

Wood Bison News



Issue Number 9, Fall 2015



The Wood Bison Are Free!

The United States now has a population of wild wood bison for the first time in more than 100 years.

On Friday, April 3, 100 wood bison were released from temporary holding pens and led across the Innoko River to their new habitat by Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist Tom Seaton. Once the gates were opened, the bison followed Seaton as he drove his snowmachine to sedge and grass meadows in the Lower Innoko/Yukon River area. The bison galloped behind the snowmachine for nearly a mile until they crossed the river, then continued where the fence ended to finally become a wild herd.

The animals had been transported to the Interior from the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center in Portage, where they had been cared for in a fenced habitat for more than a decade. The bison were first trucked from Portage to Anchorage, then flown to Shageluk in a C-130 Hercules cargo plane. Near the village, they were unloaded from specially-designed shipping containers and kept in temporary pens for just over a week to acclimate to the area.

The herd consisted of 50 adult cows (many of which were pregnant) and a mixture of 50 young males and females (30 calves and 20 yearlings/two-year old animals).



Photo: Doug Lindstrand



Photo: Johane Janelle

Farewell David

“The dream of wild wood bison that has been growing for the last two decades is now a reality.”

– David James, Retired Division of Wildlife Conservation
Regional Supervisor. April 3, 2015.

As the Regional Supervisor for the Division of Wildlife Conservation in Interior and Northeast Alaska for the past 15 years, David James kept the wood bison restoration project alive. The bison are now wild and David retired at the end of June 2015, after more than 30 years of service with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.



The Big Bulls Join the Herd

After the initial release of cows and young animals, mature bulls were added to the herd about a month later. On May 21, 12 adult bulls were loaded into containers at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center, then trucked to Nenana where they were loaded onto a barge for the 700-mile trip down the Tanana and Yukon Rivers and up the Innoko River. The barge trip was necessary to release the adult bulls in the same area occupied by the cows and juveniles released in April.

On June 18 and 19, another 18 bull wood bison were trucked, barged and released in a nearby location near the rest of the herd.



Wood bison are the largest land mammal in North America.



All 30 of the mature bulls survived the trip and walked off the barge to gain weight before the breeding season, which began in late July.

Photo: Simon Binkley
Bison make their way downriver by barge. Three adult bulls were in each of the specially-designed blue containers. The bison were monitored continuously to ensure they ate, drank and stayed cool. The last barge reached the release site on June 25, 2015.

Monitoring the Herd

ADF&G must now learn how the herd adjusts to its habitat, and how the habitat responds to bison living there. Most of the animals were fitted with a radio collar before they were released. Biologists are tracking the bison in small aircraft as weather permits. They are recording births and deaths in the herd, logging specific locations of the bison throughout the year, evaluating habitat use and movement, and recording what the bison eat. This level of intensive monitoring will continue for several years and data gathered will be used to inform management decisions.



Biologist/Pilots from ADF&G and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are radio tracking the herd.

Radio and Satellite Collars



Photo: Doug Lindstrand

Most of the animals in the herd were fitted with either a standard VHF radio collar or a GPS/Satellite collar.

VHF radio collars allow biologists to track and find individual animals by flying in a small plane, picking up the radio signal, and then homing in on the animal.

GPS/Satellite collars record movements using GPS technology. Data is uploaded to satellites and retrieved by office computers so animal movements can be tracked without flying.

Bison Survival and Herd Growth

Transporting wild animals creates stress on the individual animals, which can result in mortalities. During the wood bison restoration project, none of the animals died during transport, thanks to a great deal of planning and efforts to keep the animals calm and safe.

Since the release, six animals died within the first few weeks from undetermined causes (predation and human causes were ruled out). Nine animals fell through decaying ice during breakup and drowned, bringing the loss to 15 bison. This number is lower than what was expected. By the middle of summer, 15 calves had been observed in the wild, so the herd was back up to 100. In late June, 30 bulls were released, bringing the herd size to 130 bison.



Photo: Mark Meyers
Some of the first bison calves born in the wild. Fifteen have been born thus far.

Now that they're free, some bison will die every year due to accidents, malnutrition, or other factors. This happens in every wild animal population from voles to moose. As long as the number of young born in the spring outnumbers those lost, the population will grow.

