

Mid-1870s photo of a pile of bison skulls waiting to be ground into fertilizer.

A brief history

Several million bison (also called buffalo) once roamed freely on the plains of North America.

The western movement of settlers in the 1800s brought large-scale commercial hunting of bison (mostly for hides). Nearly 375,000 bison were killed each year.

Bison were driven to the edge of extinction. A census in Yellowstone National Park revealed fewer than 50 bison remained in 1902.

Bison poaching was difficult to control until 1894, when the Lacey Act—creating penalties for such crimes—was signed into law.

Conservation efforts to restore bison began in Yellowstone National Park and other places like the National Bison Range (MT), Wichita Mountains (OK), and Niabrara Valley (NE) between 1902 and 1913.

The U.S. Army safeguarded the small bison herd in Yellowstone National Park against poaching until 1918.

Early bison management involved feeding, culling, and herding the animals (much like cattle ranching).

The concept of preserving ecological processes, or letting nature take its course, was introduced in the National Park Service in the 1920's, and formally adopted as policy in 1967.

Today, the Greater Yellowstone Area is home to around 3,000 to 5,000 bison, depending on weather and management activities.

JASON SAVAGE

BISON RESOURCES:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
fwp.mt.gov

Yellowstone National Park
nps.gov/yell/

Bison education online resource
ibmp.info/bisoneducation.php

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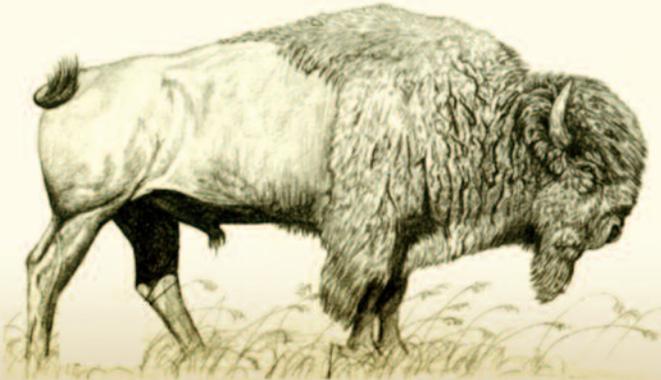
BISON BASICS

BIOLOGY, BEHAVIOR AND A BRIEF HISTORY

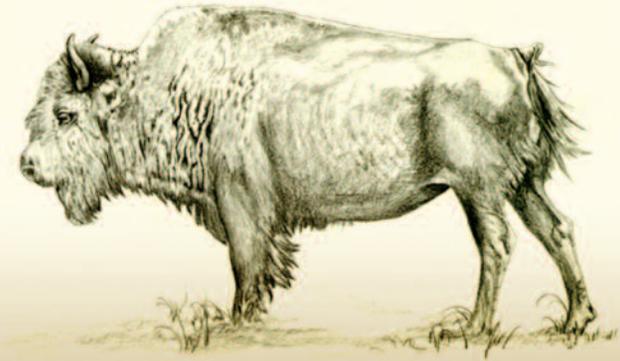
Bison biology

Bison are the largest land mammal in North America. As a native species, they play a unique role in the health and diversity of the ecosystem.

- ▶ Males, or bulls (left), weigh up to 2,000 pounds and measure up to 6 ½ feet at the shoulder.
- ▶ Females, or cows (right), weigh up to 1,200 pounds, and stand as tall as 5 ½ feet at the shoulder.
- ▶ A bison horn can reach 20 inches long. A bull's horns are larger in diameter than a cow's.
- ▶ A bison has a large, low-hanging head supported by a prominent hump above the shoulder and massive neck muscles used to plow snow away from feeding sites.



Male bison

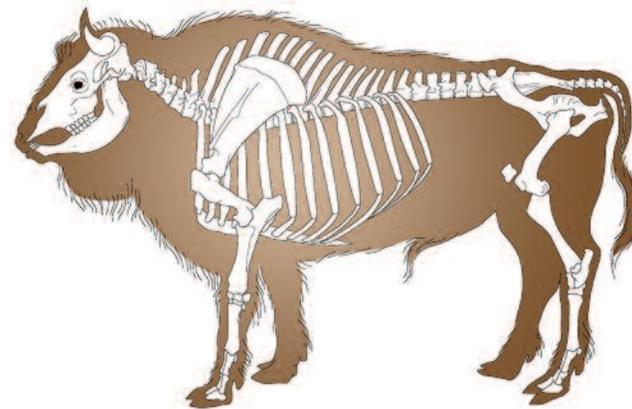


Female bison



Scan this QR code to watch how a bison uses its head to find food in winter:

View more videos and publications at our online bison resource: <http://ibmp.info/bisoneducation.php>



- ▶ Bison have an incisor-like canine tooth on their lower jaw and no upper incisors allowing them to gather 15 to 30 pounds of food per day.
- ▶ Bison hair is denser than cattle hair, providing good insulation against extreme conditions. Bison don't begin to feel chilly until temperatures drop below -20° F.
- ▶ Bison are extremely agile. They can jump up to 6 feet high and reach speeds of 35 mph. They are also capable of climbing steep hills.
- ▶ If you see bison rolling in the dust, this is called wallowing. This activity creates a scent for mating, regulates body temperature, and protects against insects.



Bison wallowing

Bison social behavior:

Mature bulls three years and older usually stay by themselves or form small groups.

Cows, calves and immature bulls form groups of 20 to 100 during fall through spring and can congregate in even larger groups during the summer breeding season.

Bison tend to move frequently. Typically they travel 2 to 5 miles per day but occasionally will move up to 20 miles. Sometimes they remain in the same location for a few days, usually during snowstorms and cold temperatures.

While not normally aggressive, bison can become dangerous when they feel threatened, especially during the peak of the rut (mating season) or when they sense that a calf may be in danger.

The peak of the rut generally occurs during the last two weeks of July and the first two weeks of August. At this time, bison herds are at their largest, because lone males join back up with the rest of the group.

