

Title: The Last Roundup

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The Last Roundup

The Nebraska Sandhills sprawl under the big skies of America's high plains. Covering nearly thirteen million acres, they are the largest grass-covered sand dune formation in the western hemisphere. In the mid-1990s, Brock and Robin Wharton lived by the banks of Buffalo Creek, on a little homestead tucked into that undulating, spacious landscape dominated by large ranches, where cattle outnumber humans more than six to one. The semi-retired couple ran a few head of Dexter cattle, raised small flocks of chickens and Guinea hens, and tended an acre of asparagus.

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One warm autumn day, the sound of a ringing telephone drifted across the yard through an open window. Robin dropped her hoe between asparagus rows and trotted toward the house. She brushed her short, dark bangs from her face with the back of her hand and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

A baritone voice crackled. "Robin? It's Denny. Would you and Brock be interested in helping out with the bison roundup at the Preserve tomorrow? We're short a few wranglers."

"Sure, we've always wanted to do that. What time do we start?"

"Seven-thirty, sharp. Bring work gloves and wear sturdy boots. Thanks for volunteering—see you then."

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At daybreak, Brock gripped a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and the Toyota's steering wheel with the other as the couple bumped down the gravel road toward the nature sanctuary. The mustached, graying man grinned at his wife. "Moving the herd across 56,000 acres of prairie should be a blast," he said.

“Uh, no, we’ll only be in the east pasture, above the headquarters. That’s less than 18,000 acres,” Robin corrected. Ignoring Brock’s eyeroll, she continued, “You know they use buffalo to help manage the grasslands. The grazing and hoof action helps keep grasses from thatching over and creates bare patches where new grass and wildflowers can grow.”

“Are you done with the lecture? I know you took pictures at last year’s roundup, but that hardly makes you an expert. This time we’ll actually get to participate, and I’m jazzed about it.” He took a sip of coffee. “Did Denny say what we’ll actually be doing?”

Robin nodded. “We’ll help move the herd across the prairie, and once they are in the corrals, we’ll assist with the chute gates. After the vaccinations and vet check, we’ll sort out the animals they want to sell and return the rest to the pasture.”

Brock turned left, following a side road. Just as the sun peeked over the surrounding hills, they wheeled into a dirt parking area by the squat headquarters building and exited their car. They joined a dozen other volunteers and a handful of regular staff as Denny, acting as trail boss, assembled everyone for a safety reminder before handing out assignments.

“Bison are wild animals and they can be dangerous,” he said. “The bulls weigh two thousand pounds, and the cows are nearly as big. They look warm and fuzzy, but they can be mean, especially when they’re nervous. People have been maimed and killed by them. These critters will be on the move and feeling stressed. Stay in your vehicles or on your horses, and remain alert at all times. Never approach bison on foot.”

The boss assigned the Whartons to drive a dilapidated, ¾-ton, Chevy four-wheel-drive pickup. He pointed at a staffer piloting a red ATV across the parking lot. “Follow Darren. He knows the Preserve like the back of his hand, so you won’t get lost.”

Robin recognized the young man as the employee who operated the corral gates when she photographed the operation. He slowed, then stopped, coating them in a cloud of dust.

“Hi, Robin. Nice to see you again. Is this your husband?” He stuck out his hand.

Brock accepted it. “Yes, I’m Brock; glad to meet you.”

Darren gazed past him and waited as two cream-colored pickups pulled up, one driven by another volunteer couple, the Martins, and the other by Doug, an older preserve employee. More trucks and several riders on horseback queued up behind Doug.

“I’ll ride shotgun,” Robin said to Brock as she climbed into the Chevy.

Darren raised his voice over the engine noise and addressed the crowd. “Everyone will head southeast along the main access road. Once we get through the gate, we’ll split up to make sure we find the whole herd.”

He nodded at the Whartons and Martins. “The first two volunteer vehicles will stay with me, in the center. Doug will take two other volunteer pickups further east, and Richard will keep the last bunch with him, on the west side. The wranglers on horseback will rove between the vehicles to ensure no animals slip through the cracks. Once we’ve reached the southeast corner, we’ll circle back and work our way northwest toward the corrals, picking up bison as we go. Doug’s volunteers will stay on the left flank, Richard’s on the right. My people will bring up the rear. Shift into four-wheel-drive now and let’s get moving!”

The caravan of trucks and horses wended their way up the sandy trail to a gap near the top of the hill. One of the riders trotted ahead to open and close the gate.

After Doug’s and Richard’s crews disappeared to the east and west, Darren pulled his ATV between his two assigned pickups. “We’ll leave the main trail, spread out, and work our way across the prairie. Keep moving right along; don’t slow down, or you’ll get stuck in the

sand,” he said. “When we start picking up bison, be sure to stay behind them. I’ll be zigging and zagging to keep them pointed in the right direction until we join up with the rest of the team. If for any reason you lose track of me, just keep going in the same direction, and we will reconnect.”

