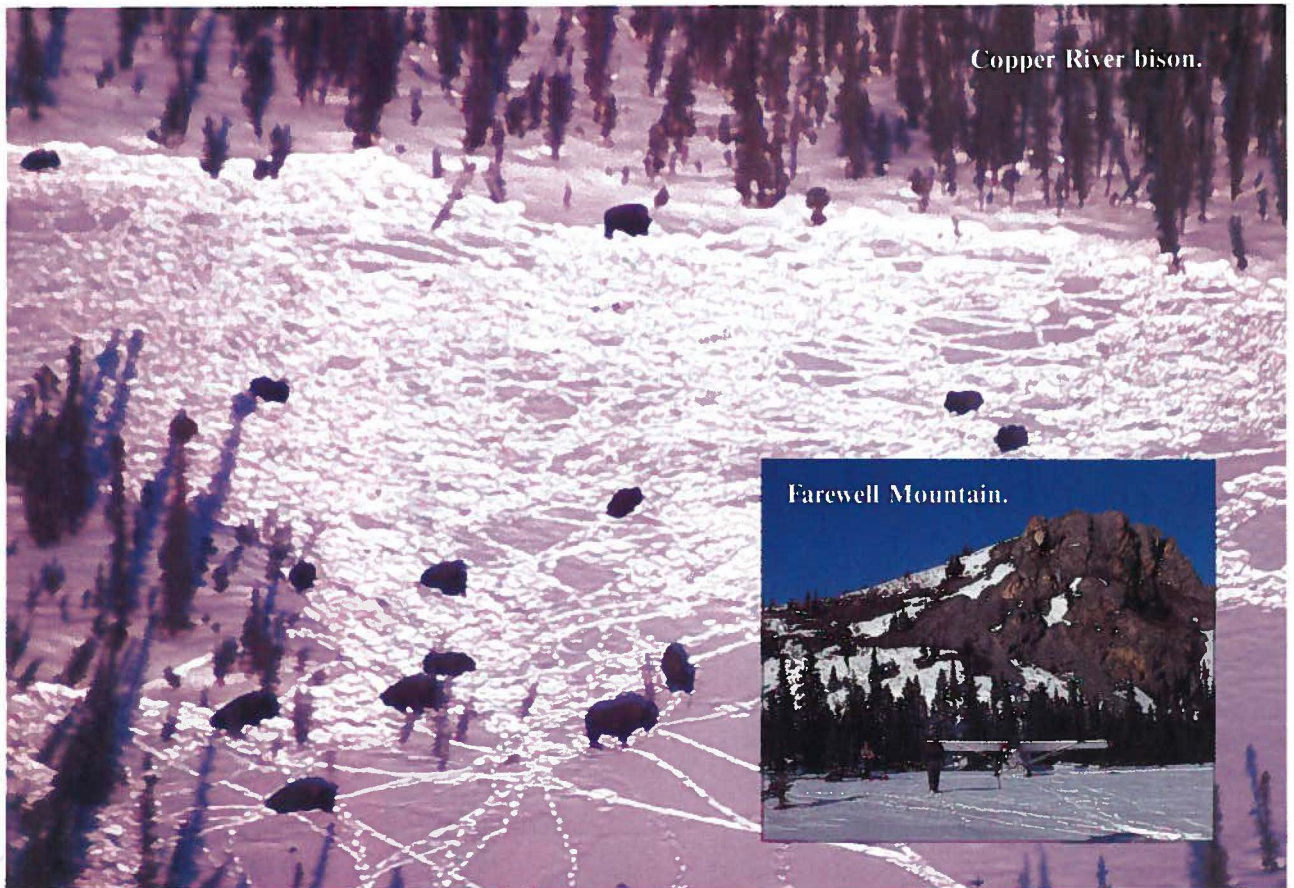


# Say Hello to Farewell

Article and photos by Jack Whitman



To most people, the mention of buffalo conjures up visions of a thousand animals moving thunderously across vast grasslands of the Dakotas. To a lucky few in Alaska, however, a quite different picture comes into view. Instead of a limitless expanse of waving short-grass prairie, there are the rugged snow-clad peaks of the mighty Alaska Range dominating the background. Rather than buffalo-grass in the foreground, there is a frost-stunted spruce forest, with an ice-scoured streambed snaking in ribbons across glacial gravel.

