

AT HOME ON THE RANGE

FIND YOUR CORNER OF WILD IN NORTH DAKOTA'S
THEODORE ROOSEVELT NATIONAL PARK

By Robert Earle Howells

Clouds roll in above the Little Missouri River, in a national park named after a president who fell in love with and worked to protect this landscape.



Dollar bills and cowboy hats fill the rafters of the Little Missouri Saloon and Dining Room in Medora. Opposite: A bucking bronco adorns the Ghost Riders belt buckle of Lyle Glass, a Medora actor and wildlife photographer.



I OWN a prairie dog colony in North Dakota. Not that its residents are impressed with me at the moment. The trail I'm walking bisects their turf, and they've come out in force to scold me for the intrusion.

My prairie dog town is in the 70,000-acre Theodore Roosevelt National Park, which is mine too, as are the granite walls of El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park, the lakes of Michigan's Isle Royale National Park, and the stalactites and stalagmites of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park. Simply by being an American, I hold collective title to these and other profoundly beautiful places—an inventory that is the envy of the world—thanks to the establishment of the National Park Service a century ago.

Just beyond my prairie dog colony, a movement, something large, catches my eye. Bison? Bighorn sheep? I veer off-trail and spot four mustangs grazing near a copse of junipers. As I edge toward them, they warily edge away. Then one prances and the others follow, inscribing an arc around me.

Then it strikes me: What could be more fun, more free, than to be a mustang with thousands of acres of grassland to roam?

I'M DRAWN TO U.S. NATIONAL PARKS for many reasons, none unusual, all deeply meaningful. In a world where wildlife is disappearing, where open space is scarce, where noise is ubiquitous and natural beauty and tranquility are hard to come by, places like Theodore Roosevelt National Park represent respite and refuge, a balm for modern life.

The 24-year-old Theodore Roosevelt came to this area in 1883 for similar reasons, though with his own predilections. A privileged Easterner, Harvard graduate, book author, member of the New York State Assembly, and avid naturalist, he shared with many of the time a fascination with the West and a concern that it was changing forever. The Transcontinental Railroad now stretched across the country, towns were popping up—and what would be the final great bison hunt had just taken place.

This iconic animal of the American West, once up to 60 million strong, had been reduced to a few straggling herds roaming the badlands of the Dakota Territory. And the man who would become a towering figure in American conservation—helping preserve millions of acres and crusading to save game animals from extinction—was determined to hunt and kill one of those few remaining bison and mount its head on his wall. So

MICHAEL MELFORD (SALOON, BUCKLE); PREVIOUS PAGES: CHUCK HANEY

in September 1883, Roosevelt made the multiday journey by train to the hamlet of Little Missouri, in the Dakota Territory, secured the services of crack guide Joe Ferris, and within days shot a big bull bison. It would be the last bison Ferris saw on the Dakota range.

In the course of his hunting trip, Roosevelt became infatuated with the Dakota landscape, just as I am 134 years later. He extolled its immense, silent space, describing it as “a high, nearly treeless region of light rainfall, crossed by streams which are sometimes rapid torrents and sometimes merely strings of shallow pools. In places it stretches out...into nearly level prairies of short grass, extending for many miles without a break; elsewhere there are rolling hills, sometimes of considerable height; and in other places the ground is rent and broken into the most fantastic shapes, partly by volcanic action and partly by the action of water in a dry climate.”

For me the vastness of the Dakota horizons, the green of the grass in June, the emptiness of the landscape are utterly thrilling, heart-expanding. Driving scenic byways in the park’s two big sections, the South and North Units (about 70 miles apart), hiking their trails, gazing out at smooth prairies yielding to barren escarpments and striking sandstone formations, I exult in the park’s wild grandeur.

T. R. did too. By the midpoint of his hunting trip, he was so captivated by this part of the Dakota Territory that he decided