They set off across the prairie at a rapid clip, both pickups generally following Darren while trying to avoid bogging down in the many sand blowouts. The Whartons soon lost sight of the Martin’s Ford. Brock kept a firm grip on the steering wheel and Robin peered ahead, announcing soft spots and advising him to steer left or right around them. For a quarter hour they saw nothing but sandy hills and brown vegetation. They occasionally caught a glimpse of Darren as he sped back and forth between them and the Martins.

An immense sea of grass all but hid four bison, who glanced up from grazing when they saw the Wharton pickup. Appearing unconcerned, the animals almost docilely trotted ahead of the Chevy for nearly a half mile until a larger herd came into view. A half dozen horseback riders seemed to have the roundup under control as they spaced themselves alongside and behind the buffalo.

“Wow, this is like a scene from the Old West,” Robin said, watching the riders with their cowboy hats screwed down tight and red bandanas shielding their faces from billowing clouds of dust.

Brock grunted. “Quit daydreaming. Our job is to put these strays in with the others. These guys don’t seem to want to join their buddies.” He sharply angled the pickup to cut off the no-longer-obedient bison, nudging them toward the main herd.

Off to their right, Robin saw Darren jump off of his ATV, waving his hat at a lagging bull, obviously being careful not to get too close. Ahead in the dusty distance, she could barely make out Doug and Richard's crews flanking the herd on the either side.

A sudden movement on the left caught Brock's attention. "Damn, where did they come from?"

Robin spun her head to look. She couldn't see what startled them, but a dozen of the shaggy beasts broke into a run, heading away from the herd. Brock pointed the pickup in their direction, and Robin yelled, "Let's move—we're gonna lose 'em!"

Just as Brock hit the gas, the breakaway bunch turned and angled toward the Wharton pickup. A contingent of perhaps fifty animals from the main herd saw them and followed. Brock wrestled the steering wheel, trying to keep the Chevy on the outside so he could turn them back. The truck topped a low rise and dropped off the other side, directly into soft sand, where they sat, tires spinning.

Brock reached for the door handle, but Robin grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"We'd better sit tight. We're not getting out of this any time soon, and we're safer in the cab," she said.

They rolled up their windows and waited. Robin thought it felt like a slow-motion movie as the stampede moved toward them. She saw magnificent bison muscles flex with each stride, and steam puffed from their gaping mouths into the cool air.

With eyes as big as pies, the couple watched the mob of America's national mammals approach them at a dead run. As the buffalo neared the truck, Robin saw their nostrils flaring beneath wide, brown eyes. The ground trembled under them and Brock held the steering wheel, knuckles white.

Just as it seemed the bison were going to run right over the truck, the herd parted, as if by magic, and galloped around them on both sides. Choking dust seeped in despite the closed windows, and the noise nearly deafened them.

And then, silence. Awestruck, Robin stared at Brock, who just sat, shaking his head.

After the dust settled, they exited the pickup and took stock of their situation. Robin's voice rang out from the front of the vehicle. "Well, you managed to get us perfectly high-centered on the lee side of this little dune."

Frowning, Brock reached inside the cab for the two-way radio and spoke into the mic. He received no response, and shook his head at Robin. "I guess we're stuck in a hole; no signal."

Robin found a shovel and a jack in the bed of the pickup, but after a half hour of work they were not any closer to freeing themselves.

Brock peered at the odometer and said, "I think we're at least four miles from headquarters and three miles from the nearest county road."

They began walking, feet slipping and sliding in the soft sand. Robin kept glancing over her shoulder, hoping they would not encounter more bison.

Not long after, a lone horseback rider caught up with them. Neal, another preserve employee, pulled a hand-held radio from his pocket and rode to the top of the nearest dune to call headquarters for help. He trotted his horse back to them.

"We got the herd into the enclosure," he said. "The rest of us can handle things from here. You guys may as well go back to the pickup and wait. Doug and Darren are coming with a winch."

Robin eyed Brock balefully as they trudged back across the dunes. "Well, you sure messed that up!"

“You helped. I could have used a little better warning about the soft spots.”

Robin grumbled under her breath and kicked at a scraggly prickly pear cactus. It broke away from the ground, needles lodged deeply in her leather boot. She leaned down, unsure about how to remove it. “I know those spines will go right through these work gloves.”

Brock kicked his own boot at the cactus and it promptly impaled him, too. He looked from Robin to his boot, then back at his wife. They stood side by side, as if handcuffed to a prickly pear.

Slowly, Brock’s scowl dissolved into a broad grin and a chuckle escaped from Robin. They both sat down in the sand and began unlacing one boot. Amid belly laughs, they managed to disentangle themselves.

Robin asked between giggles and snorts, “Do you think they’ll ever call us to help them again?”

Brock smiled ruefully. “Humph. I’m guessing that was our first—and last—bison roundup.”