

Theodore Roosevelt

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Theodore Roosevelt National Park



The American Bison



“The extermination of the buffalo has been a veritable tragedy of the animal world.”
Theodore Roosevelt

Bison or Buffalo

The American bison (*Bison bison*) is the largest mammal on the North American continent. This magnificent creature, which is a member of the Bovidae or cow family, was given the name “les boeufs,” meaning oxen, by early French explorers.

Over time, the name went through several changes from “buffle” to “buffelo” and finally to its present “buffalo.” *Bison* is the correct scientific and common name, but buffalo has been widely used and accepted for many decades.

Bison Ancestry

Ancestry of the American bison has been traced by fossilized bones and is thought to have originated in southern Asia during the Pliocene epoch over 400,000 years ago. The ancient bison was much larger than the present-day animal and ranged throughout the northern hemisphere. Paleontologists have learned that during its long history, bison went through many changes. At one point in its evolution, a prehistoric bison, *Bison latifrons*, had horns measuring nine feet from tip

to tip. A more recent species, *Bison occidentalis*, evolved in the late Pleistocene and is the immediate ancestor of present-day bison. Bison initially made their way to America by crossing the ancient land bridge that once connected Asia with North America. During the ensuing centuries, bison moved south and east, at one time ranging from Mexico to southern New England. The largest concentration of bison was found in the Great Plains where the peak number has been estimated at over 60 million.

Characteristics

The bison has often been described as the most ferocious animal in North America. This description is no doubt a result of its great size. Mature bulls can weigh over 2,000 pounds and stand 6 feet or more at the shoulder. Their massive heads have a broad forehead and are covered with long, thick, wiry hair and hold a set of horns that are never shed. The shoulders carry a huge hump that gives the bison its characteristic top-heavy look while the hips are much smaller in relation to the rest of the body. This body structure allows them to pivot quickly. Their slow, lumbering nature is a misnomer as they can run at speeds up to 35 mph. A bison cow is similar in appearance to the bull, but is smaller in size, weighing up to 1100 pounds, and reaching a height of 4 1/2 to 5 feet at the shoulder. Their heads and horns are smaller and narrower. Bison reach maturity at 7-8 years of age and can live up to 40 years.

Rutting (mating) season usually starts in July and ends in September. At age three, cows usually conceive for the first time. The gestation period is 9 months. Although calves can be born at any time of the year, calving usually begins in mid-April. The tiny orange-red colored baby weighs approximately 50 lbs at birth. It is able to walk within a few hours and will remain within close proximity to its mother for the first few weeks. Eventually, calves venture further away and play with other calves as the cows graze nearby. At three months, the orangy color of the baby will begin to change to the darker brown of the adult. At the same time, the horns and the long vertebrae that form the hump will begin to grow.

Bison are herbivores (plant eaters) and feed primarily on grasses. They like to hang out in prairie dog towns enjoying the fresh new shoots that sprout quickly after the prairie dogs have clipped the grasses. These new shoots grow back vigorously and provide superior nutrition. Bison also enjoy wallowing in the loose dirt prevalent throughout the prairie dog town.

Slaughter and Survival

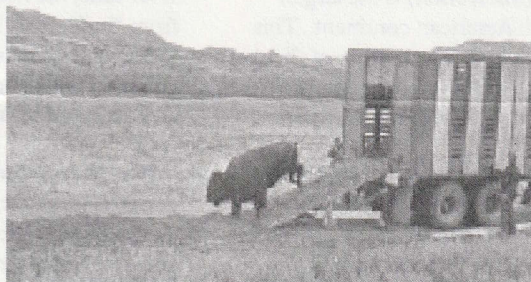
For centuries, bison and humans coexisted on the Great Plains. The bison was the mainstay of Plains Indian life providing food, implements, clothing, shelter, and spiritual power. By the 1830s, the US government and army sought to exterminate the great herds in an effort to push Indians onto reservations and open the west for settlers while fur traders saw them as a commodity to be harvested.

The westward expansion movement marked the beginning of the end for the American bison. Between 1830-80, a large scale bison slaughter occurred on the Great Plains. Millions of bison were killed for their hides and tongues, which were considered a delicacy. As many as 250 bison could be killed in one day by a single hunter, and a good skinner could remove the entire hide in five minutes. The years between 1870-80 were the height of the bison fur trade when as many as 250,000 hides were auctioned off in just one or two days. By the turn of the twentieth century, less than 300 wild bison remained and the species faced extinction. The great thundering herds were gone forever.

Fortunately, several individuals, including Theodore Roosevelt, had the foresight to try saving the few animals they were left. Warnings and attempts to protect the American bison came as early as 1776, but it wasn't until 1894 that the first federal legislation protecting this animal was enacted. Killing bison became punishable by a \$1000 fine or imprisonment. Prior to this legislation, a small herd existed in Yellowstone National Park, but was not protected against poachers. There were also small herds held by Native American groups and private individuals. With the passing of the bison protection law, game preserves were established that ensured the survival of the species. Today, more than 500,000 bison roam the North American continent and they no longer balance on the edge of extinction. It is truly one of America's greatest success stories.

Bison Return to the Badlands

In 1956, 29 bison were obtained from Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in Nebraska and released in the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Here they roamed freely on 46,000 acres of park land. By 1962, the herd had increased to 145 animals and 10 bulls and 10 cows were transported to the North Unit.



Although both units of the park could handle larger numbers of bison, park managers have currently set herd size at approximately 300 for the South Unit and 150 for the North Unit in order to maintain healthy range conditions. This limit also lessens the impact on other animals. Historically, natural predators, the wolf and grizzly bear, stalked the bison herds, but were extirpated decades ago. Today, without natural predators, park staff must manage the herd size. To maintain population levels, bison are rounded up every few years and surplus animals are removed from the park.



EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA™