

Local rancher, Don Husted (on horseback) and author, John Christopher Fine saddle up for a ride on a beautiful autumn day. The 1,500-strong buffalo herd in Custer State Park is among the largest in the world (inset). Each fall the Wild West comes alive during the annual buffalo roundup; this year's event is scheduled for October 2-4.

# Where the Buffalo Roam



PHOTO: SOUTH DAKOTA TOURISM

PHOTOS: JOHN CHRISTOPHER FINE

Cowboys gather in South Dakota's Custer State Park for the annual bison roundup

■ JOHN CHRISTOPHER FINE

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**A** cold wind whipped over the ridge. Horse manes and tails blew wild. The last warmth of fall faded and the day was overcast and cold. With a whoop and a holler, cowboys — real cowboys — rode off up the ridge, the thunder of

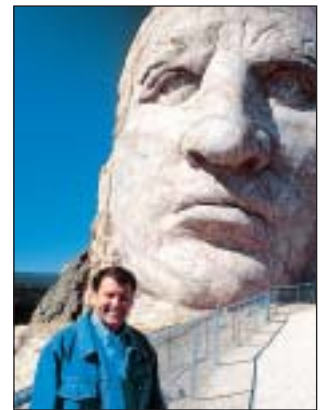
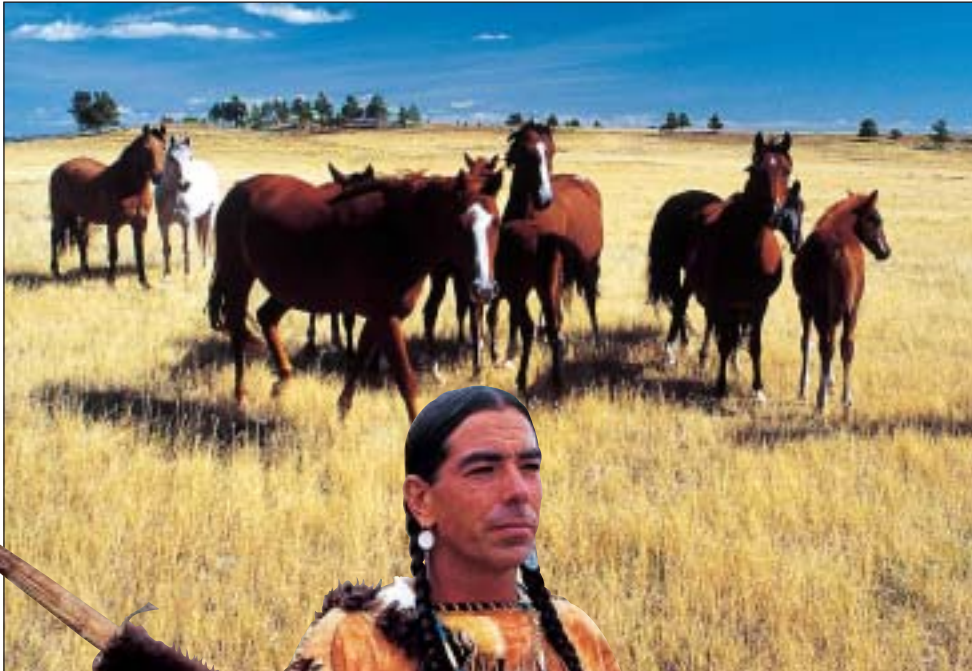
one of the largest herds in the world —down into pens where they are inoculated, branded and sorted. Bison can sometimes be ornery, and it takes a handy rider to push them where they are supposed to go. It's a rare spectacle that's worth the long trip into the Black

Hills, and many take it.

"We drove our motor-home all the way from California with the grandkids. This is something we wanted them to experience," a couple said, eating buffalo meat sloppy joes under a concession tent near the roundup corrals. "Oooooo.

and the health of grazing land. The annual auction generates approximately 20 percent of the park's operating revenue.

There are always bison roaming around in Custer State Park: Aged bulls graze alone in woodlands and flats, mamas



pounding hooves echoing across the prairie. Other wranglers in pickups bounced along the rugged terrain after them.

It was the annual buffalo roundup, a weekend when selected cowboy riders converge on Custer State Park in South Dakota's Black Hills to herd some 1,500 wild bison —

That smells," one of the grandkids from California squealed as a buffalo was pushed into a squeeze pen and branded. The smell of burning hair and smoke wafted up onto a catwalk overlook that park officials built so visitors can view sorting and branding.

Surplus bison are auctioned as part of the park's land management practices, while the rest are set free again to roam the 71,000-acre park. The number sold off for meat or as breeding stock is carefully controlled and adjusted each year, depending on rainfall

*Mustangs run free at the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary outside Hot Springs. South Dakota governor Mike Rounds with Ruth Ziolkowski, wife of late sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, who began the Crazy Horse Memorial. Since her husband's death in 1982, Ruth and her family have dedicated themselves to the work at Crazy Horse. Jay Red Hawk (left) photographed in full regalia.*

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with their calves herd in small groups. Heed park signs that caution you to stay inside your RV and enjoy bison at a distance, however: Bison are wild animals, weigh 2,000 pounds and are capable of running at speeds of 35 MPH.

