

THE AMERICAN BUFFALO

Introduction

To most Americans the buffalo is symbolic of our great nation. He is worthy of this honor for he is the largest North American mammal. In addition, no other continent has ever produced a wild game animal in such great numbers. Before the discovery of America, buffalo are thought to have numbered 60 to 70 million. They roamed from the Great Slave Lake to the north down into old Mexico as well as from seacoast to seacoast.

Technically the buffalo is more correctly called a "bison", but by tradition this animal has been known as a buffalo and the name is still used. The name buffalo actually belongs to a species of African and Asian cattle.

Description

As a member of the cattle family, buffalo have cloven hooves and chew their cud. Both cows and bulls grow a true horn supported by a bony core. Their most distinguishing characteristic is the conspicuous hump they display. This hump is caused by elongated spines of the backbone making a bony ridge.

Buffalo bulls may often weigh 1800 to 2000 pounds and stand five or six feet at the shoulders. The cows are smaller and not so ponderous. A buffalo's hair is thickest on the forepart of his body. His hind-quarters with small narrow hips seem almost naked in contrast. With thick topknot, long goatee, and hairy forelegs, he has earned the title of "the great shaggy beast".

Habits

The buffalo is gregarious by nature and is thus basically a herd animal. Bulls stay with the herd during the "running or mating" season in late summer and early fall, but the rest of the year they generally separate from the cows, their calves, and the remaining juveniles.

Buffalo are drifters, going wherever the grass is good. Before settlement of the west they wandered the open plains in great numbers, even going into the mountains and woodlands. Now they are confined to wildlife refuges administered by many agencies. Some are managed in private herds.

The buffalo's eyesight is very poor, but he has highly developed senses of smell and hearing. He appears to be a slow moving animal with all his great weight and bulkiness, but when aroused, he can wheel and charge instantly. However, he is unpredictable by nature and should never be taken for granted.

In the spring the buffalo begin to shed their heavy winter coat of hair and it hangs about them in tatters. He helps in the shedding process by rubbing on any available rock, tree, or sign post. In addition he enjoys rolling in "wallows" - saucer like depressions formed by this activity - and this "wallowing" also aids him in getting a dust or mud bath to help rid him of plaguing insects.

Production and Maturity

The mating season begins in July, and many fights between bulls develop for possession of the cows. As a prelude to the contest, much bellowing, snorting, and pawing of hooves takes place as the combatants continually vie each other for supremacy.

Bright tawny to buff-colored calves appear the following spring between mid-April and June. They resemble domestic calves at first and do not display the hump. Several months later their hair begins to darken and they begin to show the hump features. By then they truly resemble buffalo. Since the cow's milk is scanty, the youngsters are grazing with the herd within 4 to 5 months after birth.

Buffalo bulls reach their prime in about six years, but cows may have calves at the age of three. Normally a buffalo will live about 15 to 20 years, but occasionally they live to be 30 to 40 years old.

Historic Note

Much has been written concerning the economic value of the buffalo to the Indian. To the Plains Indian, the buffalo was actually a way of life, and as a result, they depended upon him for their entire subsistence. This animal furnished food, clothing, shelter, and fuel for the Indian.

Closely tied in with the Indian's dependence upon the buffalo was the calculated slaughter of this animal by the white man which eventually brought about the subjugation of the Indian. This slaughter reduced the number of buffalo from the original estimated 60 to 70 million in the early 1800's to less than one thousand by the turn of the 20th century. Fortunately, due to the effort of a small but devoted group of conservationists, the buffalo was saved from extinction and is today preserved for all to see and enjoy.