these onslaughts, man would bring yet another plague upon the few bison that remained. This would not be a purposeful attack, but it is still to this day a significant concern for the health and well being of the recovering herds – bovine brucellosis and tuberculosis.

Cattle were given free range on ranches and the open range, consisting of millions of acres to graze and reproduce on areas that once teemed with buffalo. On a few huge ranches remained small unknown populations of bison. These bison were infected with these diseases with devastating effects. Disease remains a problem for present herds, but some protective measures have been taken to keep the diseases from spreading into non-infected herds.

Cross breeding with cattle has also been an issue. While crossbred buffaloes look like a bison, they are not genetically the same. Over the past few decades the purity of many herds has been jeopardized and fewer herds remain genetically pure. Some of this genetic impurity has come as an act of nature when free ranging cattle have interbred with buffalo that have left their protected areas (such as national parks) But some ranchers tried to cross-breed their cattle with bison, seeking a more profit at market. Legitimate breeders now aware of the problem, do genetic testing before allowing unknown animals to breed with pure strain animals. However, a lot of damage has already been done.

So where do the buffalo roam today? Today there are an estimated 530,000 bison in the United States. Of that number, 500,000 are on privately held lands, 30,000 on public land that include national parks, game refuges, state parks, and other government preserves. While these are free to



roam on their own will, they are limited to the area in which they are kept, either privately or publicly.

The only free ranging, genetically pure bison herd is located in *Yellowstone National Park*. The park is home to 15,000 bison. In recent year there has been some concern and controversy over whether a part if the Yellowstone herd has been in contact or infected by cattle with bovine diseases. Many bison were slaughtered as a measure to protect the entire herd, sparking controversy over the measure.

Bison can be found in many locations, but I will mention only the locations that I have personal knowledge of. These herds are considered free roaming within a specified, controlled area. Keep in mind that regardless of where you find bison **they should be considered wild, and dangerous.** Bison are agile, fast, and unpredictable. Most Injuries occurring in Yellowstone National Park *do not* come from grizzly bears, black bears, wolves;, or mountain lions, they come from **buffalo and elk!** *Always keep this in mind – all animals in a national park are wild and potentially dangerous!*

As mentioned, the only herd considered truly wild, free roaming, genetically pure is found in Yellowstone National Park. The greater Yellowstone ecosystem includes *Grand Teton National Park* and their herd if bison. I am not sure about the genetic make up of the Teton herd, but they are magnificent. I have photographed both herds several

times, spring and fall. We was lucky to witness the Teton herd migrating back into the park near the GrosVent River one spring. It was am awesome sight to witness.

*Wind Cave National Park* in South Dakota has a herd of 200 – 400 bison that are also considered wild, free ranging and genetically pure bison. These bison are of the smaller plains bison subspecies. Wind Cave offers rolling hills of grasslands as a scenic backdrop for photo opportunities. There are also prairie dogs scattered in the area. We only spent a few hours on my visit there (I had never heard of Wind Cave National Park until we stumbled on it) but do plan on another trip there.

*Custer State Park* located near Custer, South Dakota consists of 71,000 acres of land teeming with wildlife. Best known for its elk herd it is also home to a herd of around 1,300 bison. We will be going to photograph there next year, so as of this date I have no personal knowledge of the area. I do know they have an annual bison roundup that



appears to be very popular. I have been in the area on other projects and found the Black Hills area quite beautiful and interesting. I look forward to visiting the area again.

Closer to home, *The Joseph H. Williams Tall Grass Prairie Preserve* near Pawhuska, Oklahoma is a favored area of mine to photograph bison. Free ranging on 39,650 acres of restored tall grass prairie, this herd takes some patience to find and photograph. The herd is comprised of several smaller groups and this can increase your chances for getting some good images. In addition to the bison, you will find Short-eared owls, and Northern Harriers in season. I have also photographed Upland Sandpipers there during one visit but I do not know how common they are. The preserve, which is managed by *The Nature Conservancy*, is the largest protected remnant of tall grass prairie left on earth.

*The Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge* located near Lawton, Oklahoma is another of my favorite locations. A free roaming herd of buffalo has flourished here since fifteen animals were sent by rail from the *New York Zoological Park (now the Bronx Zoo)* as part of the *American Bison Society's* (founded by William T. Hornaday and Theodore Roosevelt) efforts to preserve and protect the species. I believe the current number of the herd is around 700, but I could not find an official number. I do know that the *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* who manages the refuge added three young bulls (the first additions in 70 years) in November 2018 to introduce new genetics to the herd.

The refuge offers plenty of opportunities to photograph bison. They roam freely and are easy to spot. Each season offers its' own beauty to images you can make there. Along with the bison, you will find whitetail deer, elk, prairie dogs, and longhorn cattle. There have been recent attempts to reestablish other species that were once native to the Wichita Mountains – river otters and burrowing owls to name two, have been introduced. I have seen and photographed a burrowing owl but still have not seen a river otter there. Other photographers seeing and photographed them at *Jed Johnson Lake*.

Conservation efforts have worked well for the American Bison and continued support for these programs seems to insure the future of one of North America's treasures – the American Bison roaming the Great Plains forever, just as it was supposed to.



# The Original Angry Bird?

*“This Eastern Bluebird seems a little ticked off at us for being late with his favorite food”*

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I never played the game, but I did watch my kids play it, and when I got this Eastern Bluebird to pose for me, his expression definitely looked angry to me.

That made me wonder if bluebirds were the inspiration or models for the game with the same name. I don't know, but maybe?

