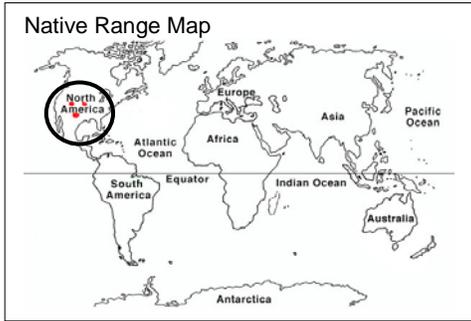


American Bison



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla
Family: Bovidae
Genus: *Bison*
Species: *bison*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** American bison inhabit plains, prairies, and river valleys.
- They once roamed free from Canada to the United States plains area. Today, wild populations are only found in national parks and refuges.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

Characteristics

- Males (bulls): Height at the shoulder = 6 feet; Length = 10-12 feet; Weight = up to 1800 pounds
- Females (cows): Height at the shoulder = 5 feet; Length = 7-8 feet; Weight = average of 1000 pounds
- They have a shaggy mane and beard and are identified by their massive head, humped shoulders, short legs covered with shaggy hair and large hooves.
- Both males and females have short horns that come out from the side of the head and curve up, reaching up to 3 feet in length.
- They can run at speeds up to 30 mph
- Lifespan: In the Wild 15-20 years; In Captivity 20-40 years

Behaviors

- Bulls and cows do not mingle until breeding season
- The American bison is most active in the early morning and late afternoon. They can also be seen taking advantage of their swimming ability, crossing rivers when moving to grazing areas or wallowing in mud to remove insects.
- In bitter cold winters, bison adapt by heading into the wind when moving, growing thick, insulating winter coats, depending on their stored fat when food is hard to find under heavy snow, and using their head and hooves to move snow off vegetation.
- There are 3 kinds of bison groups: matriarchal (cows, calves, yearlings, and sometimes a few bulls), bull (though some bulls are solitary), and breeding (a combination of matriarchal and bull groups).
- Matriarchal groups range from 10-20 individuals, with bull groups being smaller.
- Bison will charge when threatened. Their primary defenses are to face off or to stampede (running away from predators). They can also use their hooves and horns as formidable weapons against predators.
- Vocalizations include the bulls' bellow during rutting, the cow's snort, and the calf's bawl.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** Willow and maple branches, barrels, pumpkins, yam and apple toss, cut grass.

Reproduction

- Female bison are ready to mate at 2-3 years of age. Males are ready at around 3 years of age, but don't usually breed until reaching age 6.
- The gestation period lasts about 9 months.
- Mating season is usually June-September with most activity occurring in July and August.
- A male will enter a female herd and select a cow he likes. The male then curls his lip back and extends his neck. If a cow is not interested, she will walk away.
- When fights occur, males paw the ground, digging hunks of sod out of the earth while make rumbling guttural calls. It is not uncommon to see 2 bulls "smashing heads" since their skulls are padded with thick flesh to absorb the impact. Signs of submission (backing down from a fight) include swinging the head and neck widely to one side, lowering the head, or turning and walking away.
- Newborns are reddish-brown at birth. They will stand and nurse in about 30 minutes and walk and run within hours of birth. At 2 months old, the hump and horns begin to develop. The young are weaned by 7 months of age.

Diet

AmericanBisonOK

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Researched and written by the Friends of the Rosamond Gifford Zoo Education Volunteers

- **In the Wild:** grasses, forbs, sedges, and occasionally berries, horsetails, lichen, water. They will also eat snow when water is covered with ice.
- **At the Zoo:** grain, hay and alpha cubes

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Near Threatened
- The destruction of the American bison herds began about 1830. The U.S. government policy believed in exterminating herds to control “hostile Native American tribes.” Railroad crews and army posts ate bison meat and the railroads brought the hides to markets in the East. Eventually millions of pounds of bison bones were ground into fertilizer or used in the manufacture of bones in China.
- In 1900, restoration efforts began.
- Less than 5% of bison truly run wild these days.
- Predators: Mountain lions, wolves, grizzly bears, humans.

Did You Know? /Fun Facts

- The Bison is the national mammal of the United States and National Bison day is the first Saturday in November.
- One way to tell the difference between bison and buffalo is the position and growth of their horns. A bison’s horn starts growing at the side of the head and points upward, while buffalo (eg. water buffalo) horns start at the top of the head and swoop down.
- The American bison is a symbol of our national heritage and central to the Native American way of life. Native people ate the meat, used the skins for clothing and shelter, made thread and rope from sinew (tendons), made glue and tools from hooves and bones, and burned droppings as fuel.
- The American bison is also known as the “American buffalo.” Biologists prefer limiting “buffalo” to the wild cattle native only to Africa and Asia.
- The bison’s tail is like a “weather vane.” A tail hanging loosely behind indicates a relaxed animal. If the tail is partially raised, the bison is alert. If the tail is horizontal, the bison is excited. A tail raised upward is a warning; the bison may be ready to charge.

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