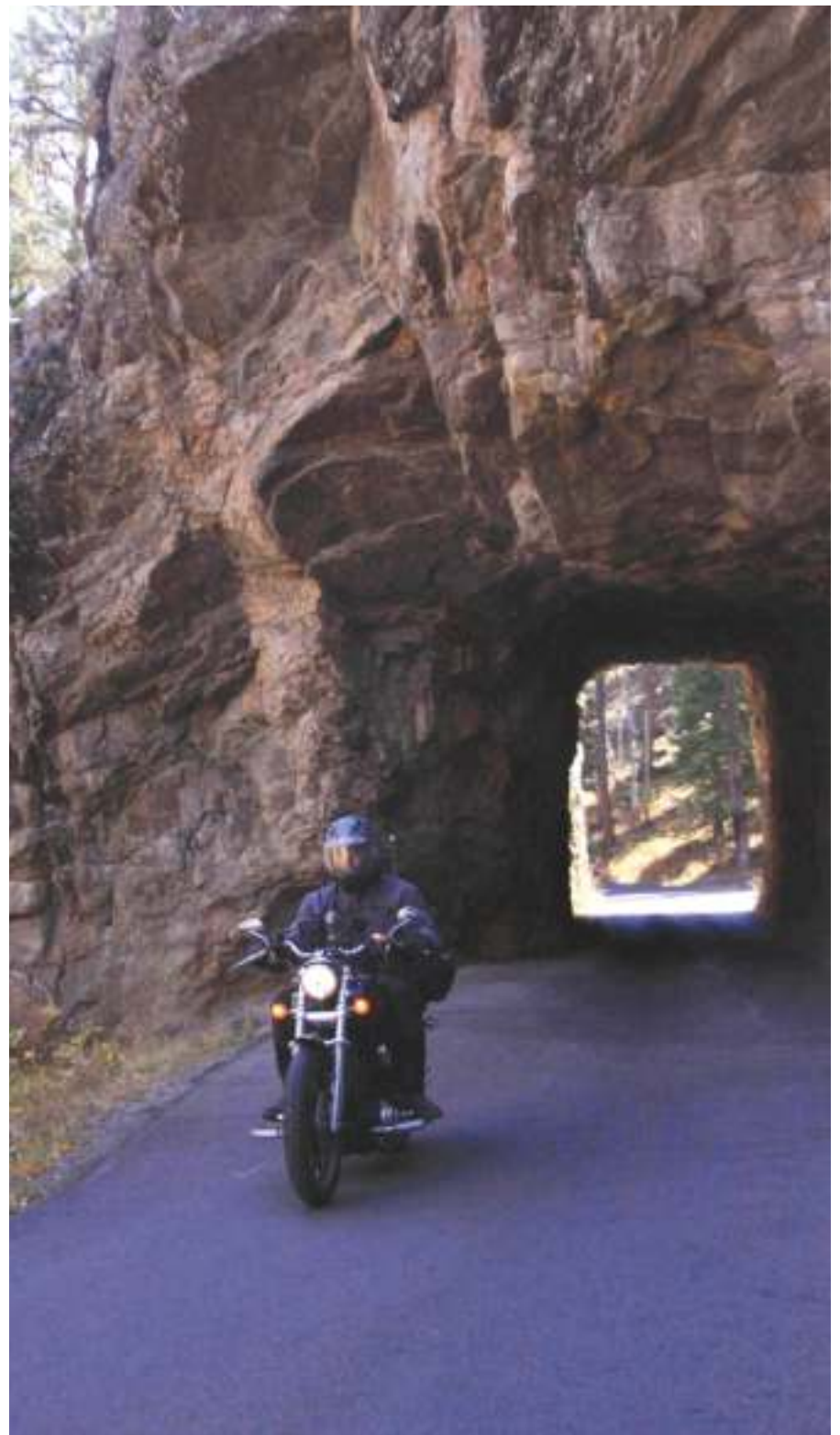


Custer State Park, where the buffalo roam



PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

Home on the range

Above, left; Custer State Park, Mount Rushmore, and the Crazy Horse Memorial are all within easy driving distance of each other. Above, right; Riding through the tunnels on Needles Highway and Iron Mountain Road is a highlight. Bottom, left; 1300 American bison reside in the park.



