



# NATIVE NATIONS PARTNERSHIP REPORT

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## GREETINGS

In these times of extreme acts of inhumanity, there is a positive, lively constant: the sounds and songs of birds, our winged relatives.

While reflecting upon the devastating losses in Ukraine, I hear the birds singing. I imagine the birds in Ukraine continuing to sing while its people suffer. The birds sing on despite the pain and suffering that oppressors heap upon the innocent. They too are impacted by the devastation, but their will to live and thrive drives them to sing, saying to the people, your life is still here too.

As I drive down my community's rural roads and pass landscapes on the Pine Ridge Reservation, I welcome the return of our winged relatives. I hear their songs and give my own in return. While the leaves and buds push up through the ground and sprout from branches, another generation of connections and offerings of provision become apparent. I give my thanks and gratitude to them too.

One day, while presenting to Pine Ridge's youth I asked where the birds build their homes. Several participants responded, "in the trees." Their answer isn't wrong, of course, but it's incomplete and reflects the loss of our people's connection to *Unci Maka* (Grandmother Earth). I respond by sharing a story about our historic connections to the grasses and how our many relatives, like the birds, depend on them too. When

we plow and destroy the grasses, our winged relatives, who have depended upon them for countless generations have nowhere to raise families of their own. I wonder, who will sing for them when their lives have been torn apart by our actions?

In lifting-up our winged relatives, I raise my voice as a song and a challenge, asking that we all take the time each day to recognize them and the other relatives who share our world. Let's recognize the work we each can do to ensure that they continue to return generation after generation. In times of great inhumanity, bird song provides a space for beauty, learning, and hope that we can carry with us in times of despair.

This year's report reflects our work to uplift and support our partners from the many Native nations that are found across the Northern Great Plains, and the wild relatives who call this region home. Each year, we seek new ways to ensure that the people, wildlife, and grasses continue to thrive for generations to come. While there is much that remains to be done, with your support we are making progress. We thank you for taking this journey with us.

***Monica Rattling Hawk,***  
*Native Nations Liaison, NGP Program*

# OUR TEAM



**KRISTY BLY, Manager, Black-footed Ferret Program:**

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Kristy leads WWF's recovery efforts for the endangered black-footed ferret and their prairie dog prey through partnerships with Native nations, ranching communities, and federal, state, and private entities.



**NOELLE GUERNSEY, Specialist, Bison & Black-footed Ferret Programs:**

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Noelle supports WWF's bison and black-footed ferret restoration efforts across the NGP in ways that benefit communities and ecosystems.



**DENNIS JORGENSEN, Manager, Bison Program:**

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Dennis leads WWF's efforts to restore bison conservation herds and expand their habitat through partnerships with Native nations and national parks.



**LIBBY KHUMALO, PhD,  
Sustainable Financing Coordinator:**

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Libby coordinates the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) by fostering conversations, conducting outreach with Native nations, connecting with Native knowledge-holders, facilitating gatherings, assisting with fundraising, and offering strategic guidance to BNGA.



**MONICA RATTLING HAWK,  
NGP Program Native Nations Liaison:**

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Monica, a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation, leads outreach efforts across the Pine Ridge Reservation's South Unit (the Stronghold). In her role as the NGP Native Nations Liaison, Monica makes connections with many tribes within the Great Plains and beyond, building partnerships through Indigenous knowledge and voice.

**Please note:** WWF's NGP Program uses the preferred term "Native nations" to refer to the governance structures established by the Indian Reorganization Act, and also uses the corresponding terms "Tribe/Tribal" and "Tribal member." We acknowledge that terminology is often contested, and continue to seek input from our partners to learn and adapt the terms that are used.



**Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) Invited Nations**

**Communal Lands Project**

**Bison & Black-footed Ferret Reintroductions on Partnering Native Nations' Lands**

# Plains Bison

## Wolakota Bison Growing in Number

Just over a year after bison were first welcomed to the Wolakota Buffalo Range, located on the land of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate, the number of bison has risen to nearly 1,000 animals thanks to the hard work of the Rosebud Economic Development Corporation's (REDCO) staff and the support of a broad network of partners and donors including WWF, the Department of the Interior, The Nature Conservancy, Conata Ranches, and American Prairie.



