

Grade 4 - Informational

American Bison

Visitors to Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge near Valentine, Nebraska, can witness something most people have never seen—a herd of bison grazing on the prairie. Although several places in Nebraska and other states offer this opportunity, bison are a rare sight. These large animals once roamed freely over most of the North American continent. Today, they are found only in parks or wildlife refuges and on a few private lands.

Prairie Giants

Bison are the largest land mammals in North America. Full-grown bulls (males) are about six feet tall at the shoulder and can weigh more than 2,000 pounds. Cows (females) weigh less—usually about 900 pounds. Bison are hoofed animals with brownish-black hair and short, curved horns. Long, coarse hair covers a bison's huge head, neck, and shoulders and forms a beard on its throat and chin. The rest of a bison's body is covered with short, fine hair.

Adult cows generally give birth to one calf each spring. Calves are reddish brown when they are born. They begin to develop shoulder humps and horns when they are about two months old. Bulls, cows, and calves spend their days eating grass and wallowing in soil. In spite of their large size, bison can move fast. Adults can run between 30 and 40 miles per hour.

American bison are often called buffalo, but scientists say this is a mistake. True buffalo, such as Cape buffalo and water buffalo, are wild oxen found in Africa or Asia. American bison have larger heads and necks, humped shoulders, and fourteen pairs of ribs. True buffalo have smaller heads and necks, and they have only thirteen pairs of ribs.

A Most Useful Mammal

At one time, nearly 50 million bison lived in North America. For hundreds of years, Native Americans followed bison herds across the plains. They hunted the bison. Bison were an important food source that could provide between 400 and 800 pounds of meat. Native Americans ate fresh bison meat, and they dried some meat to use later.

In many ways, Native Americans depended on the bison to meet their needs. Many parts of the bison were used. Plains tribes used bison hides to make their shelter and clothing. They used the horns to make utensils and tools.

Destroying the Herds

In the 1860s, however, life on the prairie changed for the Native Americans and for the bison. Railroad companies began building tracks across the plains. Hunters killed

bison for meat to feed the railroad workers. When the trains began running, bison herds became an obstacle by blocking the tracks. Trains had to stop and wait for the bison to move along. The trains could not run on time, so railroad companies hired people to hunt the bison.

Farming, ranching, and mining became more important in the West as settlers arrived. Towns were built, lands were fenced, and the bison almost became extinct. By 1906, only about 1,000 bison were left. It seemed the bison would disappear forever.

Return of the Bison

In 1886, William Temple Hornaday traveled to the West to collect bison to be mounted for a museum display in Washington, D.C. Even though people were already concerned that bison were becoming extinct, the situation was worse than Hornaday suspected. He was shocked to learn that the bison herds were nearly gone, and he decided to do something about it. He returned to Washington and set up the National Zoological Park, now known as the National Zoo. He brought live bison to the zoo and provided people in the East with an opportunity to view these western animals for the first time.

Hornaday wrote a book about the disappearing bison herds, which helped gain public support to save them. His efforts not only educated people about bison but also resulted in laws to protect the herds.

Today, about 500,000 bison live in North America, and the herds are increasing. But people today can only imagine the sight of millions of bison roaming across the vast plains. Bison have earned a special place in American history.