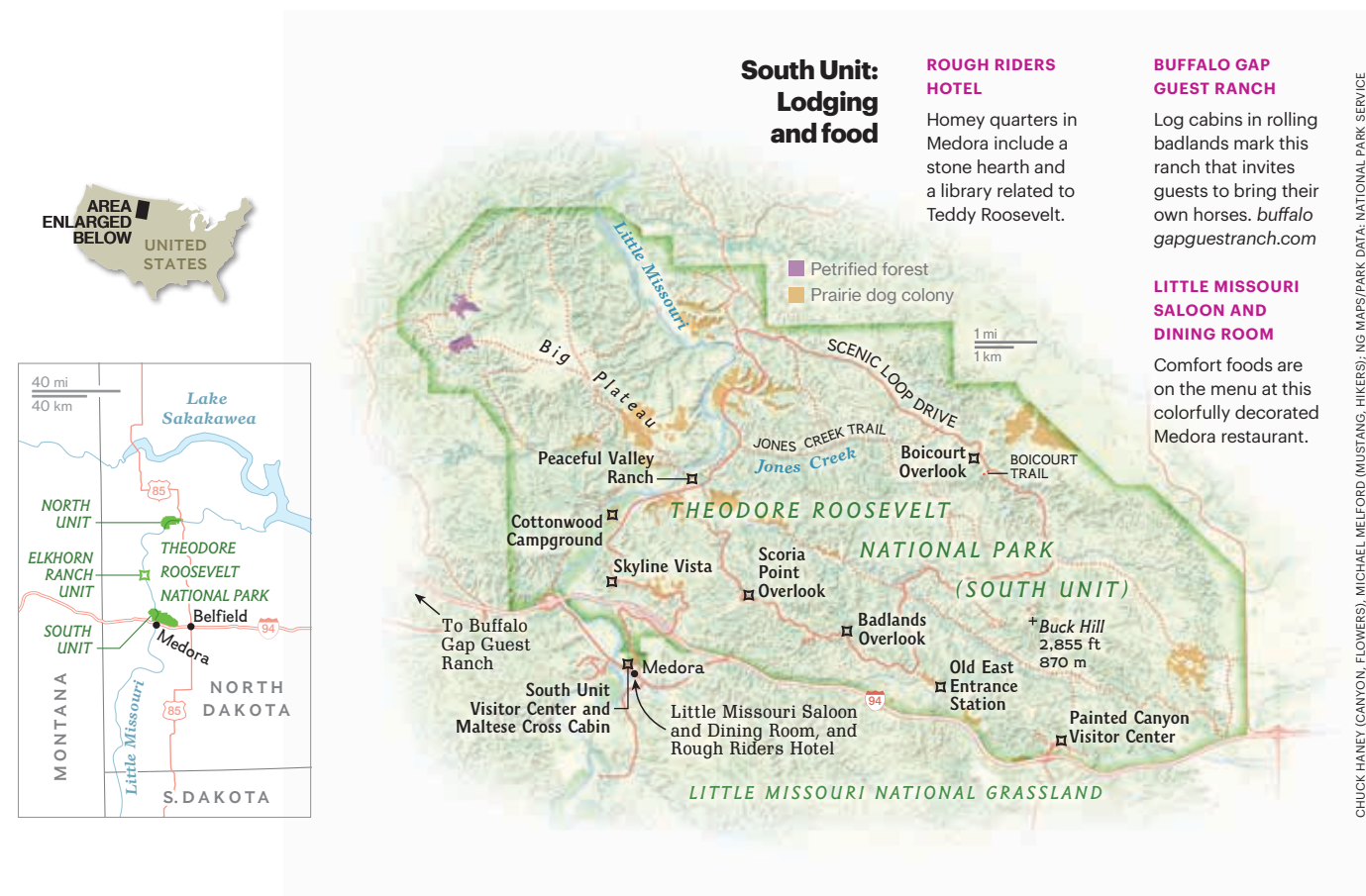
to become a Dakota cattleman. One night, after a miserably rainy day of hunting and slogging through mud, the irrepressible Easterner dashed off a check for \$14,000 to two cowboys who’d agreed to purchase several hundred cattle in his name. It was a considerable chunk of change, but as biographer Edmund Morris has written, “a small price to pay for so much freedom.” That winter Roosevelt had a cabin built, forever cementing his connection to this land.

CAUTION: FREQUENT STOPS

It’s possible to make the 36-mile Scenic Loop Drive through the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in less than a couple of hours, take in the views, and move on. But the route, the land, the views, all beg for a slow pace, akin to that of the languidly flowing Little Missouri River, which meanders through the park and its small gateway town of Medora.

My first morning stop: the South Unit Visitor Center, where ranger Michael Irving circles park highlights on my map. When I press him to recommend some hikes, he demurs. “Take all the short nature trails,” he says. “They’ll give you a sense of the park and its habitats. After that, you choose.” He also affirms what I’ve learned from decades of visiting national parks: If there’s a sign for a scenic viewpoint, it’s there for a reason. The National Park Service always points to the best of the best. Just as important, I’ve also learned, is to improvise and venture down

Ranger-led hikers in the not-so-bad badlands may encounter the South Unit’s Painted Canyon, galloping mustangs, and prairie smoke flowers.





Once nearly extinct, bison in the hundreds now roam throughout the park but are best viewed from afar.

a trail not knowing what to expect—except that your curiosity will be rewarded.