Dave Gibson Custer, South Dakota


Established in 1919, Custer State Park in southwestern South Dakota was its first and largest spanning 71,000 acres of rolling grassland and rugged mountains. The park and nearby town were named after George Armstrong Custer whose 1874 expedition discovered gold in French Creek, sparking the Black Hills Gold Rush.

As a game preserve before being named a state park, 36 bison were purchased from rancher "Scotty" Philip near Pierre, South Dakota, and reintroduced in 1914. In 1916 twelve pronghorn antelope were released and six years later bighorn sheep. Two male and four female mountain goats escaped from the now defunct Custer State Park Zoo in 1922 after being in their enclosure for only three days. Those goats found the Cathedral Spires to their liking and 150 of their descendants reside in and around the park today. Sixty more bison were purchased from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation to bolster the herd in 1951. Prairie dogs, river

otters, coyotes, elk, white-tailed and mule deer are some of the other animals you may encounter during a visit.

Completed in 1922 and laid out on horseback by then Governor Peter Norbeck, the 14-mile Needles Highway winds spectacularly through forest and jagged granite spires. Iron Creek and Needles Eye Tunnels punch through the mountains with little room to spare; Needles Eye Tunnel is the tightest of half a dozen in the area measuring 8' wide by 9'9" high. Three of the six narrow stone tunnels lie on Iron Mountain Road that leads to Mount Rushmore and is only slightly less breathtaking. The Wildlife Loop Road meanders through ponderosa pine speckled hillsides in the southern section of the park that puts you up close and personal with the animals. Feral donkeys released years ago after they were no longer used to take visitors to the top of Black Elk Mountain unabashedly mooch food at the roadside. The "begging burros," as they are affectionately

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PHOTOS BY DAVE GIBSON

Where the deer and the antelope play

Above, left; A climber rappels the Needle's Eye rock formation. Above, right; Motorists bring carrots and food for the donkeys. None of the "begging burros" looked underfed.

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known, would probably climb into the back seat of your vehicle and go home with you if you let them.

Of course, what brings most people to Custer State Park are the buffalo. From the tens of millions that once stretched across the Great Plains to merely a few hundred by the turn of the 19th century, bison numbers in the U.S. today stand at about a quarter million animals. Most are raised commercially with 40 thousand living on free-range public and tribal lands. The heaviest terrestrial animal in the Americas, males can stand over six ft. tall at the hump and weigh more than a ton. They may look docile when grazing or rolling in a dirt wallow, but are highly territorial and can be aggressive. Just like at Yellowstone, every year a tourist or two is gored and flipped into the air like a rag doll, or even killed, when they ignore warnings to keep their distance. I find that the best bison viewing takes

place from the inside of my car!

There are 1300 animals in the current herd. Since 1966 when the bison were rounded up for brucellosis vaccinations and certified disease free, they have been carefully managed, keeping their numbers in balance with the land and available grass. At the end of September, 60 cowboys and cowgirls drive the bison into corrals for medical testing/treatment, sorting, and branding. Around 450 are selected for an auction that takes place in November. The awe-inspiring sight of hundreds of bison rumbling across the plains gives a sense of what the west was once like. Custer State Park's Buffalo Roundup is witnessed by 20,000 people every year.

For more information about Custer State Park, check out www.CusterStatePark.com or call 605-255-4515.

To view past articles and pictures, go to www.DaveGibsonImages.com.

The book cover features a bronze statue of Lady Justice, blindfolded and holding scales. The scales are tipped towards a large dollar sign. The title "Life Under Corporate Rule" is written in white text on red rectangular backgrounds. Below the title, a red banner contains the subtitle "HOW DEMOCRACY DIED". The author's name, "Gene Strandberg", is at the bottom. A promotional blurb at the very bottom describes the book's content and offers a gift copy for a \$20 donation.

Black Hawk nonprofit Better World has just published *Life Under Corporate Rule: How Democracy Died*. It documents the organized undermining of Democracy that started in 1971 with the Powell Memorandum, 490pp. Receive a gift copy for a \$20 donation to support our missions to stop tobacco addiction of children and to work for better government. Send donation to Better World, PO Box 525, Black Hawk, CO 80422. Also available at Boulder Bookstore for \$34.95.