



# Wood Bison News



Drawing by Wes Olson

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## Wood Bison Imported From Canada!

Last June Alaska's wood bison restoration effort moved closer to the goal of reestablishing wild populations when 53 young wood bison were transported by truck from Elk Island National Park (EINP) near Edmonton over 2,000 miles and released at their temporary home at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC). This was the culmination of several months of planning and preparation involving various state, provincial and federal agencies and organizations in the U.S. and Canada.

The bison were separated from a herd of about 350 animals last January and held in a quarantine facility as we arranged to obtain the remaining import and export permits. Initially the plan had been to conduct the import in March, during cool weather conditions. However, the final import permit required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) could not be issued until early June. EINP staff was concerned about transporting the bison in hot summer weather, but fortunately it was cloudy and cool during most of the trip from Edmonton to Portage. Parks Canada staff separated the bison into groups of animals of similar size, and Pat Hoffman Trucking provided two trailers equipped with air shocks, which gave the bison



Wood bison from Elk Island National Park in Canada arrived at their temporary new home at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center on June 19, 2008.

a smooth ride, even over rough sections of the Alaska Highway. EINP Conservation Biologist Norm Cool and chief bison handler Archie Handel, as well as Bruce Chisholm with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency accompanied the two trucks on their non-stop, two day trip to AWCC. The bison traveled well, and were given water at Watson Lake and in Tok, where the volunteer fire department provided a pump truck to quickly fill the numerous water troughs.



Tok Fire Department volunteer Bryan Thompson helps Bruce Chisholm water the bison.

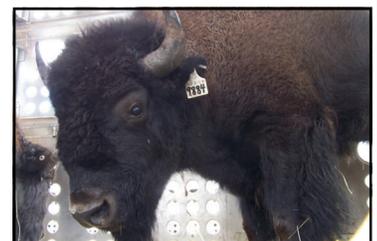
On arrival at AWCC Bob Gerlach, the Alaska State Veterinarian, and Mike Philo the USDA veterinarian for Alaska, checked the identification of each animal before the bison bounded quickly out of the trailers and into their new pasture. Unfortunately, one of the bulls was injured by another bison during the transport and died a few days after arrival. All things considered, the transport of wood bison from Canada to Alaska went very well and the 52 bison have settled in and are doing fine at their new home at AWCC.

The successful transport is an important milestone in the restoration effort, which had its beginnings in the early 1990s, when Athabaskan elders in the Fort Yukon area shared historical accounts describing how bison were an important resource for interior

Alaska Natives as recently as a few hundred years ago. It is not often that we have an opportunity to restore an indigenous species to large expanses of high quality habitat in its original range. There is a lot of work left to do, but we are now a big step closer to seeing wood bison, one Athabaskan name for which translates as "*big, hefty one on the land,*" roaming free again in interior Alaska.

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Wood bison bull in the transport trailer.

## Public Comment Shows Strong Support for Wood Bison Restoration

by Randy Rogers, Wildlife Planner

In April 2007 the report “Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska: A Review of Environmental and Regulatory Issues and Proposed Decisions for Project Implementation” (Environmental Review or “ER”) was released for public review and comment. A 12 page summary of the ER and a public comment response form were included in the spring 2007 issue of the Wood Bison News. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) accepted comments on the ER through September 30, 2007 and received nearly 100 written responses. In addition, the ER was discussed at several state fish and game advisory committee meetings and presentations to other organizations were provided on request. Over 90% of the comments on the ER expressed support for ADF&G’s efforts to restore wood bison in Alaska.