Right behind the visitors center I find Roosevelt's cabin, called the Maltese Cross Cabin, relocated from its original site south of here. I'm moved when I see the small writing desk where Roosevelt wrote several of his books during his Dakota time and a trunk marked with his initials, "T. R."

I then set out on the park's scenic drive but within minutes brake at a sign that reads, "Do Not Feed the Prairie Dogs." I have no prairie dog food but scan the ground for the large rodents. Ranger Irving had told me they're gaining recognition from biologists as ecological movers and shakers. The way they mow the vegetation around their burrows, scientists are learning, encourages the growth of particularly nutritious prairie grasses that make prairie dog towns attractive to elk. "If you want to see elk," Irving told me, "visit a dog town around dusk."

Back on the road, I motor through Cottonwood Campground, a space shaded by cottonwood trees bordering the Little Missouri River, known hereabouts as the Little Mo. Families are emerging from tents, some to commence breakfast rituals on portable stoves, bringing back memories of such mornings on my childhood camping trips to national parks, when my mother would serve corned beef hash and pancakes to three hungry fledglings and our hurry-up-the-fish-are-biting dad.

I pause at Scoria Point Overlook to observe some literally scorched earth. Scoria is a red-rock striation that occurs when coal beds in the badlands are torched by a lightning strike, causing them to burn, often for years; the sediment that tops the coal turns red from the oxidation of iron. Farther along, I set off on the Boicourt Overlook Trail and soon reach a promontory that casts out over the park's rolling-hills-and-badlands terrain before quickly narrowing to a ridge, then to a skinny path that drops steeply down three sides. Barely a quarter-mile round-trip but very, very cool. I continue my exploration along the Jones Creek Trail. Like me, this trail has no particular destination; it will be as much meditation as hike. Meadowlarks flit around me, frogs blurt from still pools in the creek, and dark-eyed juncos trill from clusters of junipers—perfect examples of the rewards of whimsical travel.

Next stop is the trailhead for a half-mile hike to the Old East Entrance Station, a small stone hut built by Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers in the mid-1930s. Structures commissioned under this jobs program created by President Franklin Roosevelt dot the national parks. The CCC built, among other things, park trails, roads, and fire-lookout towers. Here its work shows in superb stone craftsmanship, with huge sandstone blocks, quarried by CCC men, neatly fitted into walls.

Back on the road, I come upon my first bison. Several hundred roam the open range in both the South and North Units of the park, showing up where they please and holding up traffic at will. I think I ultimately encounter all of them. More than half a million bison (including a number that reflect crossbreeding



North Unit: Lodging and food

WATFORD

Business travelers like this hotel's clean, contemporary style and attentive service, located 15 miles north of the North Unit Visitor Center. thewatford.com

ROOSEVELT INN & SUITES

Just east of the Watford, this modern hostelry features Roosevelt memorabilia. rooseveltinn.com

FOX HILLS SPORTS GRILL

Popular dishes at this simple restaurant by the Fox Hills Golf Course include the Hangover (a half-pound beef burger with sausage patty). foxhillsgc.com

with cattle) now live on North American ranges, thanks in large measure to the early conservation efforts of bison hunter Teddy Roosevelt. The bulls weigh a ton, can run as fast as some horses, and are known to charge unpredictably. The Park Service has posted signs noting, "Buffalo Are Dangerous," sage advice that we view the continent's largest mammal from afar or from the comfort of our cars. Don't have to persuade me.

RANGERS AT HOME ON THE RANGE

When many of us think of national parks, we think of rangers leading nature hikes and campfire talks. I'm happy to report that these traditions endure at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, even in these cash-strapped times. One morning I join ranger Erik Jensen and a group of about 20 visitors for a hike through what is believed to be the third largest aggregation of petrified wood in the United States. Joe and Vicki Loren, from Michigan, are on a national parks tour with their spunky daughters, ages 10 and six. The kids are intensely curious and responsive to ranger Jensen's every question. As we walk among the stony stumps of 60-million-year-old bald cypress trees, Joe shares the family's affection for parks. "We love that they're as natural as you can get and that they're respected. Yellowstone is crowded,

(Continued on page 98)



Billed as *The Greatest Show in the West*, the "Medora Musical" runs all summer and celebrates the life of Theodore Roosevelt.

Theodore Roosevelt National Park

(Continued from page 82)

but hey—it’s for everybody.” Both girls, he notes, are keen wildlife spotters. “Seven different herds of feral horses yesterday! Ah, to have young eyes.”

Another visitor in our group, Marlene Young, of Minneapolis, is such a parks fan that she hosted a viewing party the night Ken Burns’s *National Parks* documentary series debuted.

