



WHY RESTORE BISON?

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME
JULY 2021

Here are 10 reasons to help restore bison to Interior Alaska



FOOD SECURITY



Wood bison can add to Alaska's culture and food supply much like moose do today. Consider that moose did not occur in most of western Alaska 100 years ago, but today they are a major part of the culture and food supply of the people that live there.

MOOSE AND BISON

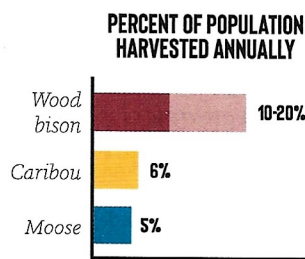
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Years of evidence that moose and bison thrive together

Moose and bison are compatible on the same landscape. Long-term studies in Canada show that bison and moose do not negatively compete for resources. For example, the Farewell and the Delta Junction areas have large plains bison herds and consistently high moose densities.

HIGH HARVEST RATE

Bison can handle a higher harvest rate than other game animals in Alaska (including moose) because they are less susceptible to wolf and bear predation.



EVIDENCE OF WOOD BISON

Wood bison have been a prominent part of the Interior Alaska ecosystem for thousands of years, but disappeared about the time that modern rifles became common. Alaska Native oral histories along the Yukon River have described historic use of wood bison in the region.



LOCAL ECONOMIC BENEFITS

Release of bison provides short- and long-term boosts to the local economy as populations grow and are able to support hunting. Local communities have access to an excellent source of wild game meat and economic opportunities (e.g., local herd stewardship jobs, ecotourism, grocery and fuel sales)



GIFT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS

Rarely do we have the opportunity to give a gift to future generations. Making efforts to restore wood bison in Interior Alaska will help heal our relationships to the ecosystem.

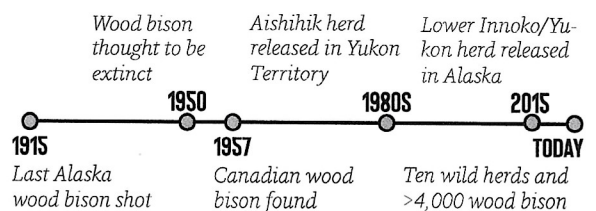


STATE, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

Wood bison restoration in Alaska has very strong grassroots advocacy and support in the form of funding, labor, and in-kind services and supplies from dozens of businesses, corporations, agencies, villages, and citizens. In addition, restoration of wood bison has strong and diverse national and international support and interest.

SUCCESSFUL RESTORATIONS

These efforts guide the way for future restorations of wood bison in other areas of the state.



GOOD EATING



Wood bison meat is an excellent source of protein and is rich in iron and vitamin B12. A single one-ton bull can provide 680 pounds of meat that tastes similar to commercial beef but is leaner and contains healthier fats.



ECOSYSTEM BENEFITS

The addition of grazers like wood bison can increase plant species diversity, richness, and quality, and concentrate nutrients that are beneficial for insects, birds, waterfowl, and mammals.

All photos by Doug Lindstrand unless specified



WOOD BISON FAQ

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME
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Here are some common questions and answers about wood bison and restoration.

WHERE DID WOOD BISON COME FROM?

Wood bison originally roamed parts of Alaska and Northwest Canada. The last Alaska wood bison was shot around 1918 according to Alaska Native oral history along the Yukon River.

Wood bison were captured from the wild in Canada in 1957, then moved to Elk Island National Park in Alberta and allowed to multiply. Elk Island was the source for wood bison released in Alaska in 2015, and will most likely be the source for future releases in Alaska.

WHAT DO BISON EAT?

Bison's main diet in winter is grasses and sedges. In summer, their diet is much more diverse, eating many plants that grow close to the ground, like horsetail or goose grass, and the leaves of several other green plants like clover and low-growing willows.

HOW DO THEY FORAGE IN DEEP SNOW? WILL THEY SURVIVE WINTER?

Bison have big heads and a giant hump for neck muscle connections that are used to sweep the snow away to access forage in winter. Operating as a herd, bison help each other clear the snow. Bison also take advantage of windblown areas and steep slopes to access food under snow.

WOULD BISON AND MOOSE COEXIST OR COMPETE? COULD THEY BREED?

