

Opinion: How the buffalo became national mammal

By Gaynell Terrell, High Country News

He was one of Nature's biggest gifts, and the country owes him thanks. – Charles M. Russell, 1925

The bald eagle has been the national symbol since 1782, but the Western artist Charlie Russell was right: The buffalo was far more important to the story of the American West.

Congress agrees on very little these days, but this May, it successfully passed a bill that was quickly signed by President Obama. The National Bison Legacy Act designates the American bison, most often called the buffalo, as our first national mammal. What's more, the bill enjoyed the support of a wide array of ranchers, environmentalists, zoos, outdoorsmen and Native Americans. As the Wildlife Conservation Society put it, the animal "is an icon that represents the highest ideals of America."

The story of the buffalo, once roaming in immense herds, also touches on some of the lowest points in American history. As settlers and gold-seekers pushed toward California throughout the course of the 19th century, tragedy often followed in their wake, including the brutal repression and massacre of the American Indian, the wide-scale exploitation of wildlife resources, and the near-extinction of North America's largest land animal, the buffalo.

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