



News Release

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Wood Bison Restoration Reaches Final Stage

The next step in bringing Wood bison back to the wilds of Alaska is here.

Starting Sunday, March 22, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game will fly loads of 15-20 of the Western Hemisphere's largest land mammal from Anchorage to the village of Shageluk in the Lower Innoko/Yukon Rivers area. Flights will be concluded by March 31.

Though lesser known than plains bison, wood bison flourished for thousands of years in Alaska and Canada, but disappeared from Alaska in the 1800s-early 1900s. Since 2003, a small herd has been growing at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Portage waiting for this reintroduction. One hundred of the herd, about half adult cows and half sub adults, will be flown to Shageluk, and ADF&G is planning to barge some adult bulls out to the same area later this summer.

"It's exciting to bring back the last large land mammal that's been missing from the U.S.," said Wood Bison Project Biologist Tom Seaton. "Moving the bison to Shageluk is a huge step toward our goal of bringing this animal back to our state and our country."

Early Sunday morning ADF&G and AWCC staff will load wood bison into specially designed shipping containers fitted with internal gates and ventilation ducts. Each 20 foot container can hold seven adult cows in individual stalls, or up to 17 younger animals.

Lynden will truck the animals from AWCC to Anchorage International Airport where the "bison boxes" will be loaded into a Lynden C-130 for the one-hour flight to Shageluk. The plane can carry two containers per flight, and can make two flights per day if weather is good.

"If weather cooperates, we could have all of the wood bison cows and sub adults in Shageluk by March 24," Seaton said.

Shageluk was chosen for the reintroduction because the area features quality habitat, strong community support and a lack of potential conflict with planned resource development.

Once the bison are in Shageluk, they will be held in temporary pens until the stress of transportation subsides and they acclimate to the area. Then ADF&G staff will follow protocols developed in Canada for a “soft release.” Bison will be lured away from the pens with a trail of food to sedge meadows about five miles away in the Lower Innoko/Yukon River area.

It’s important to get the cows out to the meadows before calving, which will happen in May. About half of the adult cows are pregnant.

“There is a lot of habitat in the Innoko region, and it is very exciting to think about what kind of resource this bison herd could be in a few decades,” said Seaton.

A small herd of wood bison will remain at AWCC, where people can see and learn about these majestic animals.

“We’ll miss the large herd, but putting them back into the wild in Alaska has always been the plan. We’re pleased to have played a role in bringing back a species from extinction,” said AWCC Executive Director Mike Miller.

Wood bison inhabited Alaska and northwestern Canada for thousands of years. Their numbers declined in the 1800s and they were declared extinct but a small herd was discovered in Canada in 1957. From that herd, conservation efforts have resulted in about 5,000 disease-free wood bison in seven wild herds in Canada.

Skeletal remains of wood bison and oral histories from some Alaska Natives in the eastern Interior show that wood bison disappeared from the state within the past 200 years, likely from a combination of habitat change and unregulated hunting. Wood bison were last sighted in Eastern Alaska in the 1920s.

Wood bison are grazers, which has been an empty niche in the boreal forest ecosystem in Alaska since bison disappeared. Wood bison are a slightly larger subspecies than the plains bison which roam the Continental 48 plains states. Wood bison are larger and more adapted to northern areas.

The Alaskan herd has been maintained and grown under the supervision of the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center staff since 2003.

For more information on bison in Alaska, visit:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=woodbison.main>

The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center is a 501 (c) (3) corporation dedicated to conservation, education, and quality animal care of Alaska’s wildlife. For more information about the center, visit:

<http://www.alaskawildlife.org/>

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