

North American Bison



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDENEK

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Bison bison* is derived from the Germanic-origin word *wisunt* (pronounced v-zunt). This word, now spelled *wisent*, denotes the smaller European bison. Although “bison” is also the correct and preferred common name for this animal, “buffalo” (a word more accurately associated with Asian and African species) is used most often. The word “buffalo” originates from the Greek word *boubalos*, which means “antelope or buffalo.” European settlers used “buffalo” in Maryland to a London newspaper, while “bison” wasn’t used until 1774. There were many words used by American Indian tribes of the Plains for the species: in Crow, *Bi-Shee*; in Blackfoot, *ee-nii*; in Cheyenne, *hotowa’e*; in Cree, *moostoos*; and most famously in Sioux, *Ta-Tanka*.

DESCRIPTION: A bison is a large mammal with a heavy brown coat that is thicker and darker in the winter, thinner and lighter during the summer. A juvenile bison is a much lighter color than an adult. Both sexes have curved horns on the sides of

their massive heads. Horns are used for defense and fighting for status within a herd. The tallest point of the animal, the characteristic hump directly above the front legs, can reach 6.5 feet high. Bison can be 10 feet long and weigh up to 2,200 pounds.

DISTRIBUTION: The bison historically was found from Canada to northern Mexico and from the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains to the eastern coast of North America. Historic numbers were estimated at 60 million. The vast majority of these lived in the Great Plains of the United States.

Today, about 300,000 bison are found in isolated populations across the West. Arizona has two distinct herds, one at Raymond Wildlife Area east of Flagstaff, and one at House Rock Wildlife Area just north of the Grand Canyon. Although many populations are hunted, only 12 populations are managed as free-ranging herds (making harvests eligible for Boone and Crockett records). The House Rock population is managed as a free-ranging herd, while the Raymond herd is not.

HABITAT: The bison’s natural habitat is open prairies and grasslands. In Arizona, it also is found on forested hillsides and canyons where grassy meadows and slopes often are used for foraging.

BIOLOGY: Herbivorous grazing animals that traditionally are gregarious, bison have a penchant for “wallowing” in shallow depressions of wet or dry dirt. Wallowing may be explained in part by playing, grooming to remove shedding fur, removing parasites, relieving insect bites and regulating heat. In the wild, bison live about 15 to 20 years, whereas in captivity they may live around 25 years. Bison are polygynous (males breed with many females). The breeding season is August and September. Gestation lasts 285 days and normally produces only one calf per female. The calf nurses for one year and does not mature until 3 years of age.

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STATUS: Arizona has approximately 350 bison between the two herds, a number which is stable to slightly increasing. They provide hunting opportunities for 15–20 hunters annually.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: There are no special management needs for this species currently, as the animals remain intensively managed and monitored on state wildlife areas. 🦏

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