In the Environmental Review ADF&G concluded that wood bison restoration in Alaska can be accomplished with minimal or no negative environmental impacts, and that wood bison restoration can enhance the diversity of Alaska’s wildlife resources and could provide significant benefits to people. The three sites evaluated for possible wood

***Over 90% of the comments received expressed support for the effort to restore wood bison in Alaska.***

bison restoration are the Yukon Flats, Minto Flats and the lower Innoko–Yukon River area. ADF&G concluded that all three sites are suitable for wood bison restoration. The Department proposed to proceed with efforts to restore wood bison in Alaska and initiate site-specific planning efforts for both the Yukon Flats and Minto Flats locations, while also increasing efforts to discuss possible wood bison restoration in the lower Innoko–Yukon River area.

Numerous comments indicated a belief that wood bison restoration is an important wildlife conservation initiative and that it will enhance Alaska’s natural and cultural heritage and ecosystem biodiversity. Several international wildlife conservation organizations including Safari Club International, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and World Wildlife Fund endorsed wood bison restoration in

Alaska as a significant wildlife conservation initiative. The Alaska Outdoor Council stated “The concept of restoring wood bison to their former range is a conservation goal of the highest order in terms of ecosystem and human values.”

Many people submitted comments emphasizing the importance of both local and non-local hunters having opportunities to share in future harvest of wood bison. Some comments opposed establishing a subsistence priority for use of wood bison. Several also acknowledged that local residents have some proprietary interest in the use of local resources, and that there does need to be mechanisms to ensure that local residents have adequate opportunities to harvest wood bison. Several comments from local residents highlighted the importance of having opportunities to benefit from the harvest of wood bison near local villages, and the need to protect wood bison from illegal harvest, especially while the herds are growing.

ADF&G remains committed to ensuring that the benefits of wood bison restoration are shared among local and non-local residents of Alaska and others. Future harvest management will be an important topic during site-specific planning efforts in which both local and non-local interests will be involved.

Several respondents agreed that predation should not be a significant threat to wood bison restoration in Alaska, while others expressed concern that wolf predation on wood bison could be significant and limit success of the restoration effort. Based on experience in Canada, ADF&G continues to believe that predator control is not likely to be required to ensure that wood bison restoration is successful.

Several comments addressed the status of wood bison under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Most of these comments emphasized the need for ADF&G to continue to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and others to ensure that any risk of wood bison restoration interfering with other resource development is minimized.

(Continued on page 3)





**Wood bison cow and calf at AWCC.**  
Photo by Doug Lindstrand

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Most comments received agreed with the ADF&G proposed action to start site-specific planning on both Yukon Flats and Minto Flats, and continue discussing possible wood bison restoration with residents of the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. There were a significant number of comments that recommended put-

ting wood bison on state lands at Minto Flats where implementation costs would be lower because of road access and which is largely under the control of state land managers and the Alaska Board of Game.

***Based on public comment and other considerations, Minto Flats will be the first priority for wood bison planning and restoration.***

Some of the reasons for restoring wood bison on the Minto Flats first include:

- ◆ The majority of lands in the Minto Flats area are within the Minto Flats State Game Refuge, which was established to ensure protection and enhancement of habitat, conservation of fish and wildlife, and continuation of hunting, fishing, trapping and other compatible uses.
- ◆ The Minto-Nenana, Tanana-Manley-Rampart and Fairbanks State Fish and Game Advisory Committees (AC) have all expressed support for

wood bison restoration on Minto Flats.

- ◆ Availability of road access to Minto Flats will help to reduce logistical complications and costs.
- ◆ Because there is little to no federal land in the Minto Flats area the Alaska Board of Game will have responsibility for decisions about subsistence use and future harvest allocation.

While the above factors are reasons to initially work towards establishing wood bison on Minto Flats, the size of the area limits the potential size of the herd to about 500 animals. Habitat assessments indicate that Yukon Flats can easily support a herd of 2,000 or more bison, and ADF&G remains committed to the objective of reestablishing one or more larger herds of wood bison to help maintain the genetic diversity of the subspecies and provide additional hunting and viewing opportunities.