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## Thunder Valley Partnership Established

WWF has formalized a partnership with Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) to explore opportunities including the creation of a new bison herd on the South Unit (also known as the Stronghold) of Badlands National Park, which is located entirely within the Oglala Lakota Nation (OLN). TVCDC believes that it is only through a whole community approach that the Oglala Lakota Nation (OLN) can truly heal and move forward. This approach addresses various, yet interconnected needs impacting the OLN such as food sovereignty, Lakota language and education, and workforce development. With support from WWF, TVCDC is exploring the availability of land leases, and developing relationships and resources that would support the creation of a historically significant bison herd. This effort builds upon a community survey conducted by WWF Native nations Liaison Monica Rattling Hawk that captured the OLN's visions for the South Unit. See the "Community Conservation" section for more information.



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### **New Buffalo Research & Education Center Developed at Aaniiih Nakoda College**

Aaniiih Nakoda College (ANC) has established a new ᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱᐱ/Tataḡa (Buffalo) Research and Education Center through a 5-yr, \$3.5 million award by the National Science Foundation. As described in the *Great Falls Tribune*, “The center aims to enrich the relationship between the people of Fort Belknap, the tribal bison herd, and the prairie ecosystem. The center will conduct ecological research on the Fort Belknap bison herd and will provide academic training to

increase community knowledge of sustainable management.” Sean Chandler, president of ANC, said the new center will empower faculty and students “to take an active responsible role in becoming better stewards to our animal relatives, land and environment.” WWF (and others) are supporting the center by participating as faculty fellows who work with ANC staff and students on bison range research and other grassland species such as the black-footed ferret.

**“We are going to ensure the buffalo are taken care of in a way that is culturally appropriate. Part of our instructions are to treat buffalo as buffalo. Don’t treat them like cattle...That means we have to raise them differently from how a lot of people do buffalo ranching. We have to make sure they have big open spaces to use the land how they need to.”**

**-Clay Colombe, CEO,  
Rosebud Economic  
Development Corporation**



# Black-footed Ferrets

## Fort Belknap Ferrets on the Rise

A record number of black-footed ferrets were documented on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana in 2021. Fort Belknap is now home to 37 individuals of this endangered species, including 19 kits born in nine litters and 18 breeding adults (the site goal is a minimum of 30 adults). This is an increase of 105% from the number of ferrets detected in 2020 and, in part, is attributed to increases in monitoring and protection of ferrets and prairie dogs from sylvatic plague. With only about 325 ferrets in the wild today, this valuable population is making a significant contribution toward the national recovery goal of 3,000 adult ferrets in the wild.





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### **New Women in Science Scholarship**

The Fort Belknap Indian Community is home to myriad multi-legged, winged, and finned prairie species, which are protected and managed by the A'aninin and Nakoda Nations' Fish and Wildlife Department. While great strides have been made to restore populations of plains bison, black-footed ferrets, and swift foxes—all iconic prairie species whose populations were significantly reduced in the late 1800s and early 1900s due to human eradication and conversion of native grassland into agriculture—much work remains. At Fort Belknap, there is a need to develop its next generation of caretakers to ensure these prairie species and their habitats are restored and sustained.

The aim of the Women in Science Scholarship is to encourage women of the Fort Belknap Indian Community to enroll in Aaniiih Nakoda College's Environmental Science Associate of Science or Aaniiih Nakoda Ecology Bachelor of Science degree program. The work of these stewards will be informed by a combination of western science and traditional ecological knowledge. There are four scholarships to award to full-time, first-time, female students majoring in one of these two programs.



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### **Northern Cheyenne Community Co-develops Black-footed Ferret Conservation Plan**

A new Northern Cheyenne community-based black-footed ferret restoration initiative is underway. In Montana, the Northern Cheyenne Natural Resources Department is working with WWF, Little Dog Wildlife, and the local community to co-develop a black-footed ferret conservation plan that lays out goals and strategies, addresses threats, and develops opportunities for future reintroduction efforts. The plan will also incorporate the cultural significance of the black-footed ferret and their prairie dog prey. An enrolled citizen of the Northern Cheyenne Nation is conducting community outreach to ensure many voices are included in the plan. These community perspectives will build the foundation for a successful, long-lasting black-footed ferret recovery program.

