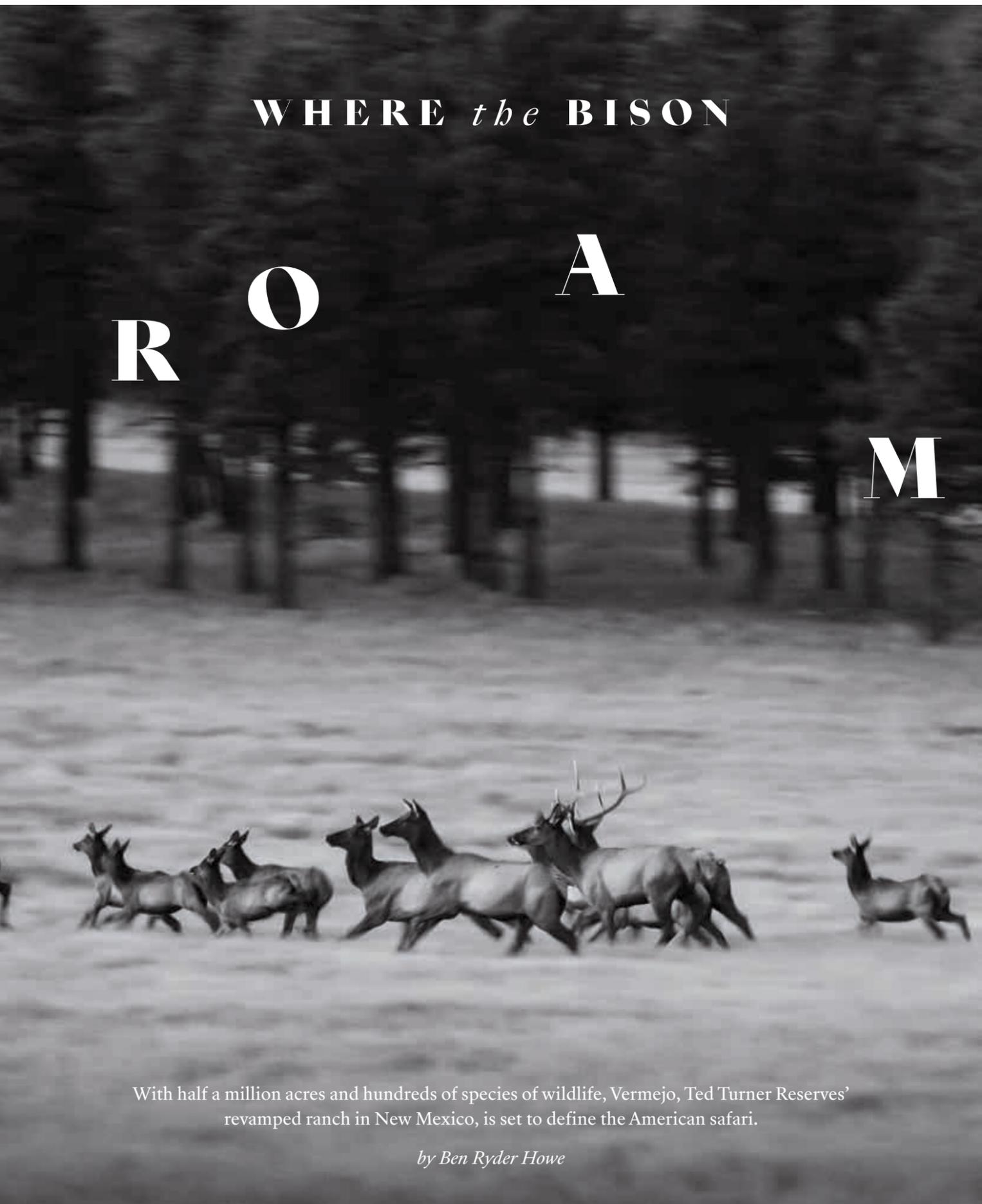




WHERE *the* BISON

R O A

M



With half a million acres and hundreds of species of wildlife, Vermejo, Ted Turner Reserves' revamped ranch in New Mexico, is set to define the American safari.

by Ben Ryder Howe

T

“There’s nothing down that way. You’re taking a road to nowhere.”

