



Prairies

News from Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota | Fall 2023

to Pines

Buffalo Head Home to Tribal Lands

Indigenous Peoples have long protected lands and waters, maintaining the balance of nature. But hundreds of years of U.S. policy and violence against Native people decimated Tribal Nations' cultures, traditions, and connection to their land.

Before colonization, buffalo were integral to daily Native life. They provided food, shelter, and clothing, as well as deep cultural and spiritual connection. Buffalo are a keystone species that play an integral role in thousands of natural relationships across North America.

But in the 1800s, the U.S. government endorsed the killing of buffalo in order to starve Native communities and force them off their land. War and genocide further eroded Native Nations and affected the lands and animals they stewarded.

Restoring Resilience

Now, two Native-led organizations, the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) and the Tanka Fund, are driving efforts to restore buffalo to Native American Tribal lands.

As a result of the efforts of ITBC and others, more than 25,000 buffalo have returned to roam on their ancestral Tribal lands for the first time in over 200 years.

"The significance of buffalo extends beyond their physical presence on the land," says Troy Heinert, Sicangu Lakota, ITBC executive director. "They represent a positive force toward spiritual and cultural revitalization, ecological restoration and conservation, food sovereignty, health, economic development and much more as each buffalo is brought back home."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 2** A Historic Investment in Conservation
- 3** Conservation News in Brief
- 6** By the Numbers
- 7** Giving on the Frontlines of Climate: Meet the Dolliffs



A Historic Investment in Conservation

Minnesota invests \$2 billion in environment, energy and climate.

In May, Minnesota legislators passed a groundbreaking environment, energy and climate bill. The Nature Conservancy worked alongside partners and coalitions to advocate for policies in the bill protecting land and water, and tackling climate change.

“We are facing two crises—the loss of biodiversity and climate change,” says TNC Chapter Director Ann Mulholland. “It’s time for us to scale up our work to match the enormity of these challenges. These investments are a critical step in the right direction for Minnesota.”

Our government relations team set a goal for at least \$200 million of the State’s budget to be dedicated to natural climate solutions—actions that protect, manage and restore nature to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and store carbon. Ultimately, we surpassed this goal when the final bill allocated more than \$250 million for natural climate solutions! Your support made this possible.

TNC received funding to work with partners to expand networks of seed collectors and tree planters, and to research planting strategies that will accelerate reforestation in Minnesota. This work will help sequester carbon and improve wildlife habitat.

Research from TNC scientists also informed legislation to restore and protect peatlands in Minnesota. Peatlands are unique for their ability to store and sequester more carbon than any other type of habitat, and Minnesota has more peatlands than any other state in the lower 48.

Both reforestation and peatland restoration are examples of natural climate solutions.

TNC’s advocacy efforts also helped secure passage of \$490 million from the state’s Clean Water Fund and Outdoor Heritage Fund. Of that amount, \$5 million will go to TNC projects. Our conservationists will

acquire, conserve and restore native prairie, savanna and wetlands. This work also benefits the wildlife that depend on these ecosystems.

After several years of advocacy, TNC helped advance legislation to allow voters the chance to renew the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, which is set to expire in 2025. This fund is supported by 40 percent of lottery proceeds and pays for critical conservation projects throughout the state of Minnesota. If the measure on the November 2024 ballot passes, it will continue to operate. Join our policy and advocacy email list to get involved in the campaign to support this ballot measure at nature.org/speakupmn.

This work to save precious lands, waters and wildlife begins with you. Many of you were on the frontlines of this work. Thank you for reaching out to your legislators in support of conservation at the Capitol! Your advocacy ensures that people and nature can thrive.

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36.3
trees preserved for the future



2,714.2 gal.
of water saved



5,266.9 lbs.
CO₂ prevented

COVER © David Glatz/TNC Photo Contest 2019

THIS PAGE Peatlands cover only about 3% of the Earth’s surface, but globally they store an estimated 30% of all land carbon.

© Derek Montgomery



Building a Bulwark in the Black Hills

In a bid to safeguard habitat and preserve vital migratory corridors for wildlife, The Nature Conservancy expanded its Whitney Preserve by 180 acres.

The additional property not only secured safe passageways for mule deer and elk but also enhanced protection for the ecologically significant Cascade Creek.