“I know this is the same sky as other places, but it’s just so big here. That’s what I love. That’s what I came for.” Young is on her first solo camping trip, a postdivorce journey that she is finding both uplifting and healing.

The petrified forest—really the fossilized remains of fallen tree trunks—lies in rugged badlands in the western part of the South Unit. Accessible by dirt road, the petrified forest itself is roadless. At one point, ranger Jensen invites us to sit and listen. To nothing. A breeze, a swish of prairie grasses, our heartbeats.

When the long summer day finally yields to a moonless night, I join another group of campers and telescope-toting docents for a ranger-guided, no-flashlights-allowed walk “to see the sky as Theodore Roosevelt saw it.” Forks of lightning stab the horizon, but the overhead sky remains jet-black clear. We watch the Milky Way appear, and gaze through the park telescopes at a showy Saturn, a half Venus (it has phases), and distant nebulae.

NORTH COUNTRY

The park’s North Unit is 70 miles north of the South Unit and quite a bit smaller. Lacking a folksy gateway town like Medora, it also is less visited, which means I have the 14-mile Scenic Drive almost to myself. The route laces together viewpoints, hiking trails, and one of the most famous picnic sites in the National Park System: the River Bend Overlook Shelter, another example of skilled stone craftsmanship by the CCC, in 1937, and now a backdrop for many a wedding. Far below the shelter snakes a great bend of the Little Missouri River, lined by a thick ribbon of cottonwood trees. An escarpment of sandstone badlands parallels the river in the distance.

At one point the Scenic Drive narrows to a single unpaved lane because of a washout, reminding me of something ranger Eileen Andes said: “The same geological processes that give us beautiful scenery also give us challenges. In seven years here, I’ve seen the North Unit road stay open all summer only once.” This challenge applies to the entire National Park System as it tries to maintain safe roads and visitor-friendly amenities in wild, often remote backcountry with a maintenance backlog of \$11.9 billion.

Another challenge: industries, such as North Dakota’s Bakken oil fields, that sit just beyond the borders of many national parks. As I drive U.S. Highway 85 through the Little Missouri National Grassland near the park’s eastern outskirts, I see countless oil wells, along with camps for workers. Park rangers share with

me their concerns about the former oil boom, including traffic, dust, poor air quality, nighttime light pollution, contamination from fracking fluids—and the effects of all these on animal populations and their migratory routes. On the other hand, “quite a few of our visitors are from the oil fields,” ranger Andes tells me. “We’re a refuge for them. More than ever, there’s a desperate need for a place like this.”

CRADLE OF CONSERVATION

Theodore Roosevelt originally traveled west to hunt, but he would return for the kind of solace only wild places offer. Five months after his first Dakota trip, his young wife, Alice, died on Valentine’s Day, 1884, of an illness shortly after giving birth to their daughter. Only a few hours earlier, Roosevelt’s mother, Martha, had succumbed to typhoid.

Heartbroken, Roosevelt retreated to the North Dakota prairie and poured himself into ranch life. He bought more cattle and established a second spread, which he named Elkhorn Ranch. Working the range, he would ride saddle for 18 hours at a time rounding up cattle. He also indulged his passion for hunting by organizing big game expeditions. Ranch life and his hunts—“the free, self-reliant, adventurous life,” he called it—would become the subjects of two books he penned in solitude here.

My strongest communion with Roosevelt comes during a full day I spend alone at what remains of Elkhorn Ranch, which is about an hour’s drive north, mostly on good dirt roads, from the South Unit Visitor Center. Only a few foundation stones indicate the outline of the ranch house, but the setting looks much as the future American president described it.

“Just in front of the ranch veranda is a line of old cottonwoods that shade it during the fierce heats of summer, rendering it always cool and pleasant. But a few feet beyond these trees comes the cut-off bank of the river, through whose broad, sandy bed the shallow stream winds as if lost.”

No one else ventures up to Elkhorn Ranch during the day I spend there. I sit a few hours under Roosevelt’s cottonwoods, reading, writing, and musing on a summer morning. I hear the sounds of crickets, the pat of raindrops, and the hoarse squawk of a ring-necked pheasant. And I consider how these Dakota prairies profoundly affected the man who would go on to extend federal protection to 230 million acres of America’s public lands.

In Roosevelt’s day, I could have ridden the region “for a month without striking a furrow or a fence,” a far cry from today’s reality of drilling and fracking. Yet in Theodore Roosevelt National Park I still can draw inspiration from its boundless spaces, stare into its starry skies, sit for hours, and hear only the rustle of its prairie grasses. May this park inspire all of us to appreciate what we have, and motivate us to do what we must do: love our parks, fund them, and preserve them forever.

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