“That’s one of the most beautiful parts of this country, but it’s wild. Tell me what it’s like when you get back.”

“Have you looked at the clock? I’d start driving now.”

These were some of the things said to me before I got on Interstate 25 in southern Colorado and headed off in a rented truck for the state’s border with New Mexico, where the rugged Sangre de Cristo Mountains traverse the two states. Thanks to the violent way in which the Sangre de Cristos punch through the Great Plains and reflect the alpenglow, I was about to learn how the range got its name, which means “Blood of Christ.” The Sangre de Cristos are known for quick and extreme changes in elevation, resulting in exceedingly rough terrain as well as rapid changes in ecosystem, from piñon-and-juniper woodland and montane forest to alpine tundra.

It was late on a chilly February afternoon, and light was flooding across pale grassland where the only marks of civilization were a lumbering freight train and occasional signs for places with heartwarming names like Huerfano (Orphan), Las Animas (Ghosts), and Starkville. And then suddenly it got dark. I exited the interstate and started down the driveway for Vermejo, Ted Turner Reserves’ half-million-acre private wildlife sanctuary, and the truck’s GPS blinked good night. Thirty-five miles later I was still on the road and wondering if I’d missed the ranch, which seemed impossible since I hadn’t seen a single light or even passed another car. A few days earlier, I had received an email from Turner specifying his favorite aspect of the ranch. “Its size,” he said bluntly. Vermejo is nearly twice as big as Los Angeles, minus all 4 million of the people. It’s two-thirds the size of Long Island, which is misleading in a way, because at the edge of Turner’s kingdom is just more wilderness unfolding in all directions. It’s a blank space within a blank space.

All of which began to oppress me acutely as I drove farther and farther in a direction I could not even specify.

“Keep your eyes peeled for wildlife,” Turner had advised. Having read beforehand about the park’s heritage colony of elk, which have an unfortunate tendency to plant themselves like lead statues in front of moving cars, and its high density of mountain lions, as well as its population of 600-pound bears, its lynx, and its other apex predators, I was having little trouble doing that. As the pavement turned into hardscrabble, I was also envisioning passages from Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, Anasazi cannibals, Comanche ambushes, and a scene from John McPhee’s *Basin and Range* in which the author, while driving out west, has a run-in with a UFO.

And then, just as abruptly as a vermilion mountain rises out of sagebrush, a house appeared, illuminated by welcoming lights. The house turned into a complex of houses, and as I parked I was greeted by a man in a calfskin sports jacket—Ted Turner Reserves’ director of hospitality Jade McBride—smiling laconically.

“So how was your trip?” he asked.

VERMEJO IS ONE of the largest privately owned properties in the United States, an estate so enormous that, as Turner told me, it would take years to explore. However, it is only a fraction of Turner’s 2-million-acre empire, which includes ranches in Nebraska, Montana, and South Dakota, as well as two other sizable properties in New Mexico.

What does one do with 2 million acres? For more than 20 years, the answer has been as little as possible. Turner would like the presence of *Homo sapiens* on his land to be somewhere between negligible and nonexistent, especially when it comes to activities like mining and logging, although he himself has been actively engaging in restoring threatened and vulnerable species like groundhogs, marmots, trout, and, most famously, bison.

At Vermejo, it used to be that three small, distinct communities of humans have been invited: biologists, who study and manage the ranch’s wildlife; fishermen; and hunters, who abide by a two-year waiting list and pay upwards of \$15,000 to shoot a trophy elk, which is allowed to ensure the balance of species. Turner himself is a hunter (of the bird-stalking variety). As a teenager growing up in Georgia, the future CNN founder was caught trying to catch a squirrel on a local estate and, supposedly, vowed to someday buy his own hunting ground.

One of the paradoxes of hunting and fishing is that sportsmen get to experience some of the most pristine, wildlife-rich places in the world, while public access is often prohibited. Indeed, Vermejo includes one of the only privately owned mountains in the Rockies, majestic Big Costilla Peak, whose neighbor, the towering 14,047-foot Culebra Peak, was sold two years ago for \$105 million to an unknown owner—perhaps Turner.