As the bison explore, they are learning about their habitat, food sources and locations providing shelter. This will increase chances of survival. By starting with 130 bison of all ages, chances of the herd's success were maximized. Mature bulls joined cow groups and breeding occurred in late July and August.

Expectations

This fall and early winter, and again during spring break-up, we expect some bison to break through thin ice and drown. Drowning is the number one cause of death in wild wood bison populations in Canada. Some bison may also die in mid- to late- winter if we have deep snow and/or severe winter conditions.

Predators will not likely take bison at this time. Predators near herds established in Canada took many years to learn how to kill bison. The Delta herd of plains bison didn't lose an animal to predators for nearly three decades.

Breeding took place in late July and August, and wild bred calves should be born in late May to early July.

Farewell Rita

“With great pride and humility I can say that my path crossed with paths of some of the finest people in the world: you men and women across Alaska. Thank you for all you taught me. Qoyanaa.”

—Rita St. Louis, Retired Division of Wildlife Conservation Regional Planner

As the Regional Planner for the Division of Wildlife Conservation in Interior and Northeast Alaska, Rita St. Louis worked with people in the Interior on many issues, including salmon, caribou, moose, and played a critical role in the wood bison management plan development. Rita leaves with wonderful memories and will be missed by her colleagues.



Bison Movements Since the Release

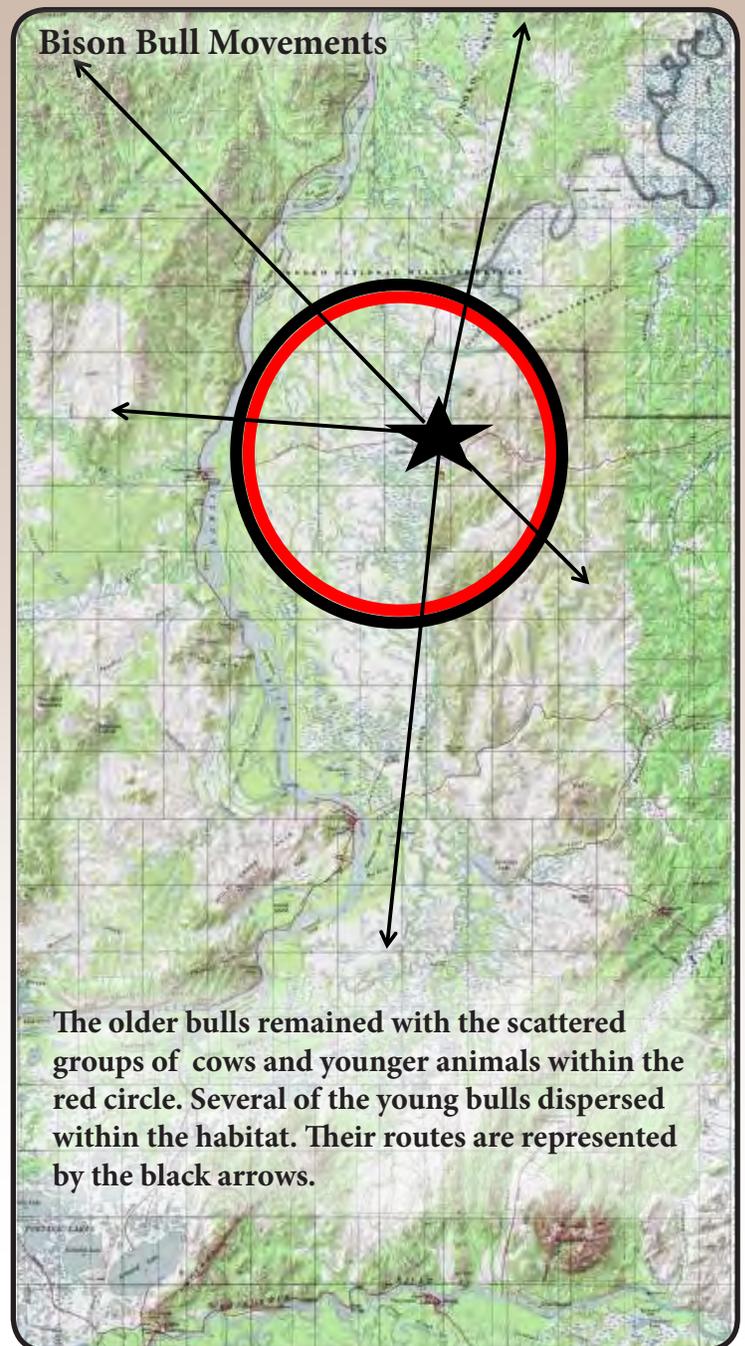
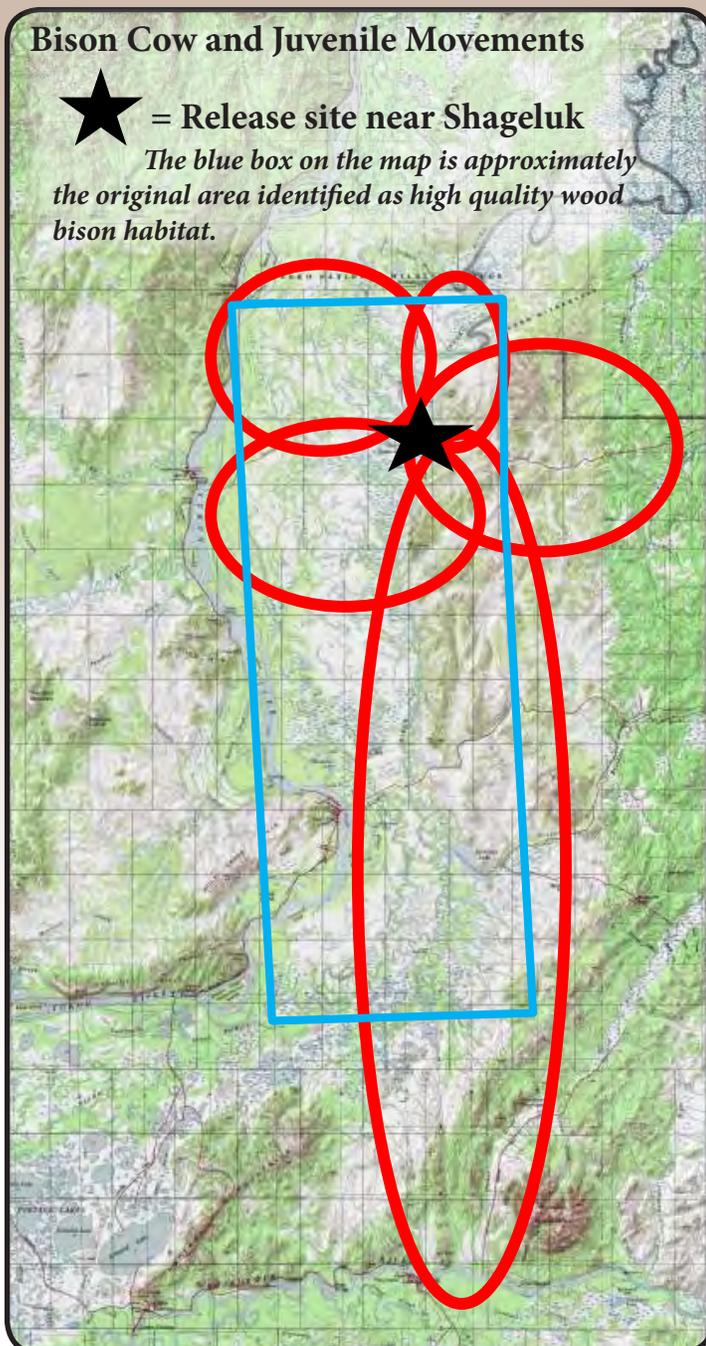
Bison Cow and Juvenile Movements

Cows and juveniles have broken into smaller groups and have made several forays exploring their habitat, then returning to within a few miles of the release area. The forays range from 14 to nearly 90 miles. It appears the plan to release the herd just prior to calving to anchor the herd to that area has succeeded. The red loops on the map show the approximate bison forays.