The land protected by TNC was at risk of development due to its picturesque views and highway access. Now that the preserve has been expanded, a relatively untouched 42,000-acre wildlife corridor within the Black Hills will remain intact.

Expanding Whitney Preserve reduces the risk that development will encroach on conservation lands and will help land managers combat invasive brush that can exacerbate wildfire.

Your support contributed to the preservation of this beautiful and ecologically significant natural area.



Study Shows How Grazing Can Benefit Birds

Researchers Taylor Linder and Susan Ellis-Felege are conducting a cattle grazing study with our chapter's Director of Science, Marissa Ahlering, at The Nature Conservancy's Davis Ranch preserve in North Dakota, and other ranches in the area. They hope to identify grazing patterns that will benefit local birds and ranchers.

Ranchers who use high-intensity, short duration (HISD) grazing practices alternate between short periods of cattle grazing and long periods of rest on their lands. This approach allows pastures more time to recover from natural disturbance, leading to increased plant diversity and a diversity of vegetation structure, which attracts a variety of bird species.

Some birds prefer heavily grazed paddocks with low vegetation, while others seek taller grasses with litter for nest construction. The researchers are evaluating whether HISD grazing can positively impact bird populations by engineering a variety of habitats to suit different needs.

HISD mimics the historic patterns of massive bison herds moving through the prairie, grazing intensely before moving on, followed by rest periods for vegetation regrowth. While smaller in scale, HISD grazing may help build better and more varied habitat for North American grassland birds, whose numbers have declined for decades.



Empowering Minnesota Farmers to Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The Nature Conservancy and the Ecosystem Services Market Consortium launched a pilot project in 2020, enlisting farmers to help tackle climate change and improve water quality. This year, enrollment for conservation practices surged, with farmers signing up 50,000 acres of cropland. Your support of TNC's "Our Water" campaign made this success possible.

The pilot project is gathering information from farm fields, such as soil samples, to establish a carbon sequestration baseline. Participating farmers are also reducing tillage and growing cover crops. These practices allow farm lands to store more carbon in the ground and reduce the amount of fertilizer running off into our rivers, lakes and streams.

By studying the impact of conservation practices on agricultural lands, TNC can help partners and companies establish a market that financially rewards farmers who reduce greenhouse gas emissions and keep water supplies clean.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The ITBC, a federally chartered Tribal organization established in 1992, is a gathering of 82 Tribal Nations based in Rapid City, South Dakota.

The Tanka Fund, based on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, is a nonprofit sister organization to Native American Natural Foods, the creator of the Tanka Bar.

"The Lakota word 'Tanka' means 'great' or 'large.' Our vision—to bring buffalo back to Native lands and people—is just as big and just as significant," says Nick Hernandez, secretary-treasurer of Tanka Fund's Board of Directors. "Buffalo means everything to us. Building up our buffalo herds strengthens Tribes and makes us more resilient."

Partners in Conservation

The Nature Conservancy works with Indigenous Peoples and local communities to support their efforts, learn from their stewardship experiences and amplify their leadership in conserving lands,

waters and ways of life. TNC's partnership with the ITBC, Tanka Fund and Native Nations is an example of this work.

TNC manages about 6,500 buffalo on a dozen preserves across the Great Plains and Midwest. Last year, TNC provided more than 750 buffalo to ITBC that they returned to Native Nations in Minnesota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

Tanka Fund also provided more than 85 buffalo from TNC to Native ranchers in Minnesota and South Dakota to help them grow their businesses and feed their communities. This included 12 buffalo transferred to Native Wise, a Native-owned and operated farm on the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa reservation. David Wise and his wife, Patra, run the farm.

The Wises welcomed the buffalo last fall. They conducted a soil and plant analysis of the pasture before the buffalo arrived so that they can study the impact of their



grazing. David hopes the buffalo will restore the biodiversity of the land and make it more productive for farming, as well as providing a food source.

"It's restored a sense of pride in the community," David says. "I'm known as the buffalo guy around here. Everyone on the reservation is excited to see them."

He plans to grow the herd by adding a bull to the group when the buffalo reach mating age.