The Yukon Flats and Grayling-Anvik-Shageluk-Holy Cross Advisory Committees have passed resolutions of support for wood bison restoration on the Yukon Flats and in the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. The Department hopes to proceed with wood bison restoration in one or both areas at the earliest opportunity.

## **Wood Bison Celebration Held at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center by Cathie Harms, Master of Ceremonies**

On July 8 nearly 100 people attended a welcoming ceremony at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Portage for the wood bison that arrived at the facility in late June. AWCC Board of Director's President Chris Von Imhoff and Executive Director Mike Miller welcomed representatives from conservation organizations, state and federal agencies, Native groups and the government of Canada. Mike noted that he is honored to have the opportunity to be involved in the effort to restore a species back to its former range in Alaska.

The ceremony was held in a field of lupine on a point of land overlooking

Turnigan Arm and the Chugach Mountains between two of AWCCs' wood bison pastures. Teck Cominco Alaska generously sponsored the event. Karl Hanne-man, the company's Manager for Public and Environmental Affairs noted how it is fitting that a company with mining interests in both Canada and Alaska would support the international wood bison restoration project.

ADF&G Commissioner Denby Lloyd called wood bison restoration in Alaska "one of the most significant conservation initiatives in decades," and thanked Elk Island National Park in Alberta for their support and cooperation.

Elk Island National Park Super-

intendent Marilyn Peckett highlighted the international cooperation involved. John Morrison of the Alaska chapter of Safari Club and Bill Moritz of the Safari Club International Foundation pledged continuing assistance for the project. Kaush Arha,

*(Continued on page 5)*



**AWCC Executive Director Mike Miller speaking at the wood bison welcoming ceremony.**

# Elk Island National Park of Canada: A Proud Partner in Alaska' Wood Bison Restoration Project

By Marilyn Peckett, Superintendent Elk Island National Park

It was my great pleasure to be present for the wood bison celebration at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center last July. It was an exciting day for Alaska and an exciting day for Canada. The United States and Canada have so much in common. Shared histories; shared experiences; and shared successes. The wood bison restoration project is one of those shared successes as we get one stop closer to the reintroduction of wood bison to Alaska.

We officially welcomed 53 wood bison from Elk Island National Park of Canada to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. Historically, hundreds of thousands of bison roamed in North America. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the numbers of wood bison dwindled to a few hundred.

In 1978, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada initially assessed wood bison as endangered. This status was improved to threatened in 1988, thanks to successful recovery actions under the Canada National Wood Bison Recovery Program.

Through the efforts of that program, there are currently in excess of 4,000 wood bison in Canada. Canada is committed to the recovery of species at risk – such as the wood bison – not just in our country, but throughout its historic range.

As the Superintendent for Elk Island National Park, I am particularly proud of our contribution to the recovery of species. Elk Island, located near Edmonton in Alberta, has a long and successful history of relocating disease-free ungulates.

Dating as far back as 1937, Elk Island's herd of elk has been used as a source herd for re-establishing elk population throughout North America. Over the years, more than four thousand elk have been relocated in Canada in such places as Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Yukon.

*This is a fine example of international cooperation for the protection and recovery of a species at risk.*

In addition, we have assisted Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina in the United States to re-establish viable elk populations. Since 1967, Elk Island has provided disease-free bison for re-introduction throughout North America – and in 2006, we transferred 30 wood bison to the Republic of Sakha of the Russian Federation. And now we can add Alaska.

