



Where the Buffalo Roam

An ambitious nonprofit initiative is restoring a vast swath of Montana ranchland to the wild, with a luxe lodge, backcountry cabins, and trail systems, creating an experience rivaling that of a national park. **Darrell Hartman** heads to the Great Plains to see this supersize conservation project in action.

Trails to the new backcountry yurts of American Prairie Reserve, a privately owned expanse of restored grassland in northeastern Montana.

WE SPILLED OUT of the woods and into a sweep of straw-colored prairie grass. To the west, above a zigzag of barbed-wire fencing, round hills bulged in the sun. Straight ahead, an eyeful of classic Montana big sky soared up from a pedestal of flat buttes. *So this is why people dream about the American West*, I thought. Another hour of hiking, around prickly pear and spiked coronets of yucca, brought us to the top of a ridge. The silver belt of the Missouri River lay below, with colonnades of cottonwoods exploding in lemon-lime colors along its banks.

The land would have looked quite similar when Lewis and Clark made their way through in 1805. Remarkably, a generation from now, it will bear an even greater resemblance to its original state. Fences will be gone. Bison will be back. Other native wildlife will return in larger numbers, too, speeding the reversion of this spread of high plains—known as the PN Ranch—to the more varied, resilient ecosystem it was before the arrival of white settlers.

That, at least, is the stirring promise of American Prairie Reserve, a nonprofit that has acquired leasing rights or outright ownership of some 400,000 acres in northeastern Montana, PN Ranch included, during the past 14 years. →

Having amassed holdings slightly larger than Utah's Canyonlands National Park, the Bozeman-based organization is laying the first real groundwork for a wave of visitors. Recent years have brought significant land acquisitions, an education center, and new campsites and lodgings, including the plush safari compound Kestrel Camp, a cluster of five luxury yurts on a remote expanse of prairie. Avenues for exploration are blossoming, too, in the form of a hut-to-hut trail system, inspired by those in the Alps, that links a series of humbly furnished backcountry lodges.

So-called rewilding projects that rely on tourism are afoot throughout the world. Ted Turner has been pumping millions into land- and species-restoration projects on two New Mexico ranches he owns, and has introduced a variety of luxury adventure experiences there with his company Ted Turner Expeditions. In Brazil, the photographer Sebastião Salgado is reforesting 1,750 acres of his family's denuded farmland, which is now known as Instituto Terra and is open to guests. The Netherlands-based nonprofit Rewilding Europe has begun hosting safari tours to view restored wildlife populations in regions as far-flung as Ukraine's Danube Delta and Portugal's Côa Valley. Though high-end retreats bring in much-needed funds, the bigger goal is visibility. Visitors enjoy themselves, word spreads, and public support for these privately led conservation efforts grows.

The hut system's first two solar-powered, two-yurt compounds were up when I visited last fall. (Two more will open by next spring, and an additional six thereafter.) One of them came into view as we rounded a corner: a pair of low cones, each 30 feet across, with bunk space for nine and a comfortably conjoined kitchen area. I grabbed a cold Montana wheat beer and bounded up a knoll to join our trip leader, Mike Quist Kautz, for the sunset. A 40-year-old Mainer, Kautz has worked in operations in Yellowstone National Park and, back east, as the manager of the Appalachian Mountain Club's celebrated hiker huts. "You're coming here for the sense of vastness, for the silence at night," he says. "It's the entirety of the place, rather than some specific route or point."

We'd traced one route earlier that day, canoeing six miles down the swift, shallow Judith River, then hoofing it for a similar distance. PN Ranch has 27 miles of river (including 17 on the Missouri) and roughly 60 miles of track and dirt road for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding. And it's just a fraction of the land available for visitors to explore.

