A HAPPY HERD of bison roams this Montana mountain valley. They look like huge shaggy cows and smell just as bad. They grunt at each other as they munch prairie grass. Babies hop and play.

One hundred years ago, it would’ve been hard to imagine a herd this big. Back then, bison had almost disappeared from North America for good. But this herd has made such a comeback that it grew too big for this valley in Montana’s National Bison Range. Not long ago, sixteen bison from this herd were moved away to start a new herd. They traveled 900 miles to Colorado, a place where bison lived for hundreds of years before settlers arrived. In a way, the sixteen bison were going home.
A Disappearing Act

When people first arrived in North America thousands of years ago, bison roamed all over. They lived as far east as New York City and as far south as Mexico. Most, however, lived on the Great Plains, including present day Colorado. When Europeans arrived, millions of bison still roamed the plains. There were so many, one explorer said they looked like a “black robe” covering the land.

Sadly, by 1893, only about 300 bison remained.

How could millions of animals disappear? For hundreds of years the Native Americans had lived alongside the bison. They depended on the animals for food and fur, but killed only what they needed. Some Native American peoples consider bison sacred. They believe they have a spiritual connection with the animals.
When Europeans arrived, they had different ideas about how the animals should be treated—and they brought guns. Guns killed bison faster than the bows and arrows Native Americans used. As European settlers moved west, they killed entire herds to make room for their towns and ranches. By the 1860s, railroads stretched across the plains, helping more people move west. Settlers slaughtered bison in huge numbers for food, fur, and sometimes just for fun. The U.S. Army even encouraged settlers to kill bison so that Native Americans wouldn’t have any food, forcing them to move away from the plains. Soon, bison were nearly extinct.

### Saving the Bison

But some Americans weren’t ready to say goodbye to bison. William Hornaday, the director of the Bronx Zoo...
Zoo in New York City, had a plan to save them. In 1899 he brought some to his zoo, starting a herd. He went on to found the American Bison Society in 1905, with help from President Theodore Roosevelt. Two years later, the first bison preserve opened in Oklahoma. Fifteen bison that lived there had come from the Bronx Zoo.

Today, at least 200,000 bison live in the United States. Most of them are raised on private ranches for meat. Some are free ranging, which means they roam wild. The largest free ranging herd, numbering around 4,000 bison, lives in Yellowstone National Park. About 20,000 wild bison live in national parks and National Wildlife Refuges, areas where they are protected by the government. The National Bison Range in Montana, the area we mentioned at the beginning of this story, is one of these National Wildlife Refuges.
Making a Home on the Range

On moving day, the sixteen Montana bison trotted into a trailer and rode over mountains and plains for 900 miles. Finally they arrived at their new home: the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, a new National Wildlife Refuge near Denver, Colorado.

The sixteen bison needed coaxing to step out of the trailer. “But once on the ground, the bison did what bison do most—graze,” said Steve Berendzen, their former Refuge Manager. They munched prairie grass and made themselves right at home.

The scientists there soon got to know their new huge, furry friends. Each bison has its own personality. Some even have favorite grasses to eat. They “talk” to each other—roars, grunts, sneezes, snorts, and bawls all have different meanings. Bison herds have hierarchies, too, which means each animal has a rank.

“Perhaps most interesting of all,” said Steve, “they like to have fun. The herd will sometimes race to a watering tank for no other reason than fun.”

Bison are the largest wild animal in America today. Male bison, called bulls, grow up to 6½ feet tall and weigh up to 2,000 pounds. That’s as much as a small car! Females, called cows, weigh less, around
The last one over is a rotten egg!

Despite their massive size, bison can run as fast as many horses—up to 40 miles per hour when they’re scared!

1,200 pounds. These huge animals need to eat a lot of grass—up to 24 pounds per day.

The bison’s big appetite keeps grasslands healthy. Something has to eat all that grass. When the bison disappeared, fewer animals grazed, and weeds began to overtake the prairie. This changed the balance of prairie grasses, flowers, and shrubs. But now that the bison are back in Colorado, the balance there might be restored.

North America might never again see millions of bison roaming the plains. But preserves like the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge help grow the population. Since 2007, when the sixteen bison moved to Colorado, the Refuge herd has grown to 86 bison. And when a herd moves near a big city like Denver, more people get a chance to meet these majestic creatures. The Rocky Mountain Arsenal teaches visitors how important bison are to the American grasslands. More importantly, it gives bison a place to call home.

Bison at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal live within sight of the city of Denver. Over 330,000 people visit them per year.

Yessir, I figured it'd take sumpin' meaner than coaglin'—gentle urging—to get back our herd.

Yep, like really, really bad singin'.