**“The partnership between WWF and the Gros Ventre (Aaniiih) and Assiniboine (Nakoda) Tribes of the Fort Belknap Reservation has resulted in the extraordinary success of black-footed ferret reproduction and survival on the Snake Butte reintroduction site.”**

**-Tim Vosburgh, Biologist,  
Fort Belknap Fish and  
Wildlife Department**



# Community Conservation

## Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance Takes Key Steps

In August 2021, the Buffalo Nations Grasslands Alliance (BNGA) officially became a nonprofit organization earning its 501(c)(3) IRS determination, a critical step that allows BNGA to directly apply for funding. Shortly after, BNGA received its first direct grant awards from both the Native American Agriculture Fund and First Nations Development Institute, which the newly established nonprofit will use to enact its ambitious outreach and engagement plan and 10-year goals. This plan will help the organization to build trust and ownership among communities while engaging tribal wildlife departments and councils.

Building on a foundation of guiding principles and an expanded board of directors developed over the past year, BNGA is now well-aligned and positioned to hire a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who can take the organization to the next level. In this position, the CEO's primary responsibility will be to work closely with participating Native nations, while fundraising and building relationships with potential partners. The CEO will also recruit and manage BNGA staff and contractors, create and manage the organization's annual budget, administer its policy efforts and programs, and work with the board of directors and participants to ensure organizational sustainability.

### **Stronghold Working Group Advances Priorities**

The Stronghold Working Group is advancing priorities from the 2020 Oglala Voice Survey and will seek a resolution from the Pine Ridge Reservation's nine districts to uphold the wishes of the people as reflected in the survey. Once approved, these declarations will be shared with the districts then advanced to Oglala Sioux Tribal Council. If successful, this true grassroots movement will advance the community's voice on the council floor. These declarations will also formally recognize the working group as an entity that has the authority to carry the people's voice to Tribal Council, sharing their vision and filling in the necessary gaps to improve the management of the Oglala Sioux's unique land base.

### **Touching the Land through the Connection Tour**

In May of 2021 the Stronghold Working Group—a group of community members and representatives from each of Pine Ridge's nine districts—was granted a permit from the Oglala Sioux Tribal Land Committee to tour the South Unit of Badlands National Park. The land contains several sacred and historical sites and

invaluable natural resources. While the Oglala Sioux Nation owns the 133,300-acre landscape, it is required to co-manage it with the National Park Service (NPS), while the Bureau of Indian Affairs manages its natural resources. As a result, it is surprisingly difficult for many residents of Pine Ridge to access.

The "Connection Tour" allowed many members of the Stronghold Working Group to touch, smell, and see the vast, raw beauty of their land for the first time. After the tour, group members were so moved by the experience, they decided to change the group's name from the South Unit Working Group to Stronghold Working Group to reflect the site's historical significance to Indigenous people and to highlight its importance to the community's future.

The tour started at the northwest section of the South Unit where the group first visited a place located along the White River called Cow Camp. Here, the group could see signs of where outsiders had illegally crossed into the South Unit, most likely in search of fossils and minerals which could be removed and sold without tribal

permission. The group felt frustrated to see that there were no protections put into place by the NPS to prevent trespassing or the theft of these precious resources.

As the caravan made its way across the rough, poorly maintained trails, members experienced many emotions. The site had been a former bombing range (after seizure by the US Government during WWII) and evidence of old targets and even a possible unexploded bomb were seen during their travels. The working group also visited a sacred site containing several tipi rings, which was also unprotected.

Although the tour was difficult on many levels, a shared desire to regain a stake and participation in any future decisions that would be made regarding the land began to blossom. Many participants expressed a desire to return bison back onto the landscape, work with the land to feed the people, address health concerns through recreation, and provide protection to all its important resources.

# WE ACKNOWLEDGE



that our work in the Northern Great Plains takes place on the unceded lands of the Amskapi Pikuni, Cheppewa, Cree, A'aninin, Nakoda, Nakota, Lakota, Dakota, Mountain Chippewa, Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Apsáalooke, Tsétséhéstâhese, So'taahe, Hunkpapa Lakota, Sihasapa Lakota, Yanktonai Dakota, Minnicoujou, Oohenunpa, Itazipco, Sihásapa, Kul Wicasa Oyate, Mdewakanton Dakota, Oglala, Sicangu, and Yanktonai Nations. We acknowledge and honor the root nation—the plants, the medicines, the food, the trees, and the grasses that sustain us. We honor our relatives, the animals, and give thanks to them for teaching us and giving up their lives so we can use their bodies as food, as clothing, and as decorated honor. We honor our teachers, the knowledge holders who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people. And we honor the powers of the four winds. We hear their voices in the moving air as they refresh us and purify the air we breathe. For this, we say thanks. Mitakuye Oyasin: We are all related.