TOP: © Michael Forsberg

BOTTOM: The Frederick family cares for a small herd of buffalo at Rez Raised Ranch near Winner, SD. © Alex Romero Frederick

Rematriating Buffalo

Rematriation—the Indigenous concept of restoring balance to the world—captures the benefits of returning buffalo to their original lands.

Buffalo play an important conservation role on the grasslands they roam. Their grazing behavior naturally promotes biodiversity and helps a wide range of plants, insects and amphibians to flourish.

“Cows will graze in one area and beat it to the dirt, but the buffalo move throughout the pasture,” says rancher Alex Romero Frederick. “We noticed they will move through different plants throughout the season. It’s less impact on the land.”

Alex and her husband, Wayne Frederick, run Rez Raised Ranch, where they’ve produced grass-fed beef for 12 years. They dreamed of adding a commercial buffalo herd after Wayne’s experience managing a buffalo herd with his father for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

Last fall, Alex and Wayne welcomed 16 buffalo to their ranch in a transfer organized by Tanka Fund.

“To bring them back, to be able to see them every day is so meaningful to us,” Alex says. “We’re just very thankful and appreciative that we have this chance.”

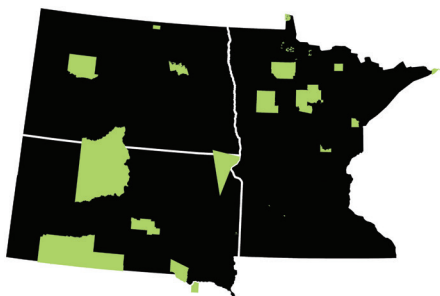
Today, TNC is exploring how we can partner with ITBC, Tanka Fund, and others to restore buffalo at scale, supporting conservation and food sovereignty on Native land. Donors like you are critical to this work. Your generosity provides the staff and resources that TNC needs to bring buffalo home.

David Wise shares, “We have a lot of gratitude to you for these bison. It’s a dream come true.”

To all our donors who made this dream happen: thank you!



By the Numbers



23

Federally recognized Tribes

in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota



96

Tons of seed

from native plants harvested by TNC and partners for prairie restoration in Minnesota



500+

Bison

at our Cross Ranch preserve in North Dakota and Samuel H. Ordway Jr. Memorial Prairie Preserve in South Dakota



31,860

Trees planted

in 2023 alongside scenic Highway 61 and rivers that flow into Lake Superior



946,000

Acres

TNC has helped protect in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota since our chapter's founding

TOP: © Nick Kuntz/TNC; © Richard Hamilton Smith; © Richard Hamilton Smith
BOTTOM: © Derek Montgomery; © John Gregor

Giving on the Frontlines of Climate: Meet the Dolliffs



Growing up near Lake Minnetonka, Roger Dolliff spent hours exploring the neighboring woods. “I was fascinated by the variety of vegetation and occasional boulders randomly placed, and which trees might be suitable for climbing,” he reflects.

For Roger, youth YMCA camps in summertime and canoe trips in the Boundary Waters and Quetico Provincial Park meant long days of paddling and portaging with other campers—hard but rewarding work.

Nature’s playground was also nature’s classroom. “Some favorite plants I would look for were jack-in-the-pulpit, columbine, and in the springtime, I would know where to find wild asparagus, which mom was happy to cook for dinner.”

Decades later, nature is still providing for Roger and his wife Vivian. They spend

summers at their home in Cass Lake, Minnesota, and winters in Palm Desert, and make a habit of visiting national parks.

They’re providing for nature, too. They made their first gift to The Nature Conservancy more than 20 years ago, and ever since then they’ve been energizing and supporting the chapter’s climate work.

The Dolliffs share a hopeful yet pragmatic outlook regarding their giving.

“As Americans we contribute a disproportionate share to the world’s climate problem, so my hope is we continue on a path for alternative sources of energy and move quickly doing so,” Roger says.

Generous donors like the Dolliffs—and you—make TNC’s climate work possible. Thank you!

© Courtesy of the Dolliffs

Leave a Legacy

You can plant a seed now that will make a world of difference for generations to come. Join the Nature Conservancy’s Legacy Club.



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To make a gift TODAY, scan the code.

To view our chapter’s income and expenses, contact us at 612-331-0700 or minnesota@tnc.org



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