



## American Bison

The two modern subspecies of North American bison are **plains bison** (*Bison bison bison*) and **wood bison** (*Bison bison athabasca*). Various forms of bison existed in Alaska for several hundred thousand years, and until recently were one of the most abundant large animals on the landscape. Wood bison were the last subspecies to occur in Alaska and evolved from their larger-horned Pleistocene ancestors. They lived in parts of Interior and Southcentral Alaska for several thousand years before disappearing during the last few hundred years. These animals were an important resource for native peoples who hunted them for their meat and hides.

Plains bison occurred in southern Canada and the lower 48 states. This animal shaped the lifestyle of the Plains Indians and figured prominently in American history before they were brought to near extinction by the late 1800s. Nineteen plains bison were transplanted to present day Delta Junction, Alaska from Montana in 1928. Alaska's existing wild bison are descendants of these 19 animals. Transplants have created additional herds at Copper River, Chitina River, and Farewell. Small domestic herds are located in agricultural areas on the mainland and on Kodiak and Popov Islands. There were approximately 700 wild plains bison in the state in 2007.

Efforts are underway to restore wood bison to parts of their original range in Alaska. By 1900 there were fewer than 300 wood bison remaining in North America, but conservation efforts in Canada have allowed them to increase and there are now over 4,000 animals in healthy free-ranging herds. The planned reintroduction of wood bison to Alaska could increase this number substantially during the coming decades.

**General description:** Wood bison are the largest native land mammal in North America. Full-grown bull bison stand 6 feet (1.8 m) at the shoulder, are up to 10 feet (3.3 m) long and can weigh more than 2,000 pounds (907 kg). Full-grown cows are smaller but can weigh over 1,200 pounds (544 kg). Plains bison are somewhat smaller than wood bison. A bison's head and forequarters are massive and seem out of proportion to the smaller hind quarters. A bison's backbone begins to rise just ahead of the hips and reaches its maximum height above or behind the front shoulder. From above the shoulder, the hump drops almost straight down to the neck. In wood bison the hump is taller and the highest point of the hump is further forward than in plains bison.

Bison horns curve upward. The horns of a bull are larger and heavier than the horns of a cow. In late fall, a bison's coat is a rich, dark brown. As winter progresses, the coat changes color and is lighter colored by spring. When the weather warms, the hair loosens and hangs in patches until it is completely shed and replaced with new hair in late spring. Hair on the chin resembles a goatee, and is more pointed in wood bison. Older animals tend to have more hair on their heads.

**Life history:** Most bison calves are born in May, but can be born from April to August or even later. New born calves have a reddish coat. They are able to stand when only 30 minutes old and within a few hours can run and kick their hind legs in the air. At about 6 days of age, calves start grazing, but continue to nurse for a few months. Their reddish-orange coat begins to darken at about 10 weeks and turns dark brown about five weeks later.

Cows are sexually mature at 2 years of age and give birth to a single calf in two out of three years on average. The gestation period is approximately 9 months. On rare occasions, a mostly white or even albino calf has been born in the Delta herd, but none has ever reached maturity and none have been born since the early 1970's.

Bison in Alaska have been known to live a relatively long time compared to other hoofed animals (ungulates). One tagged bull killed in the Copper River area was over 20 years old.

Bison tend to remain in a home range, although they often move between seasonal ranges. Alaska's wild bison do not remain in single herds, but occur alone or in groups ranging up to several hundred animals or more. In the Delta Junction area, they move to the Delta River in early spring to secluded meadows where they calve. Around late August they travel northward and eastward and eventually move onto the Delta Junction Bison Range located about 17 miles east of Delta Junction. In late fall the bison move onto farms north of the Delta Junction Bison Range and they forage throughout the winter on the Bison Range and farmlands, sometimes damaging crops that have not yet been harvested. Alaska's other wild bison herds also show seasonal movement patterns.

Bison move slowly while feeding, but when pursued bison are fleet of foot and have great endurance. A mature bull at Delta Junction jumped a seven-foot log fence from a standing position.

**Food habits:** Bison are grazing animals and in Alaska find food in meadows, around lakes, along rivers and in recent burns. Their diet is made up mainly of various grasses, sedges and forbs including vetch, a favored summer food found on gravel bars. Silverberry, willow, and dwarf birch are also eaten. Good bison habitat is now more limited than it was several thousand years ago, but the available habitat in Interior Alaska can still support several thousand bison.

**Hunting and viewing opportunities:** To keep bison populations from exceeding the carrying capacity of the range, limit agricultural depredations, and provide hunting opportunities, regulated hunts of existing plains bison populations are conducted each year. Hunters pursuing bison at Delta Junction, Chitina River, Copper River, or Farewell are often surprised by how difficult it is to stalk them. They are among the most difficult of Alaska's big game to bring down. The rewards of a successful hunt are a magnificent trophy and delicious meat, which is similar to beef. The fat is yellow rather than white and does not "marble" throughout the meat.

Photography and wildlife viewing enthusiasts will find the bison on their winter range in the Delta are fairly accessible, although respect and caution are urged when approaching this large animal. Bison are frequently visible throughout the summer at an overlook near the Black Rapids overlook at Milepost 225.4 on the Richardson Highway. Binoculars or a spotting scope are helpful.

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