PAWHUSKA -Â— The dawn sun bursting through the dark horizon set against the silhouette of 2,600 buffalo is an artist'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. It'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. "It'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." Restoration project Watching a couple of thousand bison interact is intriguing. They have personality, from fussy and grouchy to playful and protective. The annual roundup stresses the bison because they aren'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. Ranch hand Perry Collins got nearly 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.

"It's a lot better for beast, man and equipment," Payne said. When the land was pure prairie, buffalo numbered 30 million and were much larger Â— up to 6 feet tall at the shoulders and weighing a ton. Through generations, buffalo became nearly extinct, with fewer than 1,000 at the lowest point in the 1800s. Today, about 350,000 bison live in the U.S., with around 15,000 on public lands and the rest in private herds, such as the Nature Conservancy's. The Nature Conservancy keeps the herd at between 2,600 and 2,700, selling about 650 bison annually to four to five different buyers in sealed bids. The buffalo are mostly sold for meat in response to a growing demand. Living on an open range with no growth hormones, it can't get much more organic. Lessons to be had The preserve has been part of at least 200 published research papers ranging from the applied sciences to basic agriculture study. Experience has led to more understanding of the role of fire and the diets and behaviors of bison, prairie chicken and birds. The next frontier for the preserve is to find effective conservation measures for existing cattle ranches, said Mike Fuhr, state director of Oklahoma's Nature Conservancy. "We need to think beyond our boundaries and borders," Fuhr said. "We are a resource, and we all do conservation. Maybe they don't do things exactly as we do here, but we can work together." Ginnie Graham 918-581-8376 A rebirth of Oklahoma's tallgrass prairie Since the 1930s, conservation groups and the National Parks Service wanted to preserve a large chunk of tallgrass prairie. During the 1980s, it almost happened in Kansas but fell through, as tallgrass prairie ranches were being sold. The Oklahoma chapter of the Nature Conservancy was established in 1986 and embarked on the nonprofit's largest fundraising project: buying the 29,000-acre Barnard Chapman Ranch to preserve the world's largest patch of tallgrass prairie. For two years after acquisition in 1989, the land sat empty to let it breathe and return to its natural state. Studies of the ecosystem and history indicated the prairie thrives with controlled burns and bison. "The bison helped shape the prairie, and the

prairie also shaped them," said Harvey Payne, the first director of the Oklahoma chapter of the Nature Conservancy. But the plan wasn't popular. Ranchers worried about disease and government encroachment, and the Osage Nation expressed concern about mineral rights issues. The legal issues were worked out, and a certified disease-free herd was donated by the Ken-Ada Ranch in Bartlesville. "We were breaking new ground," Payne said. Now, at least 10,000 visitors come through the visitor's center annually.