



## MAMMALS

**Status: In Public and Private Herds  
Formerly Native Statewide**

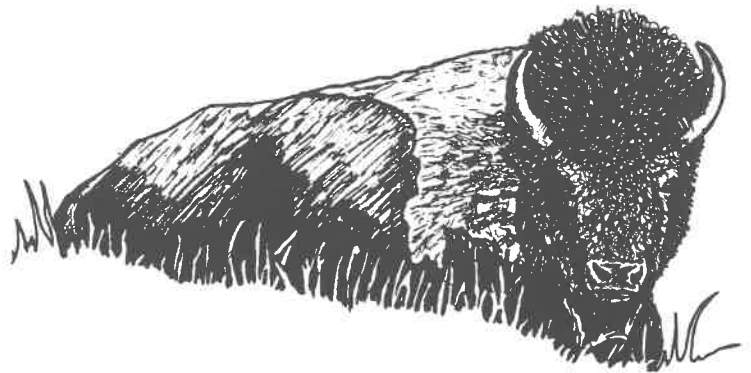
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# BISON

*(Bison bison)*

## Description

To the Lakota, the bison was called "*tah-tanka*," meaning bull. The word *bison* is a Greek word meaning ox-like animal. It is believed that the name buffalo originated with the French fur trappers who called these massive beasts "*boeufs*," meaning ox or bullock. Through the years, the name was expanded and changed to buffalo. Although the official common name is bison, the name buffalo is widely used.



**Historic Distribution Of Bison**

The bison is considered the largest native land mammal in North America. Bulls can stand 6 feet (1.8 m) tall at the shoulder and weigh up to a ton (909.5 kg). The cows tend to be smaller, averaging 5 feet (1.5 m) tall and 930 (422.7 kg) pounds. A bison's head, high shoulder hump, and forelegs are covered with brownish-black, woolly hair. The rest of the body is covered with brown, short hair. The male and female both have horns. Unlike antlers, which grow only on males and are shed each year, horns occur on both sexes of bison and are not shed.

## Distribution

Bison once ranged across most of what is now the United States, Canada, and into Mexico; their population was estimated at about 60 million. With the pioneer settlement of western North America in the 1800's, the last great bison herds were diminished in size. In eastern South Dakota, herds occurred west of the James River as late as 1866. However, by 1870, no bison were east of the Missouri River. A few bison survived near the Black Hills as late as 1877. By 1889, the total population of North American bison had been reduced to a mere 1,100 animals.

Today, in South Dakota, public bison herds can be found in Badlands National Park, Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park. A bison herd is maintained by the Nature Conservancy on the Ordway Prairie near Leola. No other state has as many public herds as South Dakota.

## Natural History

Bison are found primarily on open plains and grasslands where they feed on grass, by pulling rather than biting it off. Bison are *ruminants*, meaning they *regurgitate* their food and chew it a second time. Bison are *gregarious*, with cows and young animals remaining in herds throughout the year. The *rut*, or mating season, is July through September, when bulls leave their bachelor groups to join the herd of cows and younger animals. Fighting among bulls during the *rut* can be fierce and their challenging roars echo across the grasslands. Cinnamon-colored calves are born in May and June. Within three hours of birth, newborn calves can travel with their mothers. Bison paw and roll to make depressions in the grasslands. These depressions, known as wallows, are used by bison for dusting to alleviate the irritations of biting insects. Other than humans, the only predators of bison are grizzly bears and wolves.

## Significance

The plains Indians used all parts of the bison, wasting little. The meat was a primary source of food. Bones made tools and weapons. Hides provided materials for blankets, clothing and shelters known as teepees. The native plains people believed that each spring a benevolent spirit sent waves of bison onto the plains for their use.

White bison are especially important to the native people of the plains. A white bison hide is a sacred *talisman*. The birth of a white bison has great spiritual significance and the animal is revered. According to the *White Buffalo Woman* legend, one of the most important legends in Lakota culture, a white buffalo is the most sacred of living creatures.

Today, many private bison herds are raised for meat production because bison meat is valued as a food source by health conscious consumers. Compared to other types of red meat, bison meat is high in protein and low in fat and cholesterol. Bison are also valued for their role in the prairie ecosystem. Because the bison represents the free and open spirit of the western prairie, and because of their near extinction, bison are highly regarded by Americans and visitors to our country.



## Conservation Measures

Bison were nearly exterminated, but are no longer endangered. Today's combined herds in the United States are estimated at approximately 80,000 animals.

In 1881, during the last bison hunt on the Grand River, Pete Dupree and his wife, Mary Good Elk Woman, captured six bison calves and brought them to their ranch on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. Those calves began a herd that was later sold to Scotty Philip. Thirty-six of those animals were sold to the state of South Dakota in 1913 to begin the Custer State Park herd. Today, bison are found throughout the United States and Canada in both private and public herds. Lessons learned from this successful conservation effort may help us protect other species from extinction.

## Management Consideration

Not only are bison no longer endangered, their population is so healthy that some herds must be managed to prevent over population that would cause damage to their grassland habitat. In Custer State Park, the bison population is about 1400 animals in the summer and 950 in the winter. These numbers are maintained through several management techniques, including a limited hunting season each January, when licenses to take 10 bulls are issued, and an annual November auction at which surplus animals are sold. The bison herds in the Badlands Wind Cave National Parks are also managed, but no public hunting is permitted.



## Glossary

**Gregarious** - living in herds or flocks.

**Regurgitate** - to bring partially digested food from the stomach back into the mouth.

**Ruminants** - hooved, even-toed, cud-chewing mammals such as cattle, bison, and deer.

**Rut** - a specific time of year in which hooved animals mate.

**Talisman** - something with engraved figures or symbols that is supposed to bring luck and keep away evil.

## References

Jones, J. Knox Jr., David Armstrong, Robert Hoffman, and Clyde Jones, 1983. Mammals of the Northern Great Plains, Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE.

### **Selected Resources For Teachers**

*American Indian Myths and Legends* selected and edited by Richard Endoes and Alfonso Ortiz, 1985. Panthion Books, New York, grades K-12.

*Peterson's Field Guide to the Mammals* by Burt and Grossenheider, Houghton Mifflin Company publishers. Field guide, grades K-12.

*The Time of the Buffalo* by McHugh, University of Nebraska Press. A combination of natural and cultural history. Grades 6-12

*Wildlife of North America* by The National Geographic Society. Photo book with distribution maps and natural history information. Grades K-12.

*Bison, Symbol of the West* by Sample, Falcon Press. Information on herds found throughout America. Grades 6-12.

*Where the Buffalo Roam* by Schult, Badlands Natural History Association, includes brief history, drawings and natural history of the bison. Grades 4-12.

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