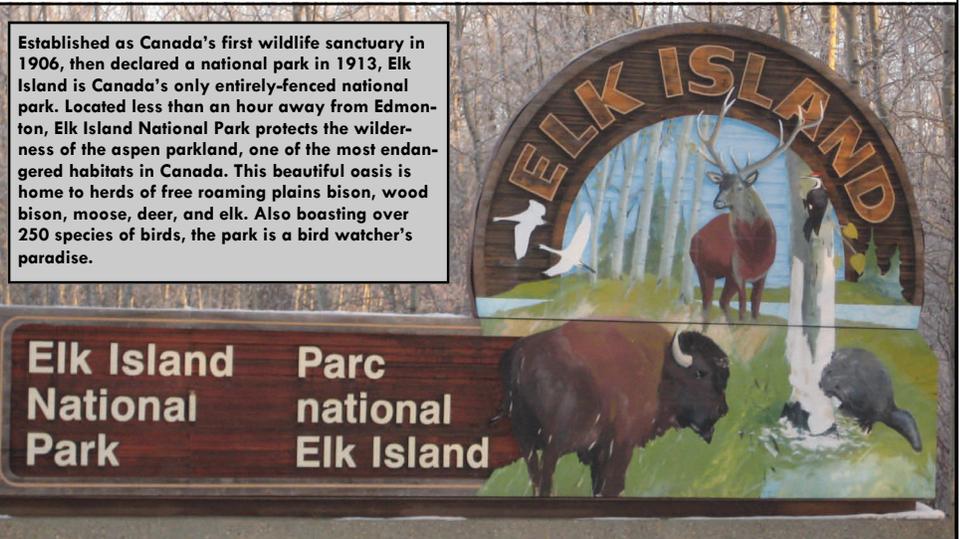
The transfer of wood bison from Elk Island to Alaska is a major milestone in the Alaskan wood bison restoration project. The bison transfer is also an important part of Canada's plan to ensure that several disease-free herds exist, not only in Canada, but also in other parts of their historic range.



**Marilyn Peckett, Superintendent, Elk Island National Park, Canada.**

This is a fine example of international cooperation for the protection and recovery of a species at risk. The great State of Alaska, Parks Canada, and Canada's Wood Bison Recovery team have been working on this international conservation project for over ten years with the assistance of other supporting departments in the United States and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I would like to acknowledge the dedication and contribution that all parties have made in order for this project to move forward. We should all be proud of our efforts.



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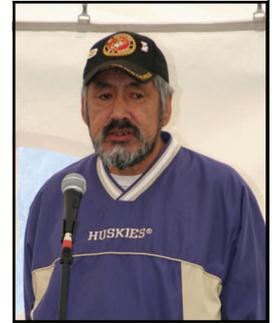
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Department of Interior, also endorsed restoring wood bison in Alaska.

Congratulatory remarks from Ted Turner of the Turner Foundation and the Turner Endangered Species Fund were read. Remarks contributed by Kent H. Redford of the Wildlife Conservation Society and American Bison Society ac-

knowledged that Alaska's wood bison restoration project is particularly significant because there are few other places where the large-scale restoration of bison will be possible. He congratulated Alaska on moving toward the ecological restoration of North American bison, and concluded by saying, "We salute you and we salute wood bison as they make a major step in returning home to Alaska."

DWC Director Doug Larsen focused on how far we've

come, and thanked the many cooperators and collaborators. Both Commissioner Lloyd and Larsen specifically thanked Bob Stephenson for conceiving the concept, working with Athabascan elders to document the presence and use of bison, and continuing efforts to restore the species in Alaska over the past 15 years. They also recognized the teamwork of Bob, Randy Rogers, David James and others which has enabled the Department to achieve significant progress in recent years.



**Arnold Hamilton from the village of Shageluk voices his support at the wood bison ceremony.**

## Safari Club Provides Key Support for the Wood Bison Project

By John Morrison (adapted from comments made at the wood bison welcoming ceremony)

The Safari Club International (SCI) and its Foundation have actively supported the Alaska wood bison restoration project for many years. The Kenai Peninsula and Alaska chapters of SCI have also been closely involved. SCI has provided both political and financial support.

SCI became interested in supporting the project when we first heard about it in the mid 1990's. Soon afterward we learned of the importance of the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center in its role for holding the bison and we saw the need to actively support the effort and take some responsibility.