As the "lucky" few squint toward the distant flats, they remind us of their predecessors almost two centuries ago in the American west. They are hunters, equipped with modern rifles and sophisticated binoculars, but otherwise, not too different from the explorers and hunters who came before them. Both were hoping to harvest one of the most sought-after big game

animals in North America—the bison. In earlier times, the lure was hides. Now, the lure is adventure.

By 1883, bison were nearly gone from their historical range. From the millions that once roamed through Canada and the continental United States, a few hundred were all that remained. In 1928, from these meager vestiges of the once huge herds, the Alaska Game Commission obtained 23 bison which were released near Delta Junction.

The transplanted Montana bison herd adapted well to their new Alaskan environment and the herd grew rapidly. By 1951, limited hunts were authorized and sport harvests began. In an attempt to provide additional viewing and sport-hunting opportunities, bison were transplanted from the Delta Herd to three other Alaska locations. In all cases, those transplant efforts have proved successful.



Perhaps the most successful of the transplants from the original Delta Herd was that which took place in 1965. Eighteen bison were trapped on the Fort Greely Army Reservation and transported to Farewell Airstrip, about 65 miles southeast of McGrath. Three years later, an additional 20 bison were trapped, crated, airlifted, and released at the same location to supplement the original 18 animals. From those modest beginnings, the Farewell Bison Herd now numbers better than 300 animals.

Beginning in 1972, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) determined that sufficient bison existed in the Farewell Herd to conduct a limited hunt. Careful management and good range conditions since that time have enabled annual hunts, while still allowing the herd to grow at a rate of almost ten percent each year. Following the 1988 hunting season, 224 bison had been harvested during the 16 years of hunting.

Aerial surveys are conducted annually to document the herd's growth and to establish an estimate of the harvestable surplus, while continuing to insure the viability of the herd. In 1977, a tremendous wildfire known as the Bear Creek Burn raged through flatlands to the north and east of Farewell Airstrip. This burned area proved to be a blessing and rapidly developed into a mosaic of spruce fingers and open grassy areas ideally suited to the habitat requirements of bison. The South Fork of the Kuskokwim River borders the eastern margin of the burn, and annual ice-scouring and floodwaters within that drainage continuously sculpt the terrain, keeping it in an early successful stage, providing the preferred summer range. Bison typically move well into the headwaters of drainages within the Alaska Range during the summer. It is not uncommon to see bison grazing in close proximity to caribou and Dall sheep during the summer, and almost alongside moose during the winter. Despite this close association with these more traditional Alaska big game species, there appears to be little competition among them for foodstuffs. They have adapted well to subsist on separate plant forms.

As testament to their tremendous popularity as a big game animal, in 1989 over 1,600 hunters applied to ADF&G for the 70 available Farewell Bison permits. A computerized, random drawing selected the lucky permittees, and they were notified by mail. In an attempt to maintain aesthetically pleasing hunt conditions, the hunters were assigned to one of seven hunt periods. This scheme was designed to spread out the hunters over a longer period of time, thus reducing the possibilities of "crowded" hunting conditions. No more than ten bison hunters have been allowed in the field at any one time. Comments received from the hunters are supportive of this plan, and virtually all have expressed their satisfaction with the hunt.

The hunt itself is certainly not an easy one. No connecting roads come within 100 miles of the area, so aircraft are a necessity.



Even then, the bison are rarely accommodating enough to insure an easy pack to a place where airplanes can land. Most hunters bring in by plane off-road vehicles and use them to gain further access to the area. It is no small task to transport 1,000 pounds of buffalo meat up to 10 or 15 miles to where it can be loaded into a plane. From all reports, however, the effort is certainly well rewarded when the steaks finally sizzle on the grill.

Continued sound management of the various species of game animals in Alaska is paramount to insuring there will be similar opportunities next year or down the road a few decades. We must all take it upon ourselves to make use of the resources in a legal and conscientious manner. With prudent management, those few lucky hunters will be able to continue their adventures, and perhaps we'll never have to say farewell to Farewell.

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