

# High plains Hoorah

A photograph of two bison standing in a grassy field under a blue sky. The bison in the foreground is dark brown with a thick, shaggy coat and curved horns. The second bison is slightly behind and to the right, appearing lighter brown. The background shows a vast, open plain stretching to the horizon.

THE LOWER BRULE  
SIOUX RESERVATION  
PROMISES A  
SMORGASBORD OF  
WILD GAME PURSUITS  
IN A BREATHTAKING  
SOUTH DAKOTA  
SETTING

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAZLO STEPTOE

**O**n a scale of one to ten, hunting on the Lower Brule Sioux Reservation in south central South Dakota could be favorably compared to eating at a Chinese buffet. Both are tens. The yin of the hunt is the overwhelming number of opportunities to sate one's appetite. The yang is the shortage of time available to we ardent hunters.

How's this? Scott Cook, one of six members we accompanied on a recent four-day safari, was interested in shooting "a big muley." No problem. A compatriot, however, wanted a whitetail. No problem. Jerry Reinhart wanted to hunt a buffalo. Same answer.

Here's the situation. The reservation is home to a veritable Noah's Ark of wildlife whose environment is the rolling countryside highlighted in the movie *Dances With Wolves*. Their abundance is a byproduct of Mother Nature's natural inclinations, and a nurturing environment fostered by farsighted tribal leaders and the tribe's department of Wildlife, Fish and Recreation.

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"Depending upon the season, visitors can also hunt elk, turkey, pheasant, goose, ducks, prairie dogs and coyotes," says Ben Janis, director of the department. Granted, Lower Brule is in a remote part of the country, but it's only a 90-minute drive from the airport at Pierre, the state capital.



In stark contrast to the state's badlands, Lower Brule's appeal is understated, but it's a sure bet that if the reservation was closer to a major population area, real estate developers would be salivating at its potential. From a bench overlooking the plains, views to the west are across a prairie bisected by the Missouri River as it wends its way to the Mississippi. Draws are covered with scrubby greenery in which game hide or find shade during blisteringly hot summer days.

The 7,000 acres that comprise the hunting area were given an ecological shot in the arm when tribal



**(Left)** Scott Cook expertly deployed his Knight Muzzleloader to drop this fine bull buffalo. Following Sioux tradition, Scott and guide Angel LaRoche ate a piece of the bull in honor of its gift.

members recently planted 80,000 native trees and shrubs, 1,000 acres of native prairie grasslands, and created 117 food plots for wildlife. Normally dry and dusty turf is covered by red-tipped buffalo grass that accents the brown of prairie dog villages.

Just up the road, the Mni Sho Sho goose camp is a magnet for hunters taking advantage of the opportunity to celebrate with shotguns the annual arrival of 150,000 Canada geese and 30,000 Northern Mallards, lured for the winter by 1,000 acres of irrigated corn and wheat fields.

For their part, Jerry and brother Jason kicked off the event with a hunt for bison that reside on 3,000 acres of countryside. They were tutored by native guides Steve Langdeau and 'Angel' LaRoche, with comic relief provided by photog Lazlo Steptoe.

Unlike the buffalo in Yellowstone National Park, which calmly accept the presence of three million camera-toting visitors a year, their cousins in Lower Brule are more suspicious of visitors roaming their turf, especially when they are bearing weapons.

A cynic could consider hunting in confined spaces unsporting. And, photog Steptoe says, "It's true that the buffalo are easier to find on the res. But, and it's a big but, on several occasions, after hunters coursed these rolling hills on foot and crawled on their bellies across soggy ground, the buffalo

were still so twitchy that they disappeared over the nearest ridge. It's not as easy as it appears."

An example: as our cadre stalked the herd, we inadvertently startled Wile E. Coyote, who was napping under a bush. He bolted, and so did the herd, which began a thundering sprint towards the horizon, leaving guides and hunters bereft of targets.

"We've got to find a different herd. These guys are so riled up that, even if we shot one, the meat would be tainted," Angel told his wards.

Eventually glassing another group of small brown dots grazing at the foot of a steep hill, the troupe made a stealthy descent through the underbrush, then settled onto an overlook 200 yards from their quarry.

"This is as close as we're gonna get," the guide said.

While the herd appeared to be in a casual, not-a-care-in-the-world mode, several cow's eyes were always focused on the hunters.

"Notice that when they see intruders, they surround the bulls to protect them," Angel pointed out.

As LaRoche patiently scanned the herd for a likely target, Jerry stabilized his .30-06 on a tripod, trained his scope on potential targets, and attempted to calm his nerves.

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Ben Janis, Director of the Lower Brule Tribe Department of Wildlife, Fish and Recreation takes a rest after enjoying success in the ringneck fields.

Then, with the sound of the first muzzle blast from his rifle still echoing across the plains, a bull jumped as if stung in the aft quarter by a wasp before collapsing into a heap. Surprisingly, rather than fleeing the scene, other bulls congregated around the victim and began using their horns in an unsuccessful attempt to lift him to his feet.

No luck.

Meanwhile, miles to the south, Cook had an entirely different experience in his pursuit of "the big muley," as he told the assemblage that evening.

"I didn't fire a shot, but this was more than I could have imagined. The walking was more than I expected, and we saw more than 100 muleys. And whitetails, and coyotes and turkeys. I just didn't find the one I wanted. I am really looking for a big muley. I saw one, but he was running and I didn't want to take a shot where I might just wound him.

But I got him on film, so that's good enough. It's not about the killing for me, though that would be nice. We'll give it another go in the morning."

Reinhart's downed bull appeared to have experienced a reincarnation, Jerry said. "After ten to fifteen minutes, he got to his feet and took off into hiding in the underbrush in a dry creek bed. While we were trying to locate him, the photographer was poking around in the brush when the bull came charging out and almost ran over him."

"Dumb bunny," a quiet voice murmured.

The following evening, Cook had a new tale.

"Angel showed me how to honor the buffalo I shot," he said.

"What?"

"He says it's a tradition to eat a piece of the meat after the kill. So we both did."

By the end of three long days afoot, members of the troupe were reaching the frayed edges of their endurance. They had traversed miles over terrain seen by only a teeny-tiny percentage of the hunter population. Three buffalo had been taken, along with limits of deer and, in Kevin Arnold's case, a trophy elk.

But they weren't finished.

The sun was approaching the distant horizon hours before the evening news would broadcast. Early fall temperatures were moving into the low 50s and dirt in the fields was still crusted by the previous night's freeze.

"But, we still have time to shoot some pheasants, if you want," Janis told the group.

Like Pavlovian dogs responding to the sound of a bell, hunters set fatigue aside, exchanged rifles for

shotguns, corralled Langdeau and Janis' dogs and headed for the corn fields.

After all, it made little sense to waste any of the remaining time they were allocated in one of the most populated, but least crowded, hunting grounds in the Lower 48.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Known more as a hotfoot on the racetrack, author and photog Lazlo Steptoe also likes to roll with the wilderness set on occasion.



(Right) Wild turkey are just one of the many game species to be found on the Lower Brule reservation. (Below) (L-R) Angel LaRoche and Jerry and Jason Reinhart scope for buffalo atop a vantage point.



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