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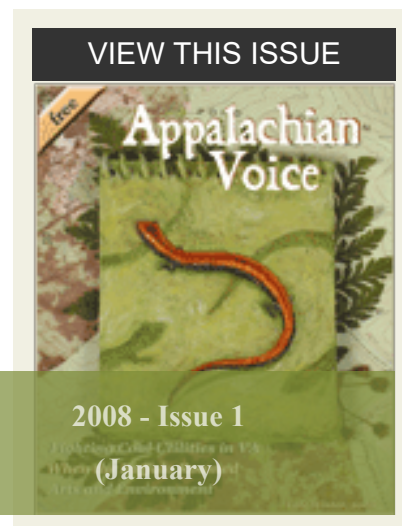
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## When the Buffalo Roamed

| January 1, 2008 | [No Comments](#)

By R. Kelly Coffey

A curious characteristic of Appalachian geography is the number of features- creeks, knobs, hollows, etc. - with “buffalo” in their name. This beast from the western plains seems as out-of-place in the forests of Appalachia as a saguaro cactus on the Blue Ridge. In colonial times though, buffalo were found throughout much of eastern North America. Observers frequently noted their presence in and around the mountains. Herds were small (a few dozen to 300 at most), compared to the multitudes witnessed in the west decades later. While native to western North America, buffalo were actually recent immigrants east of the Mississippi, with their numbers peaking in the seventeenth century before dissipating around the time of the American Revolution. Their relatively brief, two-century foray into the East is perhaps unique in our natural history, and reveals a dynamic and varied environment already being modified by humans even before Columbus set sail.

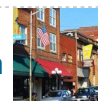


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## Frequent fires

The dense Appalachian forest would seem to be an inhospitable environment for this grazing animal of the Great Plains.

However, eastern forests- though expansive- did not form an unbroken canopy from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. Grassland environments were interspersed throughout, with some eastern prairies covering hundreds of acres. Soil characteristics played a role in forming these open landscapes, but fire was primarily responsible for the lack of trees. Unsuppressed natural fires caused by lightning maintained the savannas. Indians not only let wildfires burn, they intentionally started fires themselves on a regular basis. Indians used fire to maintain trails, direct game to hunters, and control insects, among other purposes. Fires did not always result in a treeless landscape. Because of their frequency, forest fires kept underbrush and dead vegetation from accumulating; lessening fires' intensity and thus allowing many trees to survive a blaze. Consequently, many forested areas were park-like, where sunlight filtered through the widely spaced trees, permitting grass to grow under the porous canopy. In short, buffalo easily grazed, survived, and even thrived throughout the East under these conditions.

European contact, ironically, was a cause of buffalo roaming east. Disease that arrived and spread from the earliest Spanish explorers wiped out a large percentage of the Native American population, leaving behind their well-maintained open expanses and greatly reducing hunting pressures that might have kept buffalo herds farther west. At the same time some evidence suggests that buffalo populations in the west were burgeoning, causing a "push" from the west in tandem with the "pull" of conditions in the east. All these factors converged at roughly the same time, giving buffalo an opening to the east that they readily exploited. In addition, the aggressive grazing of the buffalo themselves likely increased the acreage of open landscapes, thus expanding their own habitat simply by their presence.

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When the Buffalo Roamed



Across Appalachia

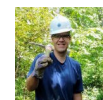


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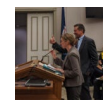
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## Buffalo's bounty

As with other wildlife, Indians took full advantage of the resources offered by buffalo hunting. The buffalo was another food source, of course, but its byproducts were just as valuable. Its hide was processed into various forms of clothing, bags, blankets, and even buffalo hide boats. White newcomers promptly learned buffalo lore as well. The earliest white settlers in Kentucky, in fact, depended on buffalo for survival until they became established with domestic livestock and farming.

Pioneers reduced the eastern buffalo population much quicker than it expanded. Settlement and farming, of course, encroached on the savannas and open forests; but excessive hunting by frontiersmen extinguished the small herds in no time. Buffalo were approachable and could even be tamed to some degree; a characteristic that probably hastened their demise. The unrestrained killing and waste of many buffalo hunts is shameful. Numerous were killed only for their tongue or other choice cut, with some hunters leaving most of the carcass behind. Indians, too, hunted buffalo in a wasteful manner, often killing far more than they could consume or process. Though much smaller in scale, these wanton slayings foreshadowed the more massive slaughters that would take place a century or so later in the West, leading nearly to the extinction of the species. By 1770, buffalo were gone east of the Blue Ridge. They held on a little longer west of the Appalachians, but 1820 marks the last sighting of the animal in Kentucky.

An image of a buffalo is prominent on the logo of the National Park Service, and the buffalo nickel once was a familiar form of United States currency. Though an icon of the West, the animal is, nevertheless, an appropriate national symbol as well, given the extent of its former range. Buffalo still haunt the Appalachian landscape in the names of ridges, creeks, coves, and other geographic features. The lineage of several modern roads can be traced back from highway to wagon road to trading path to buffalo trail. These echoes on the modern landscape are






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perhaps disproportionate to the buffalo's brief sojourn here in the East. But such honor is fitting if- even in a small way- it helps redeem our transgressions against this remarkable beast.

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