



# DRIVING THE DIME

GEARING UP THROUGH THE GREAT LAKES AND THE GREAT PLAINS

• BY MELISSA BRANDZEL

## "Badlands Teddy"

A spontaneous question may arise in the minds of those viewing one of the immense prairie dog towns inside Theodore Roosevelt National Park: If these chattering, charming black-tailed critters are indeed the most social of creatures—and if, as animal experts explain, they live in coterie tucked inside larger colonies that sprawl hole after hole across the great grasslands—does that mean they've developed some type of extended communication network down there? Something akin to a prairie dog post office? And if so, would they know about that sixteen-cent stamp recently issued by the USPS? You know, the one that—in a roundabout way—was printed in their honor?

That stamp was the fifteenth issued in the 2016 National Park Series—a series designed to celebrate the agency's centennial. Arguably, it was the most notable stamp on the sheet—even more so than the stamp for Yellowstone,

the first national park—because it paid homage to the man who established five national parks: Theodore Roosevelt.

The way the prairie dogs yip inside the park today, it seems they already know that. Perhaps they recall the great conservationist who famously said, "I never would have been president if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota."

### The Call of the West

It was a crisp fall day in 1883 when a thin, bespectacled young New Yorker named Theodore Roosevelt stepped off the train in North Dakota and into a world that would profoundly transform him. The New York State Assemblyman and outdoor enthusiast was on a two-week trip to hunt bison in the remote settlement of Little Missouri. In just a short time, he fell in love with the wild landscape—the rolling prairie grasslands, the rocky buttes, the winding river.

In fact, the Badlands had such an impact on him that the following year, in the wake of



US HIGHWAY 10 travels from Bay City, Michigan, to Fargo, North Dakota, via Lake Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Historically, the route began in Detroit, went directly to Midland, and extended from Fargo to Seattle.

a double tragedy—his mother, Martha, and his wife, Alice, died on the same day—he fled there to grieve in the spot offering the most solitude he could find.

Roosevelt stayed for two and a half years, healing his heart and renewing his spirit, trading big-city political life for that of a hardy frontiersman. He didn't exactly fit right in; he was mocked for his appearance and his intellect. But he was determined to make a go of it. He jumped on the current ranching trend, buying cattle and establishing two ranches, the Maltese Cross and Elkhorn Ranch. He became a deputy sheriff who brought outlaws to justice. A prolific writer, he also wrote volumes about his adventures, romanticizing the west. He developed perseverance and fortitude—qualities he would one day use to lead the country.

Most importantly, an awakening was taking hold of him in his new life as a rancher. He began to feel an immense appreciation for the land and its wildlife as he witnessed the overhunting of animals—including the near-



**ROUGH RIDER:** Dressed in buckskins, future president Theodore Roosevelt poses with a horse in the North Dakota Badlands in 1884. Historians say he cultivated his rough-and-tumble lifestyle from an early age: Plagued by asthma as a boy, he decided that strenuous activity in the great outdoors was the best way to bolster his constitution.



extinction of the American bison—and the destruction of their habitat. He wanted his fellow man to be able to spend time in nature, to experience the peace and beauty of the land, just as he had. It was here in the Badlands that he realized the urgent need to preserve America's natural resources for future generations.

Although Roosevelt headed back to New York in the fall of 1886, he returned to Dakota Territory periodically over the next twelve years, sadly giving up Elkhorn Ranch, and finally Maltese Cross, as his ranching business—and a chunk of his fortune—dwindled. He sold off the rest of his stock, but his respect for natural land remained. In the seven and a half years of his presidency, which began in 1901, Roosevelt placed 230 million acres of land under public protection, and established five national parks, four national game preserves, 150 national forests, fifty-one federal bird reservations, and eighteen national monuments. Even before he became president, he co-founded—along with George Bird Grinnell—the Boone and Crockett Club, the first fair-hunting organization dedicated to the management and conservation of wildlife and its habitat.

“There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country,” Roosevelt said.

And thus the Badlands took on great historical significance as “the cradle of conservation.” The national park was officially dedicated in 1947, in honor of the man who came to be known as the “conservation president.”

### A Park in Three Parts

Spanning more than seventy thousand acres, Theodore Roosevelt National Park is comprised of three units: the North Unit, the South Unit, and the Elkhorn Ranch Unit. Visiting each one requires a separate car ride.

