Book Review: *Rewilding the West: Restoration in a Prairie Landscape* By Richard Manning

Mace Hack  
*The Nature Conservancy*

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Rewilding the West gives a first impression of being the story of an innovative conservation project—creation of a 3.5 million-acre wildlife preserve from both public and private lands, restocked with bison and other traditional Plains wildlife—in the Missouri Breaks of eastcentral Montana. However, Manning only devotes thirteen pages to the project at the end of the book, with a few additional references to it scattered throughout. Instead, he traces the history of the site, from the days of the bison to modern times. In doing so, he provides a fascinating and useful frame of reference for current conservation efforts in the Northern Plains by describing how people have transformed one of the planet’s most productive, wildlife-rich environments to one ecologically degraded, underconserved, and forgotten by most Americans. To Manning, this project promises to return at least one important part of the Northern Plains to productivity, for wildlife and people, by “reconcile[ing] nature and economy to create a working landscape.”

Manning develops several themes throughout the book. The native plants and animals of the Plains have coevolved in a delicate balance, thriving in adaptation to the region’s fierce and unpredictable climate. Agriculture, whether livestock grazing or crop production, cannot be sustained in this harsh environment without considerable government support. Even worse, agriculture has led to the destruction of the Plains’ unique ecology, removing its large grazers like bison and elk, eradicating its top predators, breaking up the grassland and putting its topsoil to the wind, and damming its rivers and streams. Mostly failed government policies from both ends of the political spectrum drove this change, Manning claims: “[t]he progressive zeal of the reformer is every bit as dangerous as the swagger of the cowboy, and, conversely, the ‘conservative’ West is almost wholly a creature of the nation’s most socialist of projects, the New Deal.” Manning concludes with the argument that only a return to an economy based on wildlife can provide a sustainable livelihood for people in this region.

To the extent this history is shared more broadly across the Northern Plains, and beyond (e.g., the “West”), Manning’s insights can also inform broader wildlife conservation efforts in the Great Plains. Readers will need to take care and judge for themselves, however, the applicability to their geographies of interest. For example, Manning makes strong statements on the origin and consequences of public land leases to graziers, creating a legacy of ranchers dependent on the government, yet this doesn’t pertain at all to Nebraska’s privately owned Sandhills despite their inclusion in the book’s focus geography.

Ultimately, Manning leaves no myths of the West unchallenged, using his journalistic skills as an investigator and storyteller to reveal unexpected dimensions of the region’s historical icons—the Plains Indian, open-range cattleman, homesteader, red-state politician, and antigovernment landowner. In Manning’s opinion, knowing the rich, complex history of the land is a necessary first step towards repairing it. Otherwise, “[d]eceiving ourselves into believing we do is precisely why this land grows nothing so much as failure.”

Mace Hack, The Nature Conservancy, Omaha, Nebraska.

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Buffalo National Park stands as both a high and a low point in the history of the Canadian national park system. In 1908, it was created near Wainwright, Alberta, as a reserve, and soon a park, to house Plains bison being shipped from Montana; the park’s existence helped to restore the near-extinct species. The bison population grew too swiftly, in fact, leading to deteriorated range conditions and rampant tuberculosis. In a misguided attempt to alleviate this pressure, the Parks Branch in the 1920s shipped tubercular Plains bison to Wood Buffalo National Park, consequently infecting and hybridizing the pure-bred wood bison there. With its own range still depleted and its bison still diseased, Buffalo National Park was closed in 1939, the land turned over to the Department of National Defense.

Jennifer Brower’s Lost Tracks does a creditable job of tracing this fleeting history of what was intended to be a permanent place. Relying largely on correspondence and reports from the Parks Branch’s archival record, she details what park administrators and wildlife personnel were thinking at every step along the way. Perhaps because the bison had come from private herds before being...