A few years ago Turner turned Vermejo into a year-round property open to anyone, and it’s tempting to wonder if he truly was motivated by memories of his own frustration at being excluded from a walled garden, especially when you behold what his ranch has to offer.



PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: SEAN FITZGERALD; JEN JUDGE. THIS PAGE: JEN JUDGE

Clockwise from top left: An eagle in the pine forest at Ted Turner Reserves’ Vermejo, in New Mexico; the perfectly restored great room at Casa Grande, the park’s seven-room hotel; a bison grazing in a field; the Ted Turner Suite at Casa Grande.

Casa Grande has 20 rooms, including a grand ballroom.



Vermejo isn't simply remote or secluded. With its 7,500 head of elk, 1,400 head of bison, and herds of wild horses, among other big-ticket species, the ranch is the closest thing in the contiguous U.S. to an American safari. Animals are so plentiful and humans so scarce that encounters between the two often seem to faze us more than them.

"The Turner organization is definitely in the hospitality business," said McBride, who previously worked at two iconic Western resorts, Amangiri in Utah and Ranch at Rock Creek in Montana. Since McBride came on board, Vermejo has filled out a full range of spa services and brought in a yoga instructor. "I want the service level to be more intimate," he said. The resort also expanded its non-hunting activities, which now include mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking, photography tours, and wildlife viewing, with a dedicated concierge tailoring visits like a "4 Peaks in 5 Days Trek" with a team of guides. McBride also hired chef Cory Untch, who came from the Little Nell in Aspen. Untch grows vegetables for the kitchen in the property's greenhouse and forages other ingredients for locally inspired recipes like prickly pear crème brûlée and blue corn pudding with dried fruit. "It doesn't matter what type of guest you are—a family coming for an ecotourism visit or a hunter filling your freezer with meat," said McBride. "We can connect them with the land. We are in the land conservation business, and we use hospitality as a tool."

"So what's your priority," I asked. "Bison or people?" I

had just been served a "shoulder petite tender," also known as a teres major, from one of Turner's prized bovinds, glazed in a shallot-and-red-wine reduction and accompanied by a glass of Shafer Vineyards Hillside Select.

"Oh, that guy," he laughed, nodding at the rapidly disappearing fillet. "He's the king here. He and his descendants will be here long after we're gone. The Turner organization is thinking looong term."

McBride offered to show me to my room, which I assumed meant a pen out in the barn next to a bison lying on a chaise. The herd was elsewhere, however—we would set off in pursuit of it tomorrow—and my accommodations turned out to be nothing like I'd expected.

McBride led me into a 111-year-old, Victorian ballroom with marble columns; a vaulted, hammer-beam roof; and an 1872 Steinway once used by the Denver Symphony Orchestra. (This was the West, so the bison head mounted on a wall and the pair of Remington bronze statues on a bookcase were less of a surprise.)

McBride grinned, clearly enjoying the reaction of yet another stupefied visitor. "If you're looking to be somewhere nobody else has been, in the middle of nowhere," he said, "this is the place."

The jaw-dropping ballroom was built by Vermejo's original owner, William H. Bartlett, a Chicago grain baron who bought the ranch in 1902, moved there with his family, and created a village complete with a school, a coal mine, and a pair of sandstone mansions. The larger one,

the sprawling Casa Grande, holds the ballroom as well as Vermejo's seven guest rooms.

Bartlett's community lasted only 16 years, and subsequent owners altered and in some cases degraded the property. After Turner bought it in 1996, he and his then-wife, Jane Fonda, set about a meticulous restoration, with the help of vintage photographs showing Gilded Age life at Vermejo. My quarters in Casa Grande came with the original bathtub and sink, original light fixtures, and a marble fireplace rescued from beneath a coat of paint. They would have suited even the most discriminating bison, plus an entourage.