The North Unit, fifteen miles south of Watford City, offers plenty of rugged wilderness and delicious quietude. A scenic drive stretches from the North Unit Visitor Center to the Oxbow Overlook at the western end of this portion of the park, passing by the Long X Trail, which served as a corridor to move cattle into the Northern Great Plains in the 1880s.

Journey the sixty-eight miles from the North Unit to the South Unit, near the gate-

way town of Medora off Interstate 94, to discover Roosevelt's first ranch home, the Maltese Cross Cabin, at the South Unit Visitor Center.



#### WHERE THE DEER AND THE PRAIRIE DOGS PLAY:

The 70,446 acres of Theodore Roosevelt National Park represent one of the most diverse ecosystems protected in a single preserve. [Top] Bison wade the waters of the Little Missouri River, while [above] petrified stumps of coniferous trees litter a brittle wilderness and [below] cannonball concretions hunker in the sculpted badlands. [Right] The playful black-tailed prairie dogs appear in all three of the park's units.







**HOMES ON THE RANGE:** Theodore Roosevelt maintained two ranches on land that is now part of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. [Above] The first was the Maltese Cross Ranch—also known as Chimney Butte Ranch—purchased by the future president in 1883 during a fifteen-day hunting trip through the area. [Left] The second was Elkhorn Ranch, bought in 1884 and named by Roosevelt himself. [Below] The majestic beasts were reintroduced to the park in 1985 after an absence of many decades.



For beautiful vistas, cruise the thirty-six-mile loop drive that's open most of the year, or discover nature on foot at Peaceful Valley Ranch, the site of a former dude ranch. It's worth a short detour seven miles east of Medora for the incredible panorama at the Painted Canyon overlook, which also has a visitor center.

Between the North and South Units, a thirty-five-mile drive from Medora, is the

remote Elkhorn Ranch Unit. Dubbed the "Walden Pond of the West," Elkhorn Ranch was Roosevelt's main ranch site and the place where he spent most of his time—in the middle of nowhere, just as he wished. Today, all that remains of the structures are a few blocks in the ground to indicate the size and location of Roosevelt's former log cabin, once surrounded by corrals, sheds, and workshops.

But it's worth a visit to experience the surrounding countryside as Roosevelt once did: the serenity, the beautiful trees, the Little Missouri River, in a setting that is still largely untouched after all these years.



Stay long enough at Theodore Roosevelt National Park and you'll likely glimpse roaming bison, elk, bighorn sheep, or prairie dogs. Longhorn steer and feral horses can be found as living history exhibits. Watch the wind roll through the prairie grasses like waves, or wander through one of the largest petrified forests in the U.S. There are self-guided nature trails, and summer brings ranger-led tours, talks, and evening campfires. Travelers with kids can borrow the park's Family Fun Packs, filled with binoculars, field guides, and activities.

As one might imagine, summer draws the largest crowds, though the park is open year-round. Depending on the season, one might go canoeing or kayaking, hiking, birding, fishing, bicycling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or backcountry camping at one of three campgrounds. If the timing is right, visitors can join in special events such as the North Dakota Badlands Star Party, the Dakota Nights Astronomy Festival, or the Christmas Bird Count.

There's no doubt Roosevelt would be proud to know his old stomping grounds have been protected and preserved for the travelers of today and tomorrow. "Of all the questions which can come before this nation," he said, "...there is none which compares in importance with the great central task of leaving this land even a better land for our descendants than it is for us." Bully!

And there's no denying the park is magnificent, mesmerizing. And so are those prairie dog villages. Spend some time viewing those little fellows. But don't be surprised if you receive a postcard after arriving home, reading WE KNOW YOU WERE HERE, signed by a hundred or so tiny pawprints. We're telling you: Those little critters have something going on. ♥

**MELISSA BRANDZEL** is the Copy Editor and a Roadside Contributor for *AMERICAN ROAD*. Theodore Roosevelt photo courtesy Theodore Roosevelt Center. The following photos appear courtesy the National Park Service: bison by Janice Shanks; petrified stumps by Laura Thomas; prairie dogs by Jeff Zylland; and elk by Rolan Honeyman. Vintage Elkhorn Ranch photo from NPS Archives. Cannonball concretions and Maltese Cross Ranch House courtesy Jasperdo. Closing bison photo courtesy Matt Reinhold.