

PAWHUSKA â€” The dawn sun bursting through the dark horizon set against the silhouette of 2,600 buffalo is an artistâ€™s palette. The bison come pounding over a frost-covered ground, gently prodded by the presence of men in trucks. The snorts and grunts blend into the high chirping conversations of birds from miles away. Nature provides a breathtaking view of a new day. For 20 years, buffalo have been making this trek to the corrals of the Nature Conservancy on the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Pawhuska. Itâ€™s the one time of year they are rounded up to be counted, inoculated, weighed and tagged. The rest of the year, they live off the land among themselves, eating native grasses and drinking the water available. What began with 300 bison has grown into a herd of nearly 2,700. It has led to the return of a place where the buffalo roam and significant scientific contributions in agriculture research. Harvey Payne stands on the edge of the herd, watching in silence. He was the first director of the Oklahoma chapter of the Nature Conservancy and was instrumental in getting bison on the land. "Itâ€™s hard not to stand on a hill here and wonder what this would have looked like with vast herds of buffalo," Payne said. "Nobody ever thought we could see this again. We have rolled the buffalo and ecosystem back and captured what we had once in Osage County." The annual roundup stresses the bison because they arenâ€™t used to people. Payne said the staff had a learning curve in how to handle the annual roundup. The first year, men were on foot, all-terrain vehicles and trucks. A ranch hand nearly got trampled when a buffalo jumped on the ATV and another got a horn stuck in a loop on his coveralls. Now, the ranch hands spend three weeks enticing the herd to the corral with strategically placed food supplements. No one is ever on the ground with the herd, either staying in a truck or on elevated catwalks around the corral. "Itâ€™s a lot better for beast, man and equipment," Payne said.