I love photographing bluebirds because they are so full of expression. They are also cooperative subjects for me. I am blessed to live in an area that has bluebirds year around, so I get lots of images of them.

We have always loved birding and have been feeding them for many years. When we moved to Bixby, Oklahoma from Oklahoma City we had to come up with a new feeding regimen to suit all of the birds in the yard (over 50 Species annually). The main stars of the yard are the Eastern Bluebirds, White and Red-breasted Nuthatches, Cardinals, Blue Jays, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied, and Pileated woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and a bevy of sparrows, juncos, Indigo Buntings, and Summer Tanagers. Migrants include Rose-breasted Grosbeaks,



Cedar Waxwings, Ruby-crowned Kinglets and many more. We also have Sharp-shinned and Red-tailed hawks and Mississippi Kites in season. The hawks can be problematic at times.

Black oil sunflower seeds provide our base food, and we supplement that with various seed mixes and suet cakes. The number one food item that almost every bird goes after are the Bluebird nuggets our daughter suggested. Everything loves these tasty morsels! We call it “bird crack”. We stick it in tree crevices, suet feeders, and even a little in the flat feeders.

I can tell you when my wife or I go out to fill the feeders, there are always several birds chatting at us - telling us to hurry up, or something. And I believe that is why this guy looks the way he does!



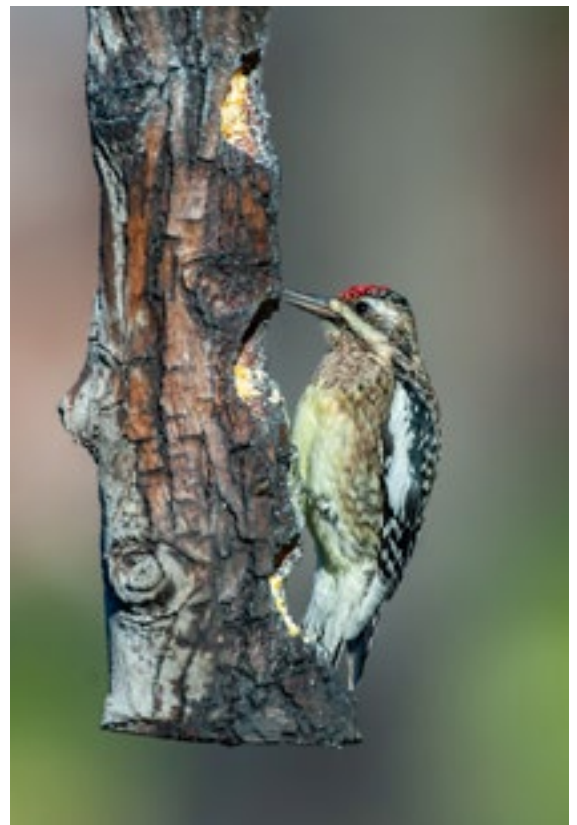
Red-bellied woodpeckers come regularly to our feeding stations.

Woodpeckers are one of my favorite birds to photograph. Since moving to Bixby, OK I have been blessed with a wide variety of woodpeckers that frequent the yard. The list includes:

1. Downy Woodpecker
2. Hairy Woodpecker
3. Red-bellied Woodpecker
4. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
5. Northern Flicker
6. Pileated Woodpecker
7. Red-headed Woodpecker



## WOODPECKER BONANZA!



# PEARLS OF WISDOM?

*The best way to improve your photography is to get out and make more images*

You have probably heard it before but I will say it again – If you want to improve your photography skills take more photos, rather *make* more photos.

This is especially true in outdoor photography such as wildlife and landscape photography. These genres of photography do not afford as much control over the process of making an image as does say, studio photography. Or does it?

Shooting in the great outdoors does have special challenges, but the more you do it the better you will get at mastering those challenging situations when they arise. *The three P's of wildlife and outdoor photography are: Patience, Persistence, and Planning*, it's the only way you will learn how to recognize a potential problem and know how to deal with it.

When I started in wildlife photography film was the only medium so I had to wait days

to see my images. When was in the field back then, I seemed to always get exposure compensation backwards - I used to struggle with light subjects on dark backgrounds, or dark subjects on light backgrounds. (I blamed the excitement of the moment). Digital photography instantly let me know if I had it right or not. After a few sessions in the backyard with a white teddy bear and a black sheet, along with a black pillow and a white sheet, I got it down to an automatic reaction. The point is that I practiced. In today's digital world you do not have any excuse to not practice your technique – it does not have any costs associated with it like we did in the film days.



Persistence is important when shooting in the outdoors too. Not only do you have to practice persistently, you have to be persistent in getting the images you want to capture. Not every sunrise or sunset have those gorgeous clouds and colors in them – you have to keep going back. Not every wild creature you want to photograph will come within range of your lens – you have to keep going back. Being in the field at the right time and in the right place takes persistence and patience.

Patience is a virtue when it comes to wildlife photography. Not only do you have to be patient with your subjects, you have to be patient with yourself. It is not all going to happen for you overnight. Learn every thing you can about the subject you want to photograph. Learn about the landscapes you want to capture. More importantly, learn your camera and how it operates. And again, get out there and shoot!



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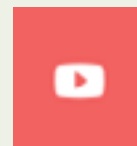
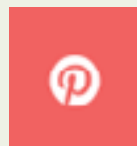
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# Parting Shot



*Patience and persistence pay off. I knew the adults were feeding their young – I just had to be there and be ready. Hours of waiting was worth it – do you agree?*