

Endangered Species: The American bison

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Level **560L**



Image 1: A group of bull bison in Yellowstone National Park. A herd of about 5,000 bison are protected in the park. Photo: Jim Peaco via Flickr.

The American bison is often called the buffalo. This animal has a big body with humped shoulders. Its horns are curved and pointed. Most American bison grow 7 to a little over 12 feet long. They stand over 6 feet tall at the shoulder. The biggest bison can weigh 2,200 pounds. That is about the weight of two grand pianos.

The American bison's coat is dark brown. It is very shaggy in winter. In spring it becomes shorter and lighter brown. A beard hangs from its chin. The animal's tail ends in a tuft of hair.

There are two kinds of American bison. One is the plains bison and the other is the wood bison. The plains bison is smaller. However, these bison can breed together. Their babies are hybrids. A hybrid is a mix of two kinds of animals.

The bison is a fast runner and good swimmer. It also has a good sense of smell. It feeds on prairie plants. Bison usually travel in herds. Some males prefer to travel alone, though.

Buffalo mating season lasts from June to September. Female bison are pregnant for about nine months. They then give birth to a single calf. The calf is cared for by its mother for up to a year.

Habitat

Today, some American bison live on wildlife reserves. Others are protected in parks. The largest herd on public land is found in Yellowstone National Park. It is home to about 4,900 bison. Most American bison now live on private ranches. They number about 500,000 animals. Canada has about 11,000 wood bison.



History And Conservation

American bison are native to North America. They once roamed much of the central and western regions. Scientists believe there were 60 million of them in the early 1800s.

Bison herds were important to many Native American groups. They provided meat and hides. The hides were made into clothing and shelter.

The number of bison dropped rapidly after the 1850s. The cause? More European and American settlers were moving west. They hunted bison for food and to sell the skins.

The U.S. government also encouraged the killing of bison. It was an effort to control Native American tribes. Killing bison took away an important food source for Native American peoples. It forced them to give up many of their traditional ways of life.

By 1900, almost all bison were gone. Only about 300 still lived in the wild.

American bison began their comeback in 1902. That year the U.S. government created a small herd. It included about 24 animals. They were put in Yellowstone National Park. No hunting was allowed at Yellowstone. The herd grew into the one that exists there today. In 1922 the Canadian government set up a similar safe space. It is Wood Buffalo National Park. This park protected the last wood bison.

Conservationists are people who work to manage and protect nature. They have worked hard to bring back the bison. Their work had a big impact. Today, the American bison is safe from extinction. It still needs protecting, though.



Quiz

1 Read the first paragraph of the article.

The American bison is often called the buffalo. This animal has a big body with humped shoulders. Its horns are curved and pointed. Most American bison grow 7 to a little over 12 feet long. They stand over 6 feet tall at the shoulder. The biggest bison can weigh 2,200 pounds. That is about the weight of two grand pianos.

Which question is answered in this paragraph?

- (A) How tall is the biggest bison?
- (B) Why are some bison called buffalo?
- (C) What does a bison look like?
- (D) How much does the smallest bison weigh?

2 Read the section "History And Conservation."

Select the sentence that explains why the U.S. government supported bison hunting?

- (A) Scientists believe there were 60 million of them in the early 1800s.
- (B) The number of bison dropped rapidly after the 1850s.
- (C) They hunted bison for food and to sell the skins.
- (D) It was an effort to control Native American tribes.

3 Look at the chart in the introduction [paragraphs 1-5].

How does the chart help the reader understand the bison?

- (A) by listing basic facts about the bison
- (B) by telling a funny story about the bison
- (C) by showing where most bison live
- (D) by comparing the bison to a buffalo

4 Look at the photograph near the section "Habitat."

Which sentence from the article is BEST supported by the photograph?

- (A) Most American bison grow 7 to a little over 12 feet long.
- (B) One is the plains bison and the other is the wood bison.
- (C) Female bison are pregnant for about nine months.
- (D) The calf is cared for by its mother for up to a year.