

## Bison hooves hit the ground in Banff National Park

By the time you read this Banff National Park will have welcomed a new herd of plains bison. It's been more than a century since these magnificent mammals have roamed the lands set aside in Canada's first national park.

You're not likely to see the herd of 16 plains bison, as they're in an enclosed pasture in the remote Panther Valley, in the eastern area of the park. The herd will calve twice in this "soft release" pasture for the first year. On January 29, Treaty 6 and 7 First Nations held ceremonies for the bison move and their hooves hit the ground the first week of February. In July 2018, Parks Canada plans to release the bison from their enclosure to freely roam throughout more than 1,000 square kilometres of the Park, their full reintroduction zone.

Conservation lobbyist Julia Lynx played a communications outreach role with Bison Belong in encouraging Parks Canada to see this project through – and garnered a wave of support from her Bow Valley community, Calgary and across Canada along the way.

She recently attended the Treaty 6 and 7 First Nations bison ceremony in Elk Island National Park where the Banff bison originated. She experienced deep relief and excitement at the gathering. "The symbolism of the bison, or buffalo, is hugely important, especially here in Alberta," she says. "The bison reintroduction feels in part to be the beginning of healing for this land." Lynx is a

long-distance hiker and hopes to eventually see the bison in their wild habitat. For now she's happy to leave them be while they settle into their new habitat. "Giving the bison some space to feel at home in their ancestral homelands seems like a smart choice by Parks Canada, especially since it won't be long until the babies are born!"

Karsten Heuer is the Bison Reintroduction



*In early February a herd of plains bison was released into a remote area in Banff National Park after their transfer from Elk Island National Park. PHOTO: © D. RAFKA/PARKS CANADA AGENCY*

Project Manager from Parks Canada and has seen the project through from paper to reality. “As you can imagine, it was a pretty emotional day for me when the animals finally came out of the crates and all of them were moving well,” he says. “The thing that struck me the most was how natural they looked in the mountain environment. This, combined with how quickly they settled into their new home, made it seem as if they had been here all along. It was as if the last 140 years in which they have been absent were erased.”

AWA supports reintroducing extirpated species. However, we believe other Alberta landscapes such as the Suffield National Wildlife Area are more suitable for bison

herds than Banff National Park. Unfortunately, the status of bison in federal and provincial legislation leads to policy differences that are one obstacle to a more general repopulation of wild bison in Alberta. In federal lands, such as National Parks, plains bison are assessed as Threatened but are not listed under the *Species at Risk Act*; to the provincial government plains bison are considered extirpated and they are classified as livestock.

We also made some detailed recommendations about the project. They focused on the impact on rare plants, the feasibility of operating fencing, the management of backcountry users in the area, and potential

risk of commercial operations in the bison reintroduction zone. We were pleased to see amendments made to the project to accommodate some of those concerns. For instance, permits will not be issued for groups larger than 10 to travel within the reintroduction zone. Also, proposals to bring people into the reintroduction zone simply to view the bison will not be considered.

It will be interesting to monitor the outcome of this project. AWA will continue to push the province to list plains bison as endangered in Alberta and pursue reintroduction in suitable provincial prairie habitat.

- Andrea Johancsik

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