

Home on the Range

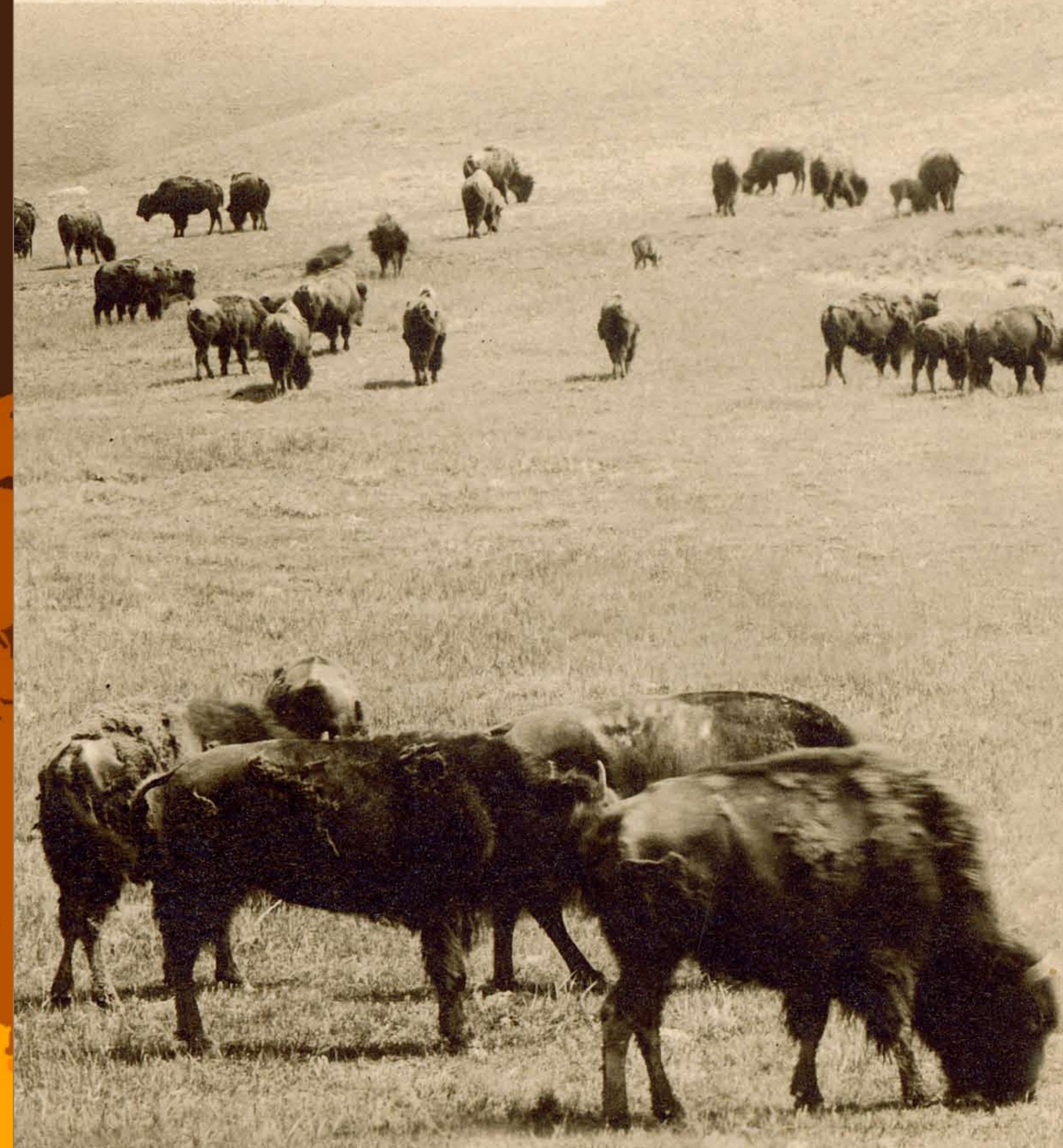
Bison, Prairie Dogs, and More

"The area from Great Bend westward for a hundred miles or so was a famous hunting ground for all the plains tribes, as its excellent pasturage made it the home of vast herds of buffaloes, besides plenty of antelopes and deer." ~ N. H. Darton, et al., Guidebook of the Western U.S., 1915

Hollywood's *Dances with Wolves* ensured that the Great Plains would be forever linked with bison in American consciousness. A few centuries ago, some 60 million American Bison ranged from Mexico into Canada.

They were the most abundant grazing mammals in North America. Unsustainable hunting in the 1800s wiped out these immense herds. By 1900, roughly 1,000 wild bison remained in this country. Today, thanks to the work of conservationists, ranchers, and wildlife managers, bison populations have rebounded.

Although bison no longer roam freely along the Byway, you can see signs of their historic presence. Bison roll on the ground to shed hair and insect pests, and in the past, their wallows formed depressions as wide as 30 feet. Stop by The Nature Conservancy's Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve to see some of these historic wallows. Watch, too, for signs of other mammals, including prairie dogs, deer, beaver, muskrat, jackrabbits, and mink.



Bison Herd Grazing between 1900-1920

Kansas State Historical Society



Black-tailed Prairie Dog/Ted Lee Eubanks

The Black-tailed Prairie Dog

Along the Byway, look for short-cropped grassy fields with scattered dirt mounds. These are signs of black-tailed prairie dog "towns." At The Nature Conservancy's Cheyenne Bottoms Preserve, burrowing owls nest in prairie dog holes, just one of many species to utilize the extensive tunnels.



Burrowing Owl/Ted Lee Eubanks



American Bison/Ted Lee Eubanks

Motion and Change

American bison migrated through this part of Kansas by the millions. In 1871, one herd reported from southwest of Dodge City included some four million individuals. Plains tribes depended on bison for food, clothing, tipis, and more, and organized their societies around bison movements.