Bob Stephenson and Mike Miller deserve credit for their determined efforts, patience and leadership in getting the project to success. Former SCI officer J. Y. Jones and I encouraged top officials in the Department of Interior in Washington, D.C. to expedite advancement of the project.

The chapter's commitment to support the project has not been based solely on the value of establishing another species to hunt. We already have three populations of plains bison that provide hunting by permits. We have been motivated by:

- ◆ Appreciation of the opportunity to re-establish a native species and restore a valuable member of the state's indigenous fauna.



**John Morrison speaking on behalf of the Alaska and Kenai Chapters of SCI at the wood bison welcoming ceremony.**

- ◆ The value of broadening the distribution of the wood bison and its genetic base to help insure its survival in North America.
- ◆ Provide the opportunity for research in the field and support the management of wood bison at AWCC.
- ◆ Give the public an opportunity to enjoy seeing the bison and learn about them.

Our foundation and chapters' support has included about one hundred thousand dollars obtained in our annual fund-raising programs and provided mainly for these activities:

- ◆ Providing funding to the ADF&G to contract with an environmental consultant to help with the necessary environmental review and analysis.

- ◆ Purchasing the squeeze chute and much of the handling facility at AWCC.
- ◆ Constructing a new hay barn at AWCC for storing food for wood bison and other animals.
- ◆ Purchasing hay
- ◆ Purchasing a stock trailer for moving wood bison and supplies and equipment.
- ◆ Helping to produce interpretive signs posted at the various enclosures at AWCC to inform visitors about wood bison and other animals.

Future possibilities for additional chapter support include:

- ◆ Providing funds for both the release of the animals and AWCC needs.
- ◆ Participating in planning with land owners and managers, and other public interest groups to develop recommendations to ADF&G for the management of the free-ranging populations of wood bison
- ◆ Once herds have grown sufficiently, support the harvest of animals under sustained yield principles, and with a system that allocates harvest fairly among local and other resident hunters as well as nonresidents.
- ◆ Supporting viewing and educational programs associated with free-ranging wood bison populations.

## Congratulations Everyone!

By David James, ADF&G Regional Supervisor

It took many, many years for the wood bison project to accomplish the all-important first step: Import wood bison into Alaska in preparation for release into the wild. Seems obvious, huh? Should be simple enough you might think? Guess again.

Close to 15 years were required to reach this first step. On June 19<sup>th</sup>, 53 wood bison bolted out of the livestock vans in which they had spent the previous 50 hours into an enclosed area at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center at Portage, Alaska. **Finally, the wood bison project was REAL!**

Although there are many more hurdles to clear before the most important goal is reached – releasing the wood bison into the wild – just getting them into Alaska was an event worth celebrating. And celebrate we did on July 8<sup>th</sup>; it was a fun and memorable event!

Many years ago we realized that the wood bison project would not succeed without broad public support. It took a

great deal of time and effort to develop that support. However, without it there is no doubt in my mind we would have failed to get this far. There were times during the past decade and a half when the project was “half a bison hair” from being stopped. It is only through the growing and unflinching support of many organizations, agencies, and members of the public that we now have wood bison stock to use in restoring these animals in the wildlands of Alaska.

*The essence of my message is a simple “thank you.”* There are too many individuals and organizations for me to name them in this short piece. But, as they say, you know who you are. Each and every contribution in time, money, or moral support was absolutely critical for the all-important first step of getting wood bison from Canada to Alaska.



Randy Rogers, Dr. Bob Gerlach, Bob Stephenson and David James celebrate the arrival of wood bison from Canada.

Your continued support will be necessary in the coming years as we develop specific site release plans and, in the interim, shepherd the captive wood bison through the quarantine period.

*The ultimate reward for your support will be a living, wildlife legacy that future generations of Alaskans and others will look back on with gratitude to those who fought and worked so hard to make happen.*

Many of the primary wood bison project contributors and supporters are listed on the back cover of this newsletter.

