

July 18, 2010 - Custer State Park

The Custer State Park is located a scant 5 miles east of the town of Custer, and about 7 miles from the airport from which I am working and base out of. On a beautiful Sunday in mid-July I arose early for a flight over a portion of the park's highlands in order to capture a few early morning photos. After returning to the airport I traded the plane for a loaner car and began my 50 mile, all day drive, through what has to be some of the most beautiful scenery in all of South Dakota. Located in the heart of the Black Hills, it is said to be one of the largest state parks in the contiguous United States.

The \$6 entrance fee was paid at the west gate and in a few miles I came to the turn off for the Wildlife Loop Road. The terrain here is generally rolling grassy hills with patches of the Ponderosa Pine forests that make up most of the Black Hills. The loop road is almost 20 miles of gradual turns with slight elevation changes that, this morning at least, seemed to draw an unusual number of Chevrolet Corvettes traveling in groups. Obviously there was some sort of a Corvette rally in progress as I would see up to a dozen of these roadsters, many with their tops down, traveling together.

The wildlife, which I saw along this route, initially was limited to small herds of deer grazing off in the distance. However I did come across one brave doe who was nibbling grass right off of the roadway and managed to photograph her before the roar of a passing motorcycle sent her scurrying. Second only to the Corvettes were the number of motorcycles, also traveling in groups, that beautiful summer's day. Since temperatures were predicted to reach into the mid 80's later that afternoon, both these forms of transportation seemed appropriate for the warm weather.

In a short while I came across the first of several "wild" burros that I had been told about. These are the only animals that the park rangers seem to look the other way for when visitors hand feed them. I had been told that they like carrots, so I had picked up a bag at the local grocery store before getting underway. The donkeys would gather in small groups and wander directly up to the parked cars sticking their heads directly into the open windows. After receiving their "gifts" they would wander over to an adjacent vehicle to see what their next offerings would be. While not probably on the best of diets, these donkeys seemed to be doing quite well with their hand outs. I had been warned to say in the car since these animals would tend to "gang up" on the pedestrians and their saliva would discolor hands and clothing with a black substance that was difficult to remove. I noticed that a lot of the youngsters who were taking delight in hand feeding the burros from outside their vehicles were showing various shades of black coloration on their clothes.

Once my supply of carrots was exhausted, I continued along the Wildlife Loop, stopping several times along the way for photos and to take short walks to scenic overlooks and on trailheads. However the main draw for this portion of the drive was to view the large herds of Buffalo that inhabit the park. Up to 1500 head accumulate over the summer months, and they graze openly on the hilly grasslands that abound in this portion of the park.



Early morning flight over Sylvan Lake & Lodge



Sylvan Lake from ground level later that afternoon



The Needles seen from my plane during early A.M.



Afternoon photograph along the Needles Highway

Each fall the herds are rounded up in a mass undertaking by park staff and volunteers and brought to large corrals where they are vaccinated, branded or tagged and then a surplus of 500 or so animals are sorted out for sale by auction. This way their numbers can be kept to a manageable 1000 permanent head, while local ranchers can then replenish their breed stock or purchase the animals for their low cholesterol meat. In fact, later that day I would enjoy a delicious buffalo meatloaf at one of the 3 resort restaurants located within the parks boundaries.

True to their word, I soon came across a large number of bison literally wandering alongside and even on the roadway. Several hundred of these buffalo travel together in social groups and there is a definite "pecking order". The males will have several cows by their side and they are very possessive, often butting heads with other challenging bulls. They made a growling grunting noise as I drove past and their size and demeanor can be quite intimidating. Getting out of one's car could lead to a more colorful staining of clothing than from the previously seen donkeys, I would suspect...more like blood red rather than saliva black.

After leaving the large herd behind I continued along the Needles Highway and begin my long climb to the 6,000 foot elevation level at Sylvan Lake and its delightfully rustic lodge. Along the way I had a chance to see, from ground level, what I had photographed earlier that morning from a thousand feet above. The needles and spires that seem to grow out of the ground like giant mushrooms are truly amazing. Their beauty is breathtaking and I captured a dozen or more photos of these rocks that often seem to defy gravity. The drive into this giant "rock garden" takes one through several of the one lane tunnels carved right into the stone, in some cases for a hundred feet or more.

In addition to the many camping facilities located in Custer State Park, there are also 3 distinct resort hotels, each with its own flavor and specialty restaurant. That afternoon I had lunch at the Blue Bell resort, located along the Wildlife loop area in the grassy southern portion of the park. However now that I was in the rugged mountains I decided to stop for an afternoon cocktail at the Sylvan Lake Lodge. I had photographed that lake earlier in the day from my plane. The early morning lighting did not make for a great picture. However, the afternoon light gave a nice photo of the lake with all of the paddle boats and canoes now traversing its waters. I had a piña colada on the outdoor patio and then enjoyed the ambiance of the rustic great room with its game animal trophy heads mounted on the knotty pine walls and relaxed on their overstuffed leather furniture.

From Sylvan Lake it is a short 10 mile drive back to my motor home camper parked at the county airport. Thus ended the perfect day of combining flying, nature and the sheer beauty of the Custer State Park along with a chance to see and feed some of its wildlife, while and at the same time enjoying a delicious lunch and a relaxing afternoon cocktail. This is what this working vacation is all about...having the opportunity to leisurely experience this beautiful big country of ours... up close and personal.



Needles Highway, up close and personal



Balanced Rock along the Needles Highway



Relaxing after a drink at the Sylvan Lake Lodge



Grazing Deer photographed traveling thru Park



Just one of the half dozen tunnels in the Park



Taking a break alongside one of the hiking trails



Donkeys meet cars along the wildlife loop road and "beg" for food. This is the view from the drivers seat



After leaving the "mountains" the rocks turn red, and soon grasslands appear. Here is a buffalo corral



Herds of buffalo (bison) graze alongside the roadways



Here a bull and his cow are blocking my path