

The Curious Case of the Ronald Lake Bison:

When is wildlife not wildlife?

By Sean Nichols, AWA Conservation Specialist



It may sound like a brain teaser or a riddle: “When is wildlife not wildlife?”

The Government of Alberta’s answer seems to be “when they are diseased.”

We know roughly one third of the wood bison found in Alberta’s Wood Buffalo National Park are infected with brucellosis or bovine tuberculosis, diseases which have spread to some wood bison herds outside the park. This has led to concerns about the potential for transmission and the effect of these diseases on the survivability of the species, as well as on domestic livestock in Alberta. As a result, “bison east of Highway 35 are assumed diseased and have been classified as non-wildlife” under the Alberta *Wildlife Act*.

This classification means that outside of park boundaries, the bison receive no protection from poaching or other forms of hunting at any time of year. Other than a public health advisory issued in 1992 “urging anyone handling, processing, and consuming potentially diseased bison to take precautions” it is open season on these animals.

So it was no surprise earlier this year when members of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) discovered evidence of such poaching: the carcass of a bison lying in the snow, with its head removed.

This is where things become slightly murky, because the bison was the member of a herd that is in fact disease-free.

The poached bison was a member of the Ronald Lake herd, whose range is slightly south and east of Wood Buffalo National

Park and overlaps the ACFN homelands. In March 2013, a flyby counted 186 members of this herd, and both the ACFN and conservationists are concerned about potential reductions to that number.

In 2011, having yet to confirm a case of either brucellosis or tuberculosis among members of the Ronald Lake herd, the then-ministry of Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) embarked on a disease-sampling program to determine rates of infection in the herd.

From 2010 through 2014, samples from 73 individuals in the Ronald Lake herd were tested for disease and not a single case was identified. Based on these tests the government, in 2013, rejected the assumption that disease prevalence in the herd was similar to that in the herds found in Wood Buffalo National Park. Instead “ESRD began testing the alternative hypothesis that the Ronald Lake Bison are not diseased.”

Following the 2014 sampling that didn’t uncover a single case of disease, ESRD then expressed that it was 95 percent confident that the disease either did not exist in the herd or had infected less than five percent of the herd. In their September 2014 progress report on wood bison disease risk management, the government wrote: “We will therefore manage [the Ronald Lake herd] as disease free until we receive other information that indicates the herd is infected.”

AWA took this statement to mean the herd would be re-classified under the *Wildlife Act* as wildlife and would be legal-

ly protected from hunting and poaching. The bison carcass discovered by ACFN members was the result of illegal poaching and should be investigated as such.

This would mean the Ronald Lake herd would enjoy the same legal protection that is extended to the Hay-Zama herd (west of highway 35). Protecting the Hay-Zama herd was cited as a reason for classifying the diseased herds as non-wildlife in the first place.

Yet when AWA put in a call to ESRD to confirm this understanding, we were informed that any decisions were still pending consultation and were directed to their media spokesperson. ACFN also reported that ESRD was unwilling to investigate the poaching.

So while the answer to the riddle may be straightforward the Ronald Lake bison herd are having a hard time getting government to recognize them as wildlife.

This province isn’t the only government reluctant to fully protect bison. Ottawa is reluctant too. In June 2004, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) recommended that the plains bison, occurring further south in the province, should be added to the list of species protected under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Yet in August 2005, the federal Minister of the Environment rejected that recommendation and left plains bison off the list for primarily economic reasons (see the story by Nigel Douglas in the June/July 2014 issue of WLA).

This year, we have another chance. Plains bison are again up for consideration for inclusion on the SARA listing. AWA strongly

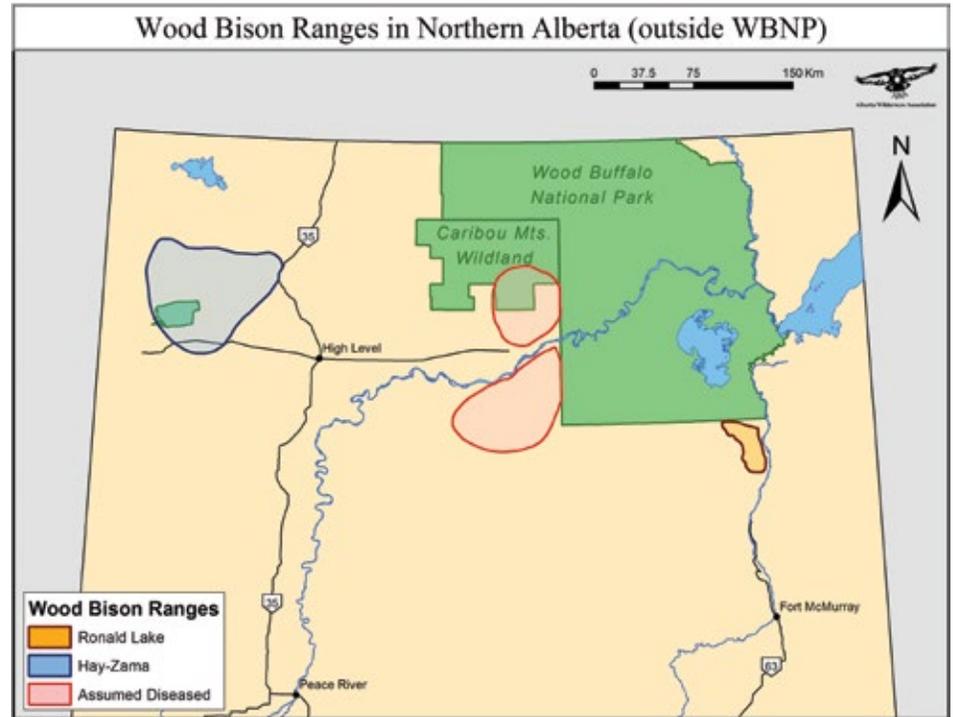
supports this listing.

In the same move, however, the federal government is inexplicably proposing a *downgrade* of the wood bison (which have been listed under SARA since June 2003) from “threatened” to “special concern.” The proposal cites increases in wood bison populations, disregarding the fact that many of those bison are diseased, and that the few non-diseased herds, such as the Ronald Lake and Hay-Zama herds, are not very large. Indeed the species summary for wood bison published by COSEWIC explicitly says: “Further increases to the population size or the addition of new wild subpopulations is not likely, as recovery is constrained by fragmented or unsuitable habitat, road mortality, disease management associated with livestock and commercial bison operations, and disease outbreaks.”

The proposal to downgrade wood bison under SARA also misleadingly references the species being classed as wildlife under Alberta’s *Wildlife Act*, again disregarding the fact that this is only true for the Hay-Zama herd.

Just as we support a SARA listing for the plains bison, AWA strongly opposes the proposed downgrade of the wood bison. We equally strongly support the re-classi-

fication of the Ronald Lake herd as wildlife. It’s hard for us to look a bison in the eye and not see it as wildlife. 🐾



Map of wood bison approximate ranges in northern Alberta. Map shows ranges for herds managed by the provincial government (i.e.: outside Wood Buffalo National Park)