## Status of Wood Bison Under the Endangered Species Act Revised

By Bob Stephenson

As was explained in the wood bison Environmental Review, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) made a determination in 2003 that although wood bison are listed as “endangered in Canada” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), wood bison brought into Alaska would not need to be listed as endangered. In December 2007, during the process of reviewing ADF&G’s application for an import permit, the FWS revised this determination. A November 2008 letter from the Director of the FWS states, “The wood bison is listed as endangered wherever found and, as such, would retain its endangered status if introduced into the United States.” In this letter the FWS also expressed support for the state’s effort to reestablish free-ranging wood bison in Alaska.

Because at times in the past there

had been public opposition to proposed reintroductions of endangered species due to concerns about restrictions on other land uses and activities, in 1982 Congress added a provision to the ESA to designate specific reintroduced populations of endangered species as “nonessential experimental populations” (NEPs). This is the provision of the ESA has been used for the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, black-footed ferrets, condors and other species. Under an NEP designation regulatory restrictions can be considerably reduced to make the reintroduction more compatible with other land uses.

ADF&G is working with FWS to designate wood bison in Alaska as an NEP. This will help ensure conservation of wood bison, minimize the potential for regulatory conflicts with other land uses

and developments and allow regulated harvests at the appropriate time in the future. While this change in the status of wood bison under the ESA adds to the complexity of the project, in the long run this approach will prevent legal challenges that could be more disruptive to the project and other land uses.



Graphic by Teal Rogers

## USDA Risk Assessment and Disease Testing Update By Randy Rogers

As noted in the last issue of the Wood Bison News, for the last several years U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations had prohibited all imports of bovines (cattle and bison) into the U.S. from Canada because of concerns about mad cow disease. In November 2007 the USDA adopted new regulations to once again allow bison imports and ADF&G submitted an application for a USDA import permit for wood bison soon thereafter. Because the Elk Island National Park (EINP) wood bison herd has been free of bovine tuberculosis (TB) and brucellosis for over 30 years and the wood bison to be imported to Alaska would be tested at least twice for TB and brucellosis before import, ADF&G anticipated little delay in obtaining the USDA permit. The situation didn't turn out to be quite that simple.

To make a long story short, USDA regulations are designed more for

importing domestic livestock than wild animals. In March 2008 the USDA determined that a Risk Assessment (RA) would need to be completed. Dr. Bob Gerlach, the Alaska State Veterinarian, worked closely with USDA staff to discuss disease testing procedures and approaches that might be used to expedite the import permit.

Through an effort led by Dr. Freeda Isaac the USDA completed the RA in less than three months and the import permit was issued in June 2008. The USDA Risk Assessment concluded there is greater than 99.99 percent confidence that the wood bison herd at EINP is free of TB and brucellosis.

In addition, all the wood bison that were imported to Alaska, were tested for TB, brucellosis, respiratory viruses and other diseases and showed no sign of problems. They were also treated twice with medicine to eliminate parasites and

***The USDA Risk Assessment concluded there is greater than 99.99% confidence that the wood bison from Elk Island National Park do not have TB or brucellosis.***

were individually inspected by Dr. Bill Samuel from the University of Alberta to ensure that no winter ticks were present.

The wood bison will be maintained in a double-fenced enclosure at AWCC for about two years, where additional tests, including at least two more TB and brucellosis tests, will be done before bison are released in the wild. This fall ADF&G Regional Supervisor David James established a Wood Bison Quarantine and Disease Testing Working Group to coordinate bison management and disease testing protocols at AWCC. The group includes Dr. Gerlach, ADF&G Wildlife Veterinarian Dr. Kimberlee Beckmen, Mike Miller, Director of AWCC, Bob Stephenson and Randy Rogers.