Bison aren't the only wild animals roaming free in the 73,000-acre state park. The big, woolly buffalo are joined by mountain goats, deer, big-horn sheep — if you're lucky, you'll even get a glimpse of elk: A population of about a thousand graze the lush prairie grasses. Burros, once used to take visitors up 7,242-foot-high Harney Peak, the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains, also roam the prairie here. The critters poke their snouts into windows if visitors stop, begging for handouts of food, but it's better not to feed wildlife in the park.

Brook, rainbow and brown trout and largemouth bass abound in lakes and streams inside the park. For those

who don't fish, though, the call of the wild is just outside the motorhome door, literally.

Take time to drive Wildlife Loop Road. This 18-mile stretch runs from the State Game Lodge to Blue Bell Lodge. It meanders between prairie grasslands, forests, wooded hills and streams, all of which offer a chance to photograph wildlife. Centennial Trail is accessible to hikers, bikers and on horseback. The Black Hills Trail runs about 111 miles, 22 miles of which are in Custer State Park.

There are 10 campgrounds in Custer State Park, with 350 individual sites; all the campgrounds have showers, and flush toilets are located at all sites except Crater Lake (which has a vault toilet). There is only one dump station inside the park, though; it's located at the Game Lodge Campground.

Given the region's rich history, Custer State Park is a perfect base camp for excursions around the area.

Highway 16A, known as Iron Mountain Road, is part of the Peter Norbeck National Scenic Byway from the park to Mount Rushmore. The winding road passes through three tunnels that offer surprising views of Mount Rushmore, so have a camera ready. It was said that it would be impossible to build the road through the mountains, but Peter Norbeck, then-governor of South Dakota, persisted, mapping the route on foot and horseback. It was Norbeck, in fact, who is credited with being the driving force behind the transformation of Custer State Forest into Custer State Park (for which he received the Pugsley Silver Medal in 1932, annually awarded for outstanding contributions to public parks in the United States).

Another scenic route is Needles Highway (South Dakota State Highway 87), which passes Sylvan Lake and goes through two tunnels; at the

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end of one of these tunnels you'll find Needles Eye, a narrow slit that runs for nearly 40 feet in a granite spire. The Needles are sharp, pointed mountains that resemble organ pipes.

As you might well imagine, the park is within close proximity to Mount Rushmore, the world's greatest mountain carving, which can be accessed via State Highway 244 from Needles Highway. This epic sculpture features the faces of four exalted American presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. These 60-foot-high granite faces look out over a setting of pine, spruce, birch and aspen in the clear western air.

There's a thrill of excitement, a chill that often runs down a visitor's spine during the evening sculpture-lighting ceremony at Mount Rushmore. The lighting program takes place at approximately 9 PM nightly (May-September) in the park's amphitheater, which is fully accessible via the Avenue of Flags to elevators at the museum. A patriotic walk past granite columns bedecked with the flags of the states leads to the famous faces carved out of a mountain. There is a trail around the base of the mountain with views up from caverns in the rocks. The trail leads to the original studio of Mount Rushmore's sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, who managed up to 400 workers during nearly two decades (1927-1941) spent carving the immense busts.

Not far away is yet another majestic, outdoor sculpture, Crazy Horse Memorial. It is hard to imagine the scale — but all four faces of Mount Rushmore would fit inside Crazy Horse's head. This amazing memorial was undertaken by one man alone, Korczak Ziolkowski, who built roads in, cut lumber to build steep steps, then — by using dynamite and jack-hammers — began what his widow, Ruth, and his large family continue to this day. When it is completed, the memorial will depict Crazy Horse, the legendary chief of the Lakota Indian Nation, astride his pony, arm outstretched toward the Black Hills, pointing to where his people had their lands.

One place not to be missed is

the Wild Horse Sanctuary, just south of Custer State Park off State Highway 79 near Hot Springs. Dayton Hyde, an inspired rancher and conservationist, author, rodeo cowboy and former *Life* magazine photographer, saved 11,000 acres of prairie land along the Cheyenne River. The land was destined to become a bomb- and weapons-testing facility. Dismayed at the plight of wild mustangs languishing in feed lots after being rounded up off federal land by the Bureau of Land Management, Hyde adopted 400 horses. At the RV-accessible sanctuary, they run free and wild. Many RVers join Hyde and the volunteers for tours and adventure discoveries of the land and its wild horses.

As anyone who's ever walked past the crystal-clear window displays of a jewelry store knows, the Black Hills are rich in ways that extend beyond historical textbooks. The darker tones of Black Hills gold makes it a favorite, and it was gold that initially brought settlers to the Black Hills. In 1874, General George A. Custer was sent out to lead a scientific expedition to explore and map the region. When one of Custer's men found gold, however, word spread — and miners began to flock into the Black Hills in quest of their fortunes. The Gordon party of miners built a stockade for protection on French Creek. Today, a replica stands on the original site in what is now part of Custer State Park.

There is a special wonder in the Black Hills. It's a unique wilderness area steeped in history, easily discovered with comfortable campsites and good roads for today's explorers in modern prairie schooners. ■

## For More Info

Black Hills Wild Horse  
Sanctuary, (800) 252-6652,  
wildmustangs.com.  
Custer State Park, (605) 255-4515,  
custerstatepark.info. Camping  
reservations, (800) 710-2267,  
campsd.com.  
South Dakota Tourism, (800)  
732-5682, travelsd.com. *CIRCLE*  
213 ON READER SERVICE CARD.