Sean Gerrity, APR's founder and managing director, is a tall, broad-shouldered Montanan. I met him in Bozeman at the organization's headquarters, where a survey map hung on the wall. I struggled to take in the jigsaw puzzle of private and public lands. But as Gerrity →



HOW TO VISIT

To reach American Prairie Reserve, a vast expanse of Montana grassland now being returned to its natural state, fly in to Billings, Bozeman, or Great Falls, all at least four hours away. A four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended. The reserve's accommodations range from high-end to bare-bones. To book, visit americanprairie.org.

KESTREL CAMP

The five private yurts are decked out with feather beds and corduroy armchairs. Guided nature tours and chef-prepared meals are part of the package. Two-night stays from \$2,000 per person.

PN RANCH

Two double-yurt compounds are open for bookings. These comfortable, self-catering lodgings provide access to a 47,000-acre former ranch. Yurts \$125.

BUFFALO CAMP

Its platform-tent sites, which have bathroom facilities, are a five-minute drive from the Enrico Education & Science Center. The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge nearby is a bird-watching destination. Campsites from \$10.



At American Prairie Reserve's Kestrel Camp, an ecotourism lodge, the guest rooms and shared lounge are all in luxe yurts.



American Prairie Reserve could become the closest thing on earth to a fully functioning temperate grassland ecosystem.

explained his plan to add 500,000 acres to 3 million acres of federally protected wildlife zones, the visuals started making sense. The Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge—which constitute the bulk of that acreage—extend across central Montana, following the Missouri River. APR acquisitions of all shapes and sizes sprout off of it. PN Ranch, at the western edge of the survey area, is one of the largest. With the recent purchase of this and another plot of roughly the same size, APR is now about 80 percent of the way to its vision: a 3.5 million-acre mega-reserve. It would be the largest allotment of its kind in the continental United States—Yellowstone is a mere 2.2 million acres—and the closest thing on earth to a fully functioning temperate grassland ecosystem.

Much of the \$140 million the reserve has raised to date has come courtesy of deep-pocketed donors. It counts Ken Burns, Tom Brokaw, Ralph Lauren, and the historian David McCullough among its supporters. These enthusiasts of the West recognize the project's legacy potential, especially with crowding in national parks at an all-time high and the status of federal lands increasingly uncertain. Upper Missouri River Breaks, a national monument since 2001, was briefly one of 27 such designations placed under "review" by President Trump during his first year in office.

From PN Ranch, we drove four hours east to Kestrel Camp, located just outside the Russell Refuge. The scientific staff leads tours of the property in modified Mercedes-Benz Sprinter vans, and the yurt interiors are furnished with plush rugs, wooden dressers, ceiling fans, and framed wildlife art. The chef, Daniel Wendell, drives up from Bozeman with a kitchen crew when there's a booking. The night I arrived, he served a rich chowder of seared Montana walleye, dashi, cream, and bacon stock, spotted with fennel oil. The short ribs that followed, sourced from APR's wildlife-friendly ranching partners, had been coaxed to tender perfection by 16 hours of braising.

Wendell worked at Chez Panisse and ran restaurants in Anchorage before setting himself up as a private chef and caterer in Bozeman. He's pulled off some surprising things in these culinary badlands, arranging Missouri River paddlefish roe atop sous vide eggs and finding ways to use foraged rose hips, wild onions, and edible ground orchids. Wendell has even made gelato out of toasted prairie grass. "It tastes like graham crackers," he told me.