## Wood Bison Round-Up!

by Bob Stephenson

On November 4 and 5 about 18 people participated in a successful effort to move 32 wood bison through the recently completed bison handling facility at AWCC. The handling involved the bison transferred to AWCC in 2003 as well as their offspring. The goal of the handling was to replace missing ear tags and obtain blood, hair and fecal samples for disease monitoring purposes and genetic analysis. Archie Handel, Chief Warden from EINP and Dr. Todd Shury, a veterinarian with Parks Canada travelled to Alaska to assist with this first round-up.



**Bison wranglers split the herd into smaller groups for handling.**

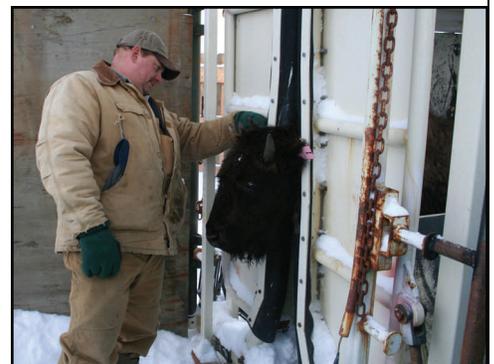


**Bison groups were separated in the chutes.**

The round-up was a success due to the efforts of the two experienced bison handlers from Parks Canada, biologists and veterinarians from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Office of the Alaska State Veterinarian, volunteers from the UAF student chapter of The Wildlife Society and several members of the AWCC staff, as well as some cooperation from the bison.

The bison were accustomed to entering the circular corral to feed, and had walked through the system of corrals and chutes in the past, but this time they were separated into smaller and smaller groups until each bison could be moved through a series of chutes ending in a hy-

draulically controlled squeeze chute, where it was restrained so it could be handled. The squeeze chute and metal holding corrals were donated by Safari Club International several years ago to help prepare for Alaska's wood bison restoration effort. AWCC then assembled the equipment and built a circular holding corral and an alley way to complete the facility. It was heartening to see the system work so well during the first attempt at handling bison.



**The squeeze chute held the bison safely in place for their check-ups!**

***Thank you to all the staff and volunteers who made the first bison round-up a success!***



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## **ADF&G gives thanks to the many wood bison project supporters!**

- ◆ Alaska Outdoor Council
- ◆ Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments
- ◆ Wildlife Conservation Society
- ◆ American Bison Society
- ◆ Deloycheet, Inc.
- ◆ World Wildlife Fund
- ◆ Pope & Young Club
- ◆ World Conservation Union
- ◆ University of Alaska-Fairbanks
- ◆ Teck Cominco Alaska
- ◆ Home Depot
- ◆ GCI
- ◆ Chugach National Forest
- ◆ Carlile Transportation Systems
- ◆ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- ◆ Natural Resource Conservation Service
- ◆ Anchorage Soil and Water Conservation District
- ◆ Canada's Wood Bison Recovery Team
- ◆ Parks Canada/Elk Island National Park
- ◆ Canadian Wildlife Service
- ◆ Canadian Food Inspection Agency
- ◆ U.S. Department of Agriculture
- ◆ Office of the Alaska State Veterinarian
- ◆ Alaska Board of Game
- ◆ Fish and Game Advisory committees and councils, tribal councils and local communities
- ◆ ....and many other individuals and organizations!

### Special thanks to:

- ◆ **The Turner Foundation for providing the essential grant that enabled ADF&G to acquire wood bison from Elk Island National Park, transport them to Alaska and more.**
- ◆ **Safari Club International and the Alaska and Kenai Chapters of SCI for extensive support (see article on p. 5).**
- ◆ **The Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center for its partnership in the project and dedication to quality care of the wood bison.**

*Many of the contributions from private organizations and non-federal agencies have been used to receive matching federal funds through the State Wildlife Grant program. This has effectively doubled the value of the contributions to the project.*



In two of the most recent donations to the wood bison project the UAF School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences gave a discounted rate on bales of hay and Carlile Transportation donated the cost of trucking the hay from Palmer to AWCC.

**Thank you UAF and Carlile!**