Bison cannot breed with moose, so hybrids are not possible.

The Delta Junction and Farewell bison herds have existed for 93 and 53 years respectively. These are areas where bison and moose live together in Alaska, and they are both among the rare areas of Alaska where moose have been at high density for many decades. This indicates that the two species do very well together. In addition, a recent study of Canada's wood bison populations showed no negative effects on moose or caribou.

If you look at the different body structure of bison and moose, you can see that they were intended to eat very different foods. Bison heads are aligned to eat at the ground level and moose heads are positioned to eat plants 3-8 feet off the ground. Moose are a true browser and bison are a generalist grazer.

HOW DO BISON BEHAVE TOWARD PREDATORS? HOW WILL THEY DO AGAINST PREDATORS?

Bison are far more resistant to predation than moose, caribou, and sheep. Bear predation on bison in Canada and Alaska is rare. Wolf predation can happen at a low level. In areas where bison have been restored after a long absence, it takes time for predators to figure out how to kill them. Unlike moose, bison are a herd animal and can defend themselves with numbers. Evidence from Canada suggests it can take 20-30 years for predators to learn how to kill bison. Bison are more susceptible to predation when they are stressed or made vulnerable by deep snow or old age.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLAINS AND WOOD BISON?

They are the same species with slight differences. Wood bison historically lived in the boreal forest and plains bison lived in the great plains. Wood bison are bigger with a steeper and higher hump, and have more hair than plains bison. Wood bison are adapted to the northern forest with features that help deal with deeper snow and colder weather.

DO BISON MOVE AROUND?

Wood bison like open meadows, and travel daily between a set of meadows that they consider home, rather than truly migrating. They can move larger distances seasonally to take advantage of forage that becomes available, like windblown areas in winter and dryer areas during breakup. The Delta Junction plains bison herd moves about 15 miles between calving grounds and winter feeding areas. The Lower Innoko-Yukon Rivers herd often moves around 35 miles between their winter and summer feeding areas. After release there are usually a small number of animals that disperse widely. Of the 130 released along the Innoko, 3 left the core area and traveled widely over the first 2 years. After the initial release effect, dispersers are extremely rare.

WILL BISON BE IN PRIME BERRY PICKING AREAS TRAMPLING BERRIES?

Bison mainly eat sedges and grasses, and other vegetation found around grassy lowland meadows. Berry picking areas are typically upland brushy meadows or open forests. Bison are not interested in the berries themselves or the woody stems of berry bushes.

Bison will find what they believe is their best habitat. Blueberry and cranberry areas hold very little bison food. You are much more likely to encounter a bear or moose in a berry patch than a bison. Their fecal patties can even return nutrients to the soil that improves plant growth.

WILL A BISON ATTACK PEOPLE OR BE AGGRESSIVE?

Bison attacks on people are extremely rare. Like moose, bison want to move away or avoid people but, if cornered, could become aggressive. Unlike moose, old bison bulls are more likely to be aggressive than cows with calves.

According to Canadian wildlife managers, out of deer, elk, bison, and moose, moose give trail users the hardest time and are the most aggressive species. Bison will use trails to travel, but will typically move off a trail when approached by people.

The plains bison herd near Delta Junction, Alaska, lives among 1,000 people and there have been no reported issues of bison being aggressive toward people for decades.

ARE BISON ENDANGERED? ARE YOU ALLOWED TO BE CLOSE TO THEM WHILE HUNTING MOOSE, ETC.? ANY RESTRICTIONS?

Wood bison are listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, but a federal 10(j) rule has been assigned to the species meaning that it is legal to do anything around them that is legal to do around other animals. There are no special restrictions relating to wood bison. The 10(j) rule also provides protections for land owners that want to develop oil and gas reserves by specifically clarifying that development activities are protected when bison are on the landscape.

It is not legal to harass any wildlife by chasing or poaching the animal.

WHEN COULD THEY BE HUNTED?

The more animals that are released initially the sooner hunting may be possible. From a biological perspective getting to 400-500 animals would give the herd a better chance for long-term survival and this could take 10-25 years. There may be surplus bulls available for hunting before the population reaches 400-500.



Still curious? Scan the QR code with your smartphone to find more resources about wood bison. Open your phone's camera app, hold phone up to code but don't take a photo; tap on the link that pops up.

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