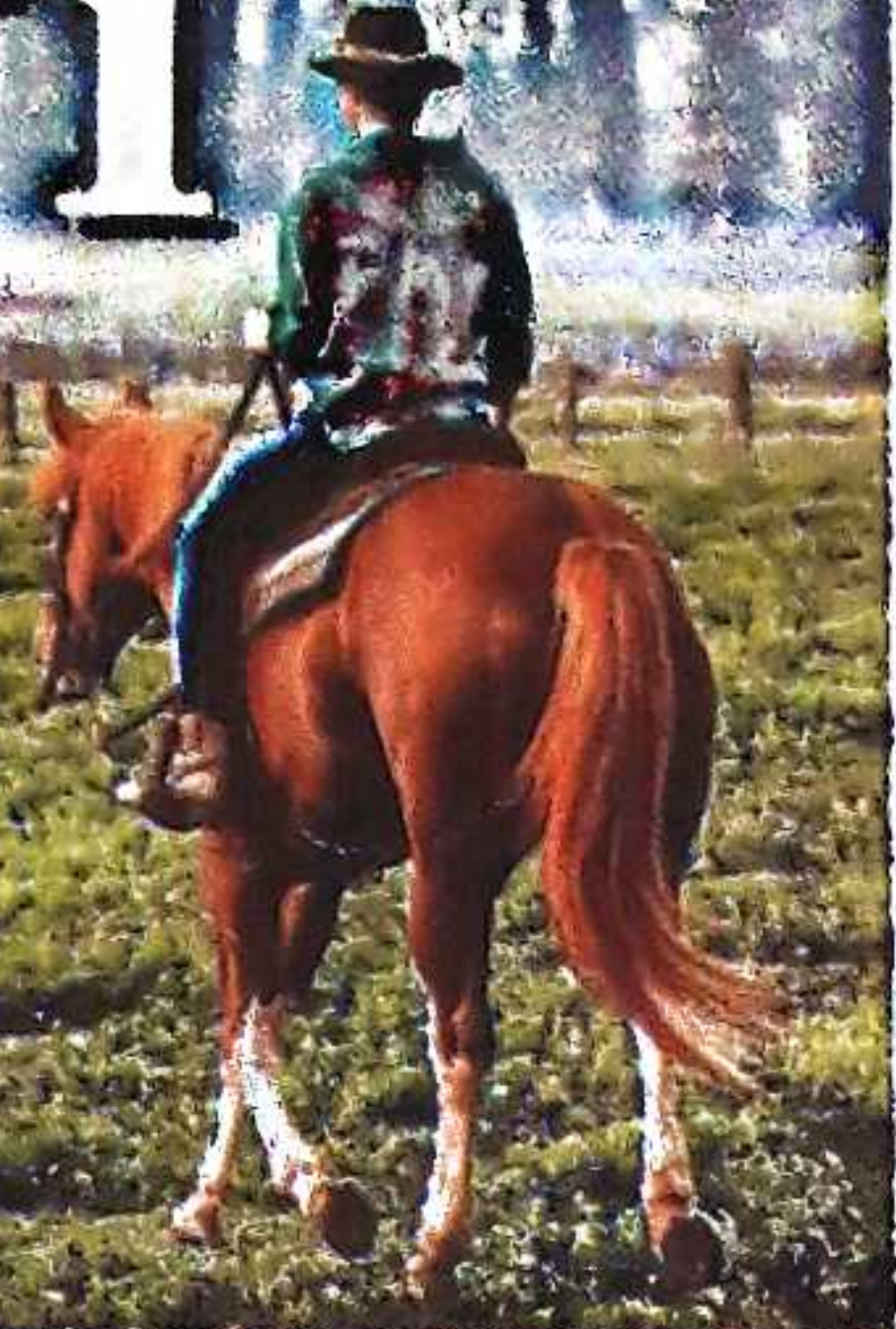
Local critics decry the project as an elitist land grab, which might explain why many of the reserve's latest initiatives seem designed to soften its image as a lark undertaken by rich outsiders. Last year, it started offering annual memberships for the modest sum of \$10 a year, which gets you APR merchandise and invitations to special events. Recreation maps became available this spring. A second RV-friendly campground will open in September, with 20 overnight sites, four cabins, and a bathhouse. A road tripper need barely get off Route 191 to →

From top: Existing roads on the Montana prairie have been converted into hiking and biking trails; canoeing down the Judith River is a popular excursion for American Prairie Reserve visitors.



