

The Cornerstone of the Prairie

Bison are a keystone species within the prairie ecosystem. Bison grazing allows plants to flourish, reduces the amount of dead vegetation, and encourages new growth, which influences the variety of plants and animals of the prairie. Their role in this ecosystem is as important as prairie fire. In fact, even the wallowing behavior of bison creates a unique mini-wetland environment while their waste provides needed fertilizer, all benefiting the prairie ecosystem. Historically, bison were a valuable food source for predators, scavengers, and humans. They provided everything needed for human survival on the plains including food, shelter, clothing, and tools.



Bison in Texas

At one time, 30 to 60 million bison roamed the North American plains. Early Spanish explorers in Texas, including the Coronado expedition, described them being as numerous as “fish in the sea.” The vast herds were never in danger of extermination until professional hide hunters arrived on the plains. Their superior weaponry allowed over 100 bison to be killed at any one time. Thus began the “great slaughter,” and from 1874 to 1878, the great southern bison herd was practically eliminated. Estimates from the year 1888 verified that there were less than 1,000 head of bison left in North America after this near extermination.



Modern Day Management

The Texas State Bison Herd is a very valuable resource for the great state of Texas as well as for the overall conservation of the bison species. Therefore, the conservation objectives of Caprock Canyons State Park for the bison herd include re-establishing them as a keystone species within the ecosystem, ensuring the genetic integrity of the herd through a selective breeding program, and contributing to the overall conservation of the species of bison in North America. Every winter, DNA testing is conducted to closely monitor the herd’s genetic diversity and each member of the herd receives an overall health check. Vegetation studies, grazing control, and prescribed fire are all part of managing the herd’s habitat. The health and preservation of the Texas State Bison Herd is of the utmost importance. We carefully monitor this herd to help ensure an even brighter future for bison throughout North America.

Caprock Canyons State Park

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Caprock Canyons

STATE PARK & TRAILWAY

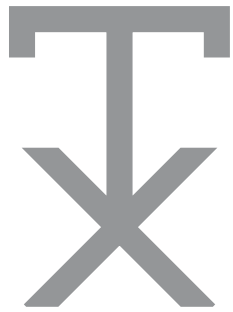
TEXAS STATE BISON HERD



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Preservation of an American Icon

Towards the end of the great slaughter, a handful of individuals concerned with the fate of the bison began the difficult task of saving them. These individuals took on the care of orphaned calves and started to increase the number of bison by forming their own herds. Mary Ann Goodnight urged her husband Charles to capture some orphan calves from the southern herd in 1878. These bison calves were raised up on the JA Ranch to form the nucleus of the Goodnight Herd which soon grew to over 200 head. The descendants of these animals now constitute the Texas State Bison Herd today. The Goodnight Herd, as well as four other herds started by other concerned individuals, provided the foundation stock for virtually all bison in North America today.



The Texas State Bison Herd

Following the death of the Goodnights, the herd eventually faded from public awareness until wildlife conservationist Wolfgang Frey learned about the remaining herd

of 50 or so bison on the JA Ranch and contacted the state of Texas in 1994. After genetic testing by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, a rare genetic marker was discovered within the herd revealing it to be perhaps the last remaining group of southern plains bison. The JA Ranch donated the herd to Texas Parks and Wildlife, and in 1997 they were moved to Caprock Canyons State Park. Unique not only in its historical importance but also in its rare genetic makeup, the herd has been designated the Official Bison Herd of the state of Texas. To this day, the herd remains in a portion of its natural home range on what was once a part of the JA Ranch in Caprock Canyons State Park.

FASCINATING FACTS

- **Buffalo or bison?** In America, “bison” and “buffalo” are used to refer to the same animal. However, scientifically speaking, there are no true buffalo in North America. The only true buffalo are the African Cape Buffalo and the Asian Water Buffalo.
- **Still endangered?** Bison are great survivors. Although once nearly extinct, bison numbers have risen from less than 1,000 to nearly half a million! The majority of these bison are found in private herds.
- **Bison or supermarket?** Bison were so central to the lives of many Native Americans on the plains that many were designated as “buffalo culture” people. It is doubtful that any other animal in the world has ever matched the buffalo in providing so many important items to any one people, similar to the supermarkets of our time. The number of non-food uses of bison has been placed as high as 87!
- **Bison calves.** Newborn bison calves are light brown to cinnamon in color. Later, they become the darker brown color of their parents. Normally, only one calf is born per year, but twins do occasionally occur.
- **A camel, a lion, no, a bison ... Oh, my.** A bison is shaped like no other animal. It has a large hump on its back which is a huge shoulder muscle that holds up, and (powers up!) its head. The special bones that support this muscle are called the “hump ribs.” Using this powerful system, bison can “plow” through deep snow to feed on dry grass in the winter. Bison also use a variety of sounds to communicate. Many people think the roaring, booming sounds of the bison bulls sound much like a lion.
- **Am I being buffalood?** Not at all! Early settlers, seeing a bison raise its tail in an “S” shape when they were very excited or agitated, knew that it was time to get outta there or “high-tail it!” Similarly, if you heard someone say “you can’t buffalo me,” that meant to force, threaten, or manipulate someone.

