



Bull bison at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge welcomes a couple of tourists.

American Icon

Driven To The Brink Of Extinction, Bison Revival Is A Conservation Success Story



Bison at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

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For the GPHN

Want to get up close and personal with the largest land mammal in North America?

Take a tour around the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge's 11 mile-long Wildlife Drive and you might have an eye-to-eye encounter with a 2,000-pound Plains bison bull. But stay in your car, as these beasts are wild animals and can be aggressive. And, they are deceptively fast — able to run 35 miles per hour and jump six feet high.

For safety reasons, visitors to the Refuge's bison area must remain in their vehicles, and try to keep at least 75 feet away from the animals.

According to Sarah Metzger, U.S. Fish and Wildlife visitor services manager for the Refuge, there are currently 211 bison in the herd. Calving season begins in late March into April. Each year the herd produces between 40 and 50 "red dogs" — as the bison calves are called because of their reddish color just after being born.

Metzger said that the herds are regularly rotated to different pastures across the 15,988-acre (that's nearly 25 square miles) protected land so that they can get enough forage and to help with the Refuge's management goals.

Last month, as well as this month, the herd can frequently be seen within the first mile or two after crossing a cattle guard and entering the fenced enclosure on the Wildlife Drive, which begins near the southeast section of the Refuge. The great beasts sometimes meander along, grazing just feet from slow-passing tourist vehicles. Metzger says that while the bison usually ignore cars, signs of agitation include when a bison starts licking its lips, holding its tail straight up, or begins making grunting sounds. Any of these indicators suggest you should move further away.

Bison or buffalo?

"Bison" is the correct scientific term for these massive, prehistoric-looking bovines, but the vernacular "buffalo" is used interchangeably. The word buffalo actually predates the use of bison to describe the animal, as early French trappers called them *boeufs*, thinking the creatures looked like the old-world Asian or African bovines.

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal bison herd is part of the U.S. Department of Interior's ongoing efforts to bring back wild bison from the brink of extinction. Prior to European settlement, more than 30 million bison roamed North America from Alaska

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to Mexico and as far east as Georgia and New York. But, by the late 1800's, bison were close to being wiped out, with only several hundred remaining in the wild. The only place where wild bison have lived continuously is what is now Yellowstone National Park.

In recognition of the bison's historic importance, and as a mark of its conservation success story, on May 9, 2016, President Barack Obama named the American bison the national mammal of the United States, joining the Bald Eagle as an official symbol of our country.

Paradoxically, in the 1870's the United States Army implicitly endorsed the systematic extermination of the American bison as part of the effort to conquer the Plains Indians.

The 2021 Fish and Wildlife publication, "Songs on the Wind, Hooves on the Landscape," quotes a University of Montana anthropology professor explaining that as long as the Plains bison existed as a food source for Native Americans, the government would have trouble moving the tribes into reservations. So, the U.S. Army facilitated an extensive market for hides and recreational bison hunts, during which millions of bison were slaughtered — as many as 5,000 a day. One Army colonel is reported to have told a wealthy hunter in 1867, "Kill every buffalo you can! Every dead buffalo is an Indian gone."

Demand for buffalo robes and bison leather, which was used for mechanical belts during the industrial revolution, meant the extermination of the vast herds on which Native Americans relied. It also meant the corresponding end of the free-roaming Plains tribes, as they were effectively starved into submission.

Embracing the old ways

Today, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages bison herds across six national wildlife refuges, alongside other Department of Interior agencies including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the National Park Service. It is estimated that 11,000 bison have been brought back to public lands in 12 states. The largest public herd remains in Yellow-