Three Perfect Pins: Lānaʻi

with Anela Evans



The island of Lānaʻi – which is a short ferry ride from Maui – is an entire island off the beaten path. Anela Evans was born and raised on Lānaʻi and shares a special connection to this unique place full of solitary beaches, breathtaking landscapes and *wahi pana* (storied and sacred places). Here are her top Lānaʻi spots:



LĀNAʻI CULTURE & HERITAGE CENTER

“This is a great first stop to learn about Lānaʻi’s history and traditions. It helps us to be better cultural practitioners and genuine Hawaiian people if we allow visitors to really understand the essence of our culture.”



HULOPOʻE BAY

“One of my favorite spots, especially to enjoy the sunset. Wide and open, there’s never more than a few people on the beach at any given time. It’s located right by the Four Seasons Lānaʻi, where I work as a cultural liaison.”



KAUNOLŪ VILLAGE

“This is one of the most significant *wahi pana* on Lānaʻi, surrounded by dramatic cliffs and ocean. It’s a U.S. National Historic Landmark.”

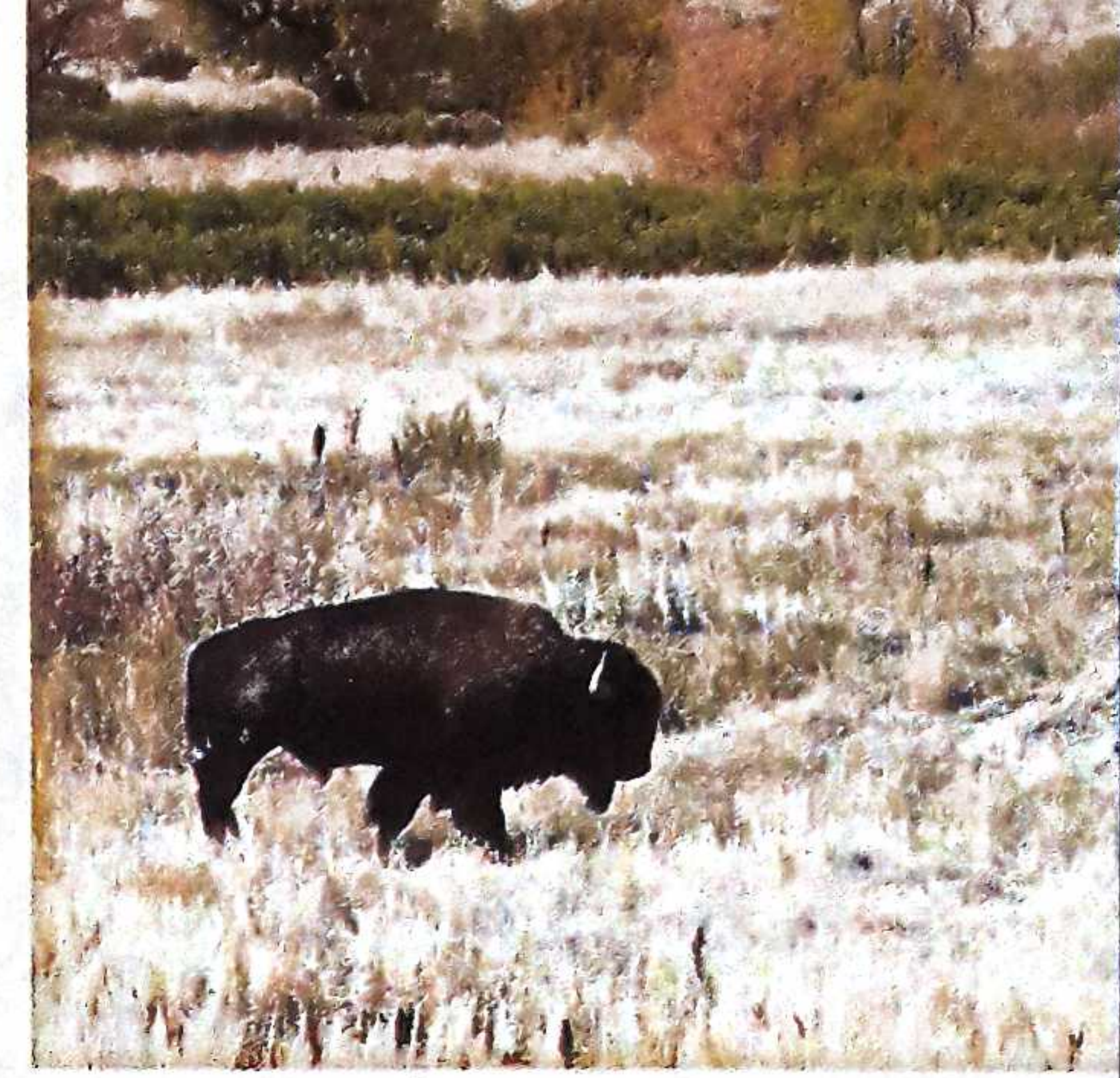
LĀNAʻI

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DISPATCH

American Prairie Reserve's bison herd has grown from just 16 animals to 800.



reach it. For backpackers, the new hut-to-hut system is a comfortable way to get off the grid. The structures will be connected via public and private roads, and eventually a combination of hiking, biking, and horseback routes.

The next morning, we piled into a van at Kestrel Camp and headed into the Russell Refuge. The sage and wheatgrass undulated like swells in the sea. Once a hunting ground for the Crow, Blackfeet, Sioux, and Assiniboine nations, this swath of gently rolling prairie now has a reputation as a bird-watcher’s paradise. It’s home to raptors, owls, migrating shorebirds, and the sage grouse, whose elaborate chest-puffing courtship dance has made it a star of international wildlife films. At one point our driver spotted a coyote on the roadside about 50 feet ahead. It peered at us calmly, trotted forward a few paces, and stopped to look back again.

My last stop was Buffalo Camp, a creekside clearing with RV hookups, tent platforms, and interpretive panels that designate points of interest. Bison love to scratch their backs against