THE NORTH AMERICAN mountain lion is the fourth-largest cat in the world, weighing up to 175 pounds. Cougars, as they're also called, see us more than we see them. They're solitary and secretive, preferring to sneak up on their prey from behind and clamp their powerful jaws on the nape of their necks. In places where cougars thrive, such as the lower Rockies, an avid outdoorsman might never see one, but at Vermejo it can happen.

As I drove away from Casa Grande the next morning, Brian Palmer, a 39-year-old guide, promised to take me to Spring Canyon, where he'd recently seen mountain lion tracks. I was expecting a long drive, but I had barely put my seatbelt on when Palmer turned off the engine. "They like it here," he said, exiting the pickup. "Their prey don't." Palmer had found elk and deer carcasses not far away.

Years ago I came across the paw print of a big cat—a jaguar, not a cougar—on a muddy riverbank halfway up a jungle-covered mountain near the Panama-Colombia border. I could have fit my fist inside the impression if I had tried, but the moment was so electrifying that I just stood there paralyzed, imagining the sheer presence of an animal that could have left such a deep, perfectly formed cavity.

"Up there," Palmer said, gesturing at the encircling cliffs of Spring Canyon. "That's where they hang out." It was February, so icy snow still lay on the ground, and a cyclonic easterly wind that had been howling all the previous night now seemed to be specifically targeting the nape of my neck. I hiked up my collar, and we moved on.

Palmer, who's worked at Vermejo for 23 years, grew up in the nearby town of Cimarron, New Mexico (population 899), which was named for the wild mustangs that have roamed this area since Spanish-colonial times and which we now set out in search of.

There are only three animals that Congress has specifically made it a crime to harass: eagles, burros, and wild horses. When Turner bought Vermejo, around 50 mustangs roamed the park, a number that has increased to about 200, divided among less than a dozen bands. Wild horses are renowned for their intelligence. Although thousands still roam the West, few people will ever see one. From the passenger seat of Palmer's pickup, I looked for their swishing tails along the banks of the Canadian River, a favorite retreat, but the windstorm had pushed them into the forest.

**IF YOU'RE
LOOKING to BE
SOMEWHERE
NOBODY ELSE
HAS BEEN,
in the MIDDLE
of NOWHERE,
THIS IS the PLACE.**

Palmer, meanwhile, was looking for the road, which had disappeared under thicker and thicker snow. We were now climbing closer to the tree line, the specially modified pickup spinning its wheels as it fought its way upward. As the angle of ascent caused my sunglasses to slide off the dashboard into my lap, the highest privately owned mountain in the world, Culebra Peak, slid onto the horizon, peacocking atop a 22-mile surrounding ridgeline. All of it was visible, but no wildlife could be seen anywhere, thanks to the raging storm, so Palmer literally skied the 5,000-pound F-150 down the mountain, fishtailing without ever betraying the slightest loss of control as we headed out into the prairie in pursuit of the grand prize: Turner's herd of bison.

"**THEY'RE BISON**, not buffalo," Palmer kept reminding me. Like most Americans, when I look at a stout, shaggy, cloven-hoofed mammal with gleaming 22-inch horns, I think of our national mammal (thanks to a declaration by President Obama in 2016), the American bison. True buffalo live only in Asia and Africa. I also tend to think, *Run*. Palmer and I had driven 40 miles to Van Bremmer Canyon, near the limit of Turner's property, and found a herd of 50 or so bison lolling in pale, winter-starved buffalo grass.

"They're usually pretty friendly," said Palmer, "but once in a while they can get aggressive."

I stayed in the truck as the herd drew closer, curiously approaching the Ford as if it were a strange, fast, metal object piloted by suspicious creatures. Soon they had us surrounded. You would expect a 2,000-pound mammal to make a noise—a slurp, a snort, a stomp, a growl—but it was as if we weren't there. For a half hour we sat there looking at each other. The sun started to go down. Palmer pulled his hat over his eyes. Looking out at the reddening mountains and a seemingly endless sea of shortgrass beyond the herd, it was easy to imagine that, in fact, nothing had changed during the past 500 years—that the balance between bison and man had been restored—which of course it hadn't. But for this moment it was. *Rooms from \$1,150; tedturnerreserves.com.*