

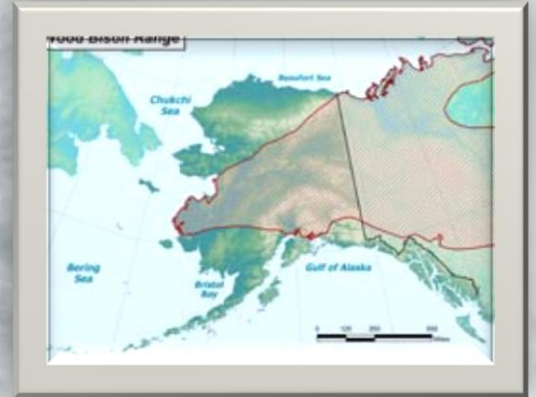
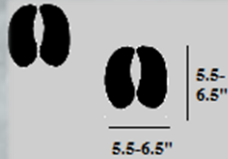
Wood Bison

Bison bison athabascae

Great Grazers! Wood bison are primarily grazers and mainly eat grasses, sedges, and forbs. They can use a variety of other plants. For example, silverberry and willow leaves make up part of their summer diet. Wood bison graze in meadows, around lakes and rivers, and in recent burns. Wood Bison spend between 9-11 hours per day grazing! Wood bison are referred to as a key grazing animal because their grazing, hoof disturbance, and wallowing can increase plant diversity, productivity, and nutrient cycling. This means healthy meadows!

Wood Bison are the largest land mammal in North America! Adult males (called “bulls”) are approximately 6 feet tall at the shoulder, 10 feet long and weigh over 2,000 pounds. The females (called “cows”) are smaller, generally weighing around 1,200 pounds. They have a dense coat of warm and durable hair that is dark brown in the winter and lighter in the spring. They shed their winter coat as temperatures begin to warm in the early spring. By mid-summer, it has been completely replaced with new hair.

Wood bison live in groups of up to 20 to 60 animals during most of the year, but adult bulls usually live in smaller groups and stay separate from the larger groups of cows and young bison except during the breeding season in late summer. They have strong social bonds and like to be near other bison.



Wood bison were the last bison to occur naturally in Alaska but disappeared during the last few hundred years because of unregulated hunting and changes in habitat distribution. By 1900 there were fewer than 300 individuals remaining in Canada. The State of Alaska has developed a wood bison restoration program with the goal of reintroducing wood bison in parts of their original range in Alaska. Three sites in the interior Alaska have been identified as potential restoration sites.

Bison move between seasonal ranges, and move each day from meadow to meadow, where they graze and rest before moving on. The size of their annual range tends to increase with population size, and also depends on habitat quality. In lower quality habitats, wood bison herds will move over a larger area. Although bison move slowly when feeding, they are capable of moving rapidly over long distances.



Cows generally breed when they are three years old. Wood bison are pregnant for 9 months and give birth during April to August with most calves born in May. Newborn calves are red in color, similar to moose calves. To evade predators, calves can stand within 30 minutes of birth and can run and kick within hours! After a week, calves will begin grazing but continue to nurse for several months. After 10 weeks, their coats begin to darken and become dark brown by about 15 weeks of age.