the signs’ sharp steel corners. The reserve’s herd has grown to 800. A lone bull plodding through the campsite raised its massive head to eye me. This backyard Serengeti may not offer the big-game bonanza of its African counterpart, but to an American, at least, it’s just as captivating.

The newness of the American Prairie Reserve project creates that rare feeling of having a special place almost entirely to yourself. But I also remembered something Gerrity had said back in Bozeman about the importance of the reserve’s aging process. “The older it gets, the more people are going to cherish it. The harder they’re going to fight to protect it.” ✕

Darrell Hartman is a Brooklyn-based writer and the cofounder of the travel website Jungles in Paris.

AMERICAN WILDERNESS, RECLAIMED

Large-scale restoration projects open to visitors are under way on private land throughout the country. Here are three great ecotourism options.

LADDER RANCH, NEW MEXICO

One of three New Mexico properties in the Ted Turner Expeditions portfolio, this 156,000-acre ranch includes diverse terrain and a 19th-century ghost town. Endangered frogs, tortoises, and wolves are among the species being reintroduced. Private stays are available in Turner’s five-bedroom house, which sleeps up to 11. tedturnerexpeditions.com; fully staffed house from \$3,000.

HIGH LONESOME RANCH, COLORADO

Guests stay in the main house, private cabins, or deluxe safari tents at this high-end ranch in the western Rockies. The land offers everything from elk hunting to horseback riding; among the conservation efforts are restorations of native grassland and trout-friendly creek habitat. The chef is an alum of Chicago’s Alinea, and his tasting menu is not to be missed. thehighlonesomeranch.com; doubles from \$1,635.

NACHUSA GRASSLANDS, ILLINOIS

The Nature Conservancy runs this 3,500-acre reserve of tallgrass prairie, which is home to more than 100 native bison. Two hours west of Chicago, it is perhaps the most accessible place in the U.S. to see free-roaming bison. The park is open only during daylight, but Lincoln Way Inn, a B&B in a lovingly restored Victorian house nearby, makes an ideal base. nachusagrasslands.org; lincolnwayinn.com; doubles from \$139.