



Bison at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, with the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop.

Wild And Free

Rocky Mountain Arsenal An Urban Refuge

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is six miles north of Park Hill. In addition to bison, the refuge is home to whitetail and mule deer, raptors (including bald eagles), songbirds, waterfowl, prairie dogs, badgers, coyotes and the endangered black-footed ferret, among other animals.

Entry to the Wildlife Refuge is free. It is open sunrise to sunset, seven days a week (except for Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day). The Visitor Center hours are Wednesdays through Sundays 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (closed Mondays, Tuesdays, and federal holidays).

The Refuge also offers extensive gravel walking and bicycle paths, but no walking or cycling is permitted in the bison area. For more information see, <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/rocky-mountain-arsenal>

stone National Park, with an approximately 4,800 animals.

In 2020, the Department of the Interior laid out a Bison Conservation Initiative organized around five central goals:

1. The maintenance of wild, healthy bison herds;
2. Genetic conservation and diversity across Department of Interior managed herds;
3. A commitment to shared stewardship of wild bison in cooperation with states, tribes, and other stakeholders;
4. The maintenance of wide-ranging bison herds on appropriate large landscapes where their role as ecosystem engineers shape healthy and diverse ecological communities; and
5. A commitment to restore cultural connections to honor and promote the unique status of bison as an American icon for all people.

Every fall the Rocky Mountain Arsenal conducts a bison gathering (the term "roundup" is no longer used). During the gathering, the animals are moved, using low-stress handling techniques, into corrals. There they undergo health checks, and microchips are implanted in calves. Some of the animals are designated for potential transfer to other public herds around the country, which helps promote genetically diverse herds.

In 2021, consistent with the objective of cultural restoration, excess bison from the Arsenal's gathering were donated to the Wolakota Buffalo Range, a 28,000-acre native grassland on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. During the ownership transfer ceremony at the Arsenal, Tribal members offered prayer and songs, burned sacred medicine to honor the bison, left gifts in offering to the bison for their safety, and to express gratitude for calling them back to their old ways.

"Hosting the Native gathering at the capture, and sending bison to the Rosebud Sioux Tribe is a step in mending our relationships with Indigenous people and the wildlife we protect in our region," explained Fish and Wildlife Education Spe-



Stampeding bison enjoying fresh snow that fell in the morning last Oct. 25.

cialist Tom Wall, in "Songs on the Wind, Hooves on the Landscape."

A new threat

But last year, there was no transfer of bison among Department of Interior herds or to Native lands. *Mycoplasma bovis*, a bacterial respiratory pathogen with a mortality rate near 25 percent, is threatening both wild and commercial bison herds across the United States and Canada. It is feared that transfer of bison across state lines or between herds may further spread the disease.

As a result, Metzger said this year's bison gathering was used to test the Arsenal herd for the illness by swabbing penned animals with a giant nasal Q-tip-like apparatus. The herd ultimately was found to be disease-free and excess bison were transferred to the University of Wyoming for research purposes. But Arsenal personnel remain vigilant to protect the health of the herd.

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