

Buffalo get herd-start in Nottoway County



The five-foot high heavy gauge, electric fence reminded me of *Jurassic Park* as I watched Kenny Freitag stand by the feeding trough, can of corn in hand, and send his buffalo-call into the winter air.

Safely outside the enclosure, I looked towards the crest of a distant hill, camera ready, and let my imagination run.

Having seen *Dancing with Wolves*, I knew that an approaching herd of buffalo could make the earth tremble and the sun grow dark from clouds of dust. But before my fantasy could get past the credits, Freitag's four bison, three females and one male, were already at the trough, heads buried to their horns, munching their daily treat of corn. These animals can really run, I thought.

As the bison ate, occasionally breaking their meal for some head butting, Freitag talked about how he came to have a starter herd of bison. Why go out West, when you can stay right here in Nottoway County and have a "home where the buffalo roam," I thought.

I suddenly remembered another movie, *Field of Dreams*: Freitag built a range and the buffalo came! Apparently, he never "heard a discouraging word." "Home on the Range," was full of new meaning because of Kenny Freitag.

While his mini-ranch on Route 611 may not have a North Dakota vista, he can, nevertheless, look out his kitchen window and watch buffalo file down to the pond, where they have created what few in the east have seen, a buffalo wallow.

Purchased last August from a West Virginia breeder, Freitag's herd, now 19 months old, has brought with it all the behaviors the American bison developed to

survive in the harsh plains. Whether the herd blankets the earth, or is the size of postage stamp in Virginia, it makes no difference to the bison.

Freitag, who came to Nottoway 12 years ago from Long Island, bought 28 acres, cleared five, and began planning. He read everything he could on bison, went to seminars, and visited breeders. He named his min-ranch “Piney Green,” and hung snowshoes on his tool shed.

“You have to be prepared for them when they come,” said Freitag, who was now standing quietly near the largest cow—who was standing just as quietly, watching him. At the trough he could get close, but in the field, forget it.

“You never can tell what they are going to do,” he said, now squatting down, with me close to the fence and watching out for the hot wire. “They can jump six feet from a standstill, run at 35 miles an hour, and turn on a dime. They can easily knock you down, so you want to move slow around them. Quick moves will make the jumpy.

“But they always give you a sign when they are threatened. Their tails come straight up in the air. Then it’s time to get out of their way.” I quickly noted that their tails were down.

But just being able to watch buffalo roam was not Freitag’s reason for raising bison. “I’m going into buffalo meat production,” he said, and he described what seemed like a very good idea.

The meat—which tastes like beef, only more solid, he said—is registered by the American Heart Association because it’s so beneficial to people with heart conditions. Low in cholesterol, fat, and high in protein, the meat brings a good price—maybe \$10 a pound for steaks, he said. Freitag plans to market the meat himself, shipping it on dry ice anywhere in the country.

Bison are much easier to raise than cattle, he explained. And they behave a lot differently, too—a lesson his dogs, not small by any means, learned the first day the bison arrived.

“They went in their twice and that was it. The bison chased them right out by working together in a line, head down, walking towards the dog. The dog kept backing up until on bison came out and chased him away.”

Freitag also noticed—he has learned a lot about bison from just observation—that when bison lie down, each faces a different direction. And when something approaches, the designated herd leader will stand up and watch intensely. “It’s always this female here,” Freitag said, pointing to the bison watching him. “She’s the boss.”

But for breeding and profit purposes, the bison has real advantages over cattle. “They eat most anything, weeds and even leaves off trees, and their digestive systems convert food into energy more efficiently. So they need less pasture than cattle.”

In addition. Their immune systems make them more resistant to disease. “There’s only two things that can kill bison, internal parasites and bullets,” said Freitag.

Moreover, bison live up to 40 years, with cows producing a calf a year for most of that. Freitag said he wanted to build his herd to 25 cows, and he figured he could clear the land as the herd grew.

The young bull was standing apart from the cows eating some hay in his preferred solitude. “He’ll be the first one to go,” said Freitag, now thinking about his business.

“You keep the best and get rid of the rest, keep your cows and rotate your bulls,” he said, quoting his rule of thumb for the buffalo industry.

He hoped his sons, age 8 and 6, could understand this. They wanted him to keep the bull until it was 6 years-old.

“That bull is where you’re going to get the most meat. Prime slaughtering age is 1 and ½ years. The meat gets tough after that.”

And what’s more, the bull get even tougher, he added. He didn’t want a 2,000 pound bull, standing six-feet at the shoulder, lowering his head at him.

Considering that these rather large animals were just 700 pounds each, I agreed. The females would grow to five feet at the shoulder and weigh 1,000 pounds.

My imagination began to roam again, and I envisioned this herd on the plains, multiplied by 6,000. That’s the size of the herd in *Dancing With Wolves*, which lives on a 60,000 acre ranch. “They have to slaughter 1,000 head a year to manage that herd,” said Freitag, who had facts for all my questions.

When the Europeans arrived in America, there were 60 million bison on the plains. That was reduced to a few hundred by 1900. And they were saved only by a few ranchers who bred them.

I sensed that Freitag enjoyed participating in this effort to preserve this amazing animal that is so uniquely American

Like the bison itself, Freitag looked like a survivor. He could stand as quiet as a buffalo, but you sensed he could move effortlessly into full action if threatened.

While most men settle easily into their pictures and would be lost on the frontier, Freitag searched for a frontier—some Nottoway woods, if you will—and cleared, not a pasture, but a “home where the sky is not cloudy all day.”