



Room to Roam

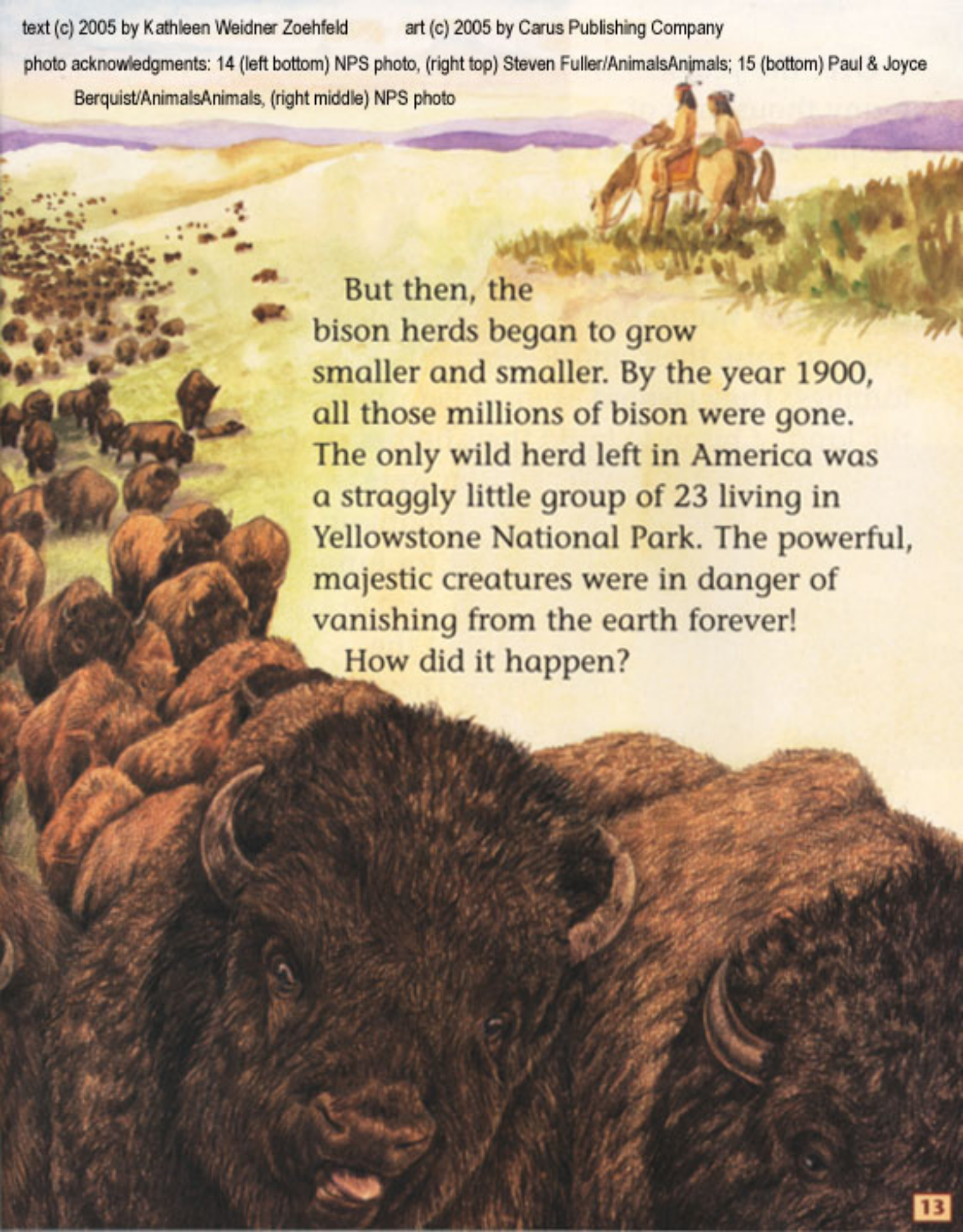
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Not so very long ago, millions and millions of American bison lived on the vast grassy plains in the western United States. If you watched from a hilltop, one herd of bison would stretch out before you as far as your eye could see.

The Indian tribes of the Great Plains told tales and legends of the bison. They admired its strength and spirit. The bison provided them not only with food but with almost everything they needed to live. From its hide they made clothes and shoes, blankets to keep warm, and tipis to live in. From its bones they carved knives, tools, and even toys for their children. They made rope by braiding the bison's long, shaggy fur. Nothing was wasted. And the herds remained large.



photo acknowledgments: 14 (left bottom) NPS photo, (right top) Steven Fuller/AnimalsAnimals; 15 (bottom) Paul & Joyce Berquist/AnimalsAnimals, (right middle) NPS photo

An illustration of a vast prairie landscape. In the foreground, a large herd of bison is shown, with one bison in the immediate foreground looking towards the viewer. In the middle ground, two people on horseback are riding across the field. The background features rolling hills under a pale sky. The overall style is that of a children's book illustration.

But then, the bison herds began to grow smaller and smaller. By the year 1900, all those millions of bison were gone. The only wild herd left in America was a straggly little group of 23 living in Yellowstone National Park. The powerful, majestic creatures were in danger of vanishing from the earth forever!

How did it happen?

Over the years, many thousands of people settled on the wide-open American plains. They came in covered wagons or by train. They wanted a place to raise their families. They cleared the land of bison to build their homes and farms and towns. The bison were hunted for food and for their valuable hides—and sometimes even just for fun—until there were hardly any left.

Some people were shocked that the bison herds were disappearing. They dreamed of a time when wild herds might roam the Great Plains once again. In New York, the director of the Bronx Zoo



Although bison are often called buffalo, scientists say they are not closely related to true buffalo, which live in Asia and Africa.



had an idea. He started a small herd of bison at the zoo. As the zoo's bison had babies, the herd grew larger. The zoo then sent its extra bison to places out west that

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had been set aside as parks. There, the bison could live safely.

The Bronx Zoo bison were carried on carts through the streets of New York and loaded on trains. The first group of bison traveled 1,800 miles to Oklahoma. All along the route, people who had never seen bison before came out to cheer them on to their new home.

Gradually the western herds grew. Never again will vast herds of bison thunder across the plains. But today, more than 100,000 bison roam in protected ranges across the country.

A bison traffic jam in Yellowstone National Park.

