

Bison



History

Bison are native to North America and once roamed wild in Saskatchewan. It is estimated that at one time up to 60 million bison roamed North America and were a major staple for the Indigenous people. After the Europeans came to North America, bison were hunted to the point of extinction, with fewer than a thousand heads remaining in the late 1800s. The bison have recovered through the efforts of various levels of government, conservationists, conservation minded ranchers, and individuals. The ongoing recovery and increase in bison numbers in North America is being driven by the demand for the taste and health attributes of the meat.



Although bison is the scientific name, they are often referred to as “buffalo.” It wasn’t until the early 1980s that interest in bison as an agricultural diversification strategy really took off. Around the same time, food scientists determined that bison meat offered important health and nutritional benefits. In Western Canada some farmers started diversifying from traditional grain and cattle into bison.

Production

Bison are well suited to Saskatchewan’s climate because they are hardy animals. They are raised outdoors and have a fairly simple diet of grass and sometimes low-lying shrubs. During the winter, bison will forage under the snow to find grass.

Fences for bison pastures are approximately 6 feet high and are very important for these animals. Fences are commonly built using five to eight high tensile wires (smooth and stretchy wire) such as page wire or barbed wire. If the pasture is in an area known for heavy snowfall or drifting snow, then a higher perimeter fence may be required. Pens for winter feeding and handling bison need to be built strong and are most often built using wood or steel.

Healthy bison cows give birth to a calf once per year, usually from April to June, with most of the calves born in May. Bison females are usually bred at two years old and produce their first calf at three years old. Bison have a gestation period of about 280 days. It takes 18 to 30 months from birth to raise bison for meat. Bison cows can live to be more than 20 years of age.



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Diet

Bison are ruminants, which means they have four stomachs and can digest feed that is high in fibre such as grass and hay. From spring to fall, bison generally graze in the pasture on grass. In the winter, bison may graze on the grass under the snow. In the winter and sometimes year-round, farmers will supplement the grass with hay, grain, and a vitamin/mineral supplement. Bison will generally eat less feed in the winter months than in the summer months. Bison cows will eat up to 30 lbs (14 kg) per day.

Animal Welfare

The Canadian Bison Association and the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) have developed a Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Bison. This Code of Practice consists of nationally developed guidelines that help ensure animals are cared for using responsible management and welfare practices that promote animal health and well-being.

Nutrition

Bison meat is nutrient dense food and is considered a healthy lean red meat. Bison meat is higher in protein and iron than other red meats, such as beef.

Per serving, bison meat is lower in calories, fat, and cholesterol than beef, pork, and skinless chicken meat.

Bison and the Environment

As long as adequate pasture and/or feed is available to bison, they have a low impact on the environment. Bison tend to have less of an impact on sensitive riparian areas than cattle. Since they are generally raised outdoors in large areas, they have little impact on air quality.

Bison ranching helps preserve the last remaining native grassland habitats on the prairies. Many oilseed and grain farmers in Canada have switched to the bison industry over the past three decades. This switch involves stopping using large areas of land for growing monocrops and instead planting a permanent cover of grass on the land. This switch in land use has led to a huge expanse of formerly farmed land to be converted to pasture which in turn leads to economic and environmental benefits.

Did you know?

If pressured, bison can jump
6 feet high!

Industry in Saskatchewan

Production: 40,418 (2016)

Number of Producers: 303 farms (2016)

Value to Economy: 44 million (2016)

Industry in Canada

Production: 150,000 (2016)

Number of Producers: 975 (2016)

Value to Economy: 118 million (2016)

Bison



By-Products

The main use for bison is consumption, however, there are still some other uses for bison including leather production from the hides, sweaters and coats made from bison hair and jewelry made from bison horns.

Traditionally, bison provided food, shelter, clothing and tools for the Indigenous tribes. These tribes used every part of the bison for a variety of things including:

Horns—Arrow points, utensils, medication

Hair—Decorative headdresses, ropes, pad or pillow filler, moccasin lining

Skull—Sundance, medicine prayer

Hides—Moccasins, drums, buckets, ropes, splints, snow shoes, shields, straps, saddles, stirrups, shelter, tipis and clothing

Manure Chips—Fuel

Scrotum—Ceremonial rattle

Tendons—Bowstrings, bridles, tipi liners, tapestries

Hooves—Glue, spoons, rattles

Liver—Hide tanning

Beard & Teeth—Ornamentation

Fat—Lubricants, soap

Stomach Lining—Water containers, cooking vessels

Bladder—Pouches, medicine bags

Tail—Fly brush, whip, decoration

Bones—Knives, pipes, splints, arrowheads, shovels, sleds, fleshing tools

Buckskin—Moccasin tops, bedding, bags, shirts, belts, tipi covers, bridles

Fat—Mixed with meat and berries to make pemmican

Muscles—Glue, bows, thread, arrow ties

Gall & Blood—Decorative paint

Careers

- Bison cow producer
- Bison feedlot worker
- Meat processing worker
- Feed producer

Glossary

COW—adult female who's had a baby
BULL—adult male
CALF—baby bison