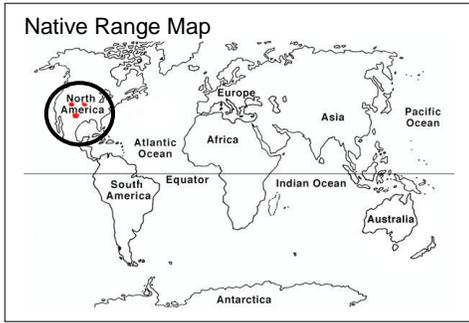


American Bison



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 Trail

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
- Bison have a shaggy mane and beard, a massive head, humped shoulders, short legs covered with shaggy hair and large hooves.
- Both males and females have short horns that stick out from the side of the head and curve up, reaching up to 3 feet long.
- They can run at speeds up to 30 mph
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 15-20 years; **In Human Care** 20-40 years
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Behaviors

- American bison are most active in early morning and late afternoon. They can swim well, sometimes crossing rivers when moving to grazing areas or wallowing in mud to remove insects.
- 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, while bull groups are smaller.
- Bison will charge when threatened. Their primary defenses are to face off or stampede. They can also use their hooves and horns as formidable weapons.
- 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 old. Males don't usually breed until about age 6.
- Mating season is usually June-September with most activity occurring in July and August. The gestation period lasts about 9 months.
- When fights between males occur, bulls will paw the ground, digging hunks of sod out of the earth and 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 include swinging the head and neck widely to one side, lowering the head, or turning and walking away.
- The reddish-brown newborn will stand and nurse in about 30 minutes and will 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 old.

Diet

- **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.
- In 1900, restoration efforts began, but less than 5% of bison are truly wild.
- 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 by the position and growth of their horns. A bison’s horn starts growing at the side of the head and points upwards 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. They 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.” However, actual “buffalo” are native only to Africa and Asia.

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