



American Bison

Background

American bison (*Bison bison*), also known as buffalo, are an important part of Alberta's landscape and history. Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA) believes bison should be listed as 'wildlife' under the *Alberta Wildlife Act* and their populations managed as wild.

Bison are a keystone species to the prairie ecosystem. Through grazing and other behaviour, they improve plant diversity and composition, and act as an important part of the nutrient cycle. Bison also benefit many birds and mammals, as well as enhancing drought resilience.

In addition, bison are prominently featured in many Indigenous cultures, providing food, shelter, tools and appearing in stories and traditions. Reintroduction or rematriation of bison is a major part of Indigenous reconciliation.

Current State

There are two subspecies of American bison: plains bison (*Bison bison bison*) and wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*). Plains bison are generally smaller in size than Wood bison, with a rounded hump compared to the taller, square hump of wood bison.

Plains bison were assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as 'Threatened' in 2013, although the species is not yet listed under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Efforts by COSEWIC to have plains bison listed under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) in 2005 were not realized. At that time, it was decided that it was not in the best interest for commercial producers of the Canadian Bison Industry. This status is currently under review, and plains bison are being considered for addition to the species protected by SARA.

In Alberta, plains bison are considered 'livestock' and are not listed under the *Alberta Wildlife Act*. As a result, bison lack protection and harvesting is not managed. There are semi-wild plains bison herds in Elk Island National Park, Waterton Lakes National Park and Banff National Park. Alberta has designated the Upper Red Deer River Special Bison Area immediately adjacent to Banff as an area where bison are protected. Reintroductions of plains bison have also occurred in the lands of some First Nations, including the Kainai or Blood Tribe.

Wood bison are listed as 'Threatened' under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). In 2013, COSEWIC assessed the species as 'Special Concern', and the species is being considered for a status change under SARA, which may result in a down-listing of the species. In February 2021, Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) issued an Imminent Threat Assessment for the Wabasca and Ronald Lake wood bison populations. An imminent threat is one that would render the survival or recovery of the species impossible or highly unlikely, and which cannot be eliminated without immediate intervention.

In November 2021, wood bison were officially designated 'wildlife' by the Government of Alberta within specified Wildlife Management Units (WMUs). Currently there are six subpopulations of wood bison in Alberta: Wood Buffalo National Park, Elk Island National Park, Ronald Lake, Wentzel/Wabasca, Hay Zama and Etthithun.



Limiting factors to the recovery of American bison include habitat fragmentation, disease in Wood bison (bovine tuberculosis, bovine brucellosis and anthrax is common in many herds in North America), and legislative and policy obstacles.

AWA Position

1. AWA supports reintroduction of extirpated species.
2. AWA believes bison must be listed and managed as wildlife in Alberta.
3. Plains bison should be listed under SARA, and wood bison should not be downlisted from Threatened to Special Concern.
4. Wild herds must be managed as wildlife.
5. Alberta needs a strategy to differentiate the status for wild bison and domestic bison based on ownership. Their status would depend on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd or in the wild.
6. AWA recommends Suffield National Wildlife Area, with its large prairie grasslands be considered as an important area for reintroduction of bison.

Points of Emphasis

- Bison are a crucial part of the Alberta landscape. Particularly in grasslands, bison help to maintain diversity by grazing grasses at different heights and wallowing, or rolling on the ground, which creates a depression in the soil. These depressions can fill with rainwater, creating temporary pools. While cattle grazing also improves grassland health, they do not fill the same ecological niche as bison. For instance, while cattle can feed on forbs, bison preferentially graze on grasses, allowing forb diversity to increase. Cattle also do not create wallows, and prefer to be near water, a behaviour that can degrade riparian zones.
- As well as their importance to many Indigenous cultures and traditions, bison can improve food security. Bison meat is highly nutritious, and because the species evolved on the prairies, the species is more resilient to drought, extreme temperatures and other climate extremes than introduced sources of meat.
- First signed in 2014, the Buffalo Treaty is an agreement between over 40 First Nations in Canada and the United States that supports the repatriation of bison and recognition of bison as a wild animal.
- From the 2021 Census of Agriculture, there were 65,405 head of bison being farmed on 472 farms in Alberta, accounting for 44 percent of farmed bison in Canada. Parks Canada manages 7 conservation herds across Canada.
- Disease is prevalent in Wood Bison National Park (WBNP). In Alberta diseased bison are considered non-wildlife and are not protected under SARA. Wood bison that roam out of WBNP are therefore often presumed diseased and not protected from poaching and hunting.
- COSEWIC has stated that populations have increased; however, their assessment does not consider that the WBNP herd is not considered wildlife in Alberta. Discounting the large number of wild wood bison that are present in the WBNP population significantly reduces the Canadian population and should be taken into consideration by COSEWIC. Until the WBNP herd are once again considered wildlife under the Alberta *Wildlife Act*, AWA does not support the down-listing of Wood bison.
- Plains bison require an adaptive management plan in Alberta to recover in the wild, developing long-term conservation goals, while protecting economic interests. This will need to involve bison producers, managers, other stakeholders and conservationists in order to succeed. Montana maintains a dual status for wild bison and domestic bison based on ownership. Their status



**Position
Statement**

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depends on whether they are located on a commercial farm, a private conservation herd or in the wild. Alberta could adopt a similar strategy.

- The addition of new bison herds is limited by habitat availability caused by habitat fragmentation. Regions of contiguous habitat should be targeted.
- Reintroduction should present an opportunity to educate visitors about the positive impacts that bison once had on the area and will have in the future. Risks to visitors must be minimized and managed through education and awareness programs. As reported in the draft Environmental Impact Statement for Bison Conservation and Management in Montana, bison often avoid hikers and human injury is rare.

