



A bison cow and her very young calf. At one time, this was a very common scene on the Colorado grasslands. (Photo courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

Where the bison once roamed

We should probably start out by using the correct name for this animal. The American bison is not a buffalo, as the buffalo live in Africa and Asia. The American bison's ancestors can be traced to southern Asia thousands of years ago.

Bison made their way to North America by crossing the ancient land bridge that once connected Asia with North America during the Pliocene Epoch, some 400,000 years ago.

The ancient bison was much larger than the bison of today. Some fossils found that the males, called bulls, had horns that exceeded 9 feet in width measured tip-to-tip.

Millions of bison once roamed this continent, with herds stretching from the timbered areas of Alaska, all the way to the grasslands of Mexico. Lewis and Clark encountered a herd at White River, South Dakota, in 1806 and described it as "The moving multitude ... darkened the whole plains."

Because there was never any survey made to estimate bison populations, we will never know just how many there once were. Some estimates claim there were once close to 75 million bison in North America.

Bison are the largest land mammal in North America. A bull can weigh more than 2,000 pounds and stand 6 feet tall at the shoulder, while a cow usually reaches 1,000 pounds. Calves, at birth, may weigh as much as 70 pounds. In the wild, a bison can reach 20 years.

Bison calves are usually born in late March through early May. The calves are reddish orange in color, earning them the nickname "red dogs." After a few months, their hair starts to turn dark brown, and their characteristic shoulder hump and horns begin to

appear.

The main food source for bison includes prairie grasses, weeds and leafy plants. These large mammals graze for as many as 11 hours a day. Don't think because of this eating that they are slow. A bison can run at up to 35 miles an hour, faster than a quarter horse, and clear a 6-foot fence.


They have a great sense of smell but horrible eyesight and a temperament to match. These critters have no sense of humor, and weighing in at a ton, they can quickly stomp you flatter than a half dollar after inflation.

The tail of the animal is the indicator of mood. When it is hanging down and twitching, all is right with the world. However, if the tail stands straight up, better make sure the disaster insurance is paid up, because you now have a problem. That beast is coming for you.

In researching for this column, I had opportunity to speak with Glen Hinshaw. Hinshaw had a 34-year career with the Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), then known as Division of Wildlife (DOW). Hinshaw retired in 1997 but wrote several books. One book, "Crusaders for Wildlife," is a 200-year history about wildlife and wildlife stewardship in Southwest Colorado.

Hinshaw stated, "Early explorers, like Zebulon Pike killed bison in the area where Salida is today. His party also killed them in the San Luis Valley."

"Cochetopa (the pass) is a Ute Indian word meaning buffalo gate. Most likely, small bands of bison from the valley



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

wandered across Saguache Park and the Cochetopa into the Gunnison Basin," continued Hinshaw.

"I found no historical references or evidence of any substantial bison presence in Southwest Colorado. By the mid 1800s, bison were pretty much reduced to isolated remnant populations on the prairies," Hinshaw said.

The entire history of bison and Native Americans are intertwined, as the animal has been an integral part of tribal culture. Bison provided tribes with food, clothing, tools and even spiritual value.

By the beginning of the 1800s, the smaller herds of bison east of the Mississippi were gone. Perhaps they were killed to protect livestock and farmlands from overgrazing. As the American frontier began to expand westward, reduction of the herds began, somewhere around 1830.

Bison hunting quickly became the chief industry of the plains. Groups of hunters killed them for hides and meat, often killing 250 or more daily. There were a lot of people, at that time, who wanted the bison eradicated in order to destroy the livelihood of the Native Americans.

The construction of the railroads was probably the final nail in the coffin for the bison. Railroads advertised hunting from train windows and passengers shot them as the bison raced alongside the train. By 1883, the northern and southern herds had been completely destroyed. By 1900, fewer than 300 animals remained in the United States and

Canada of the herd that once counted in the millions.

In May of 1894, Congress made bison hunting illegal in Yellowstone National Park. Slowly, the herd there grew and today numbers around 4,000. There are refuges in Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado and North Dakota where bison run free. Today, the herd count is somewhere around 200,000, a far cry from what it once was.

Closer to home, off Interstate 70 at exit 254 (Genesee Park) you can visit the Buffalo Herd Overlook. The herd belongs to the City and County of Denver, and is the descendants of seven of the remaining wild animals found at Yellowstone National Park in 1914.

On May 9, 2016, President Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act into law. This act officially made the American Bison the national mammal of the United States. The bison joins the ranks of the bald eagle as the official symbol of our country.

I realize that the restoration efforts for the bison, is one of the greatest conservation success stories of all time, however, it still deeply saddens me. I think the plains of our great state would have been more exciting to see when huge black herds of bison roamed free. Maybe, with continued efforts, it can be again, but I have my doubts.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



Debbie Reed
Broker Associate
(970) 209-1396
DebbieReedRealtor.com

As we watch...

...the hot shot crews starting to come back through town, the enormity of the gratitude we owe to them and to all of our firefighters, first responders and law enforcement is immense. The pictures we have all seen of fires raging beyond control for days are not easily forgotten. Nor are the pictures of firefighters, weary beyond belief, trudging to tents in command centers with shovels over their shoulders for a few hours of rest. The words "thank you" are not nearly enough, but we offer them from the depths of our hearts.

500 S. 10th Street

Under contract in 5 days!



- 2016 sq. ft, 4 BR, 2 full BA home on 3 City lots!
- New roof, new furnace and many other recent updates!
- Beautiful yard at end of cul-de-sac!

MLS # 746941 \$220,000





Phelps Real Estate Group, LLC
501 S Townsend Ave • 970.209.1396
Montrose, CO 81401