Bison Bull Movements

Twenty of the bulls released were large, mature animals which connected with cow groups just before the breeding season. Breeding success will become apparent when calves are born in the spring. Ten of the bulls released were smaller animals which dispersed to explore habitat, grow and eventually become breeding bulls.

Many wood bison herds were established in Canada with only yearlings which had to grow to breeding size and age. The age diversity of the Lower Innoko/Yukon River herd includes calves of the year through animals older than 10 years. This can allow breeding the first year, which can mean early herd growth.



The Management Plan

Over the years, a great deal of planning went into the reintroduction effort. Before the release, a plan had to be developed. ADF&G invited 29 entities to send representatives to develop a wood bison management plan. Twenty eight attended. After three meetings, the plan was finalized in February, 2015.

The planning process was facilitated by Dr. Alistair Bath, a world leader in the field of applied human dimensions of wildlife management. Agreements were by consensus.



Seven goals of the plan:

1. Establish a wood bison herd in the Lower Innoko/ Yukon River area and manage it for long-term viability.
2. Ensure adequate staffing and funding for all phases of wood bison management.
3. Minimize conflicts between humans and wood bison.
4. Encourage cooperation among land managers to ensure reasonable, standardized land use to access wood bison.
5. Manage harvest allocation to equitably benefit local residents, nonlocal residents, and nonresident hunters.
6. Minimize wood bison impact on other wildlife species and the ecosystem on which they depend.
7. Ensure continuing communication among all user groups.

Other Key Points include:

- Ensure hunting does not prevent herd growth and expansion into adjacent areas where suitable habitat exists.
- Begin hunting only after the herd grows large enough to provide a harvestable surplus of at least 20 animals (estimated 3–10 years).
- Eighty percent of the permits will be drawing permits (with no more than 10% for nonresidents), and 20% will be registration permits issued in each of the four surrounding villages.
- Alaskans who are not shareholders of the Native corporation lands will pay a land use fee of \$300 (nonresidents will pay \$500–\$1500) to the nonprofit Randy Rogers Wood Bison Foundation Fund established to provide scholarships and training for village youth to learn more about wildlife.

Interests Represented During Management Planning

Alaska Outdoor Council
Anchorage Advisory Committee
Anvik Tribal Council
Big Game Commercial Services Board
Bureau of Land Management Alaska Office
Board of Game
Central Kuskokwim Advisory Committee
Deloy Ges, Inc. - Anvik
Deloycheet, Inc. - Holy Cross
Alaska Department of Natural Resources
Doyon Ltd.
Fairbanks Advisory Committee
Federal Subsistence Board
Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk, Holy Cross
Advisory Committee
Grayling Tribal Council
Hee-Yea Lingde Corporation - Grayling
Holy Cross Tribal Council
Innoko National Wildlife Refuge
Northern Alaska Environmental Center
Office of Subsistence Management, USFWS
Safari Club International - Kenai Chapter
Safari Club International - Alaska Chapter
Shageluk Tribal Council
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Western Interior Regional Advisory Council
Yukon-Delta Regional Advisory Council
Zho-Tse, Inc. - Shageluk

You can read the entire management plan at:

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

Dr. Bath and His Research Team

In addition to facilitating the Wood Bison Management Plan development, Dr. Alistair Bath is an associate professor at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. Three of Dr. Bath's students are conducting research related to human interests of the wood bison restoration program in Alaska.

The main goal of this research is to help minimize potential conflict in the future, and to include the concerns of the public in wildlife management. Data is being gathered to assist management of the wood bison population for years to come.

The students have interviewed people in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk and Holy Cross, and have distributed hundreds of surveys to be returned by mail.



Flavia Franchini Silveriera is a graduate student conducting research to understand how Alaskans currently perceive impacts and opportunities that may arise as a result from the wood bison reintroduction, and documenting the range of opinions and views about wood bison management in the state.



Bethany Downer is an undergraduate student researching how experience influences the desire of Alaskan hunters to hunt wood bison, and how hunting quotas will be accepted.



Ethan Doney is a graduate student investigating ways people view wood bison and how they would like to see the animal managed under situations not yet identified in the current management plan. His research will also explore how Alaskans perceive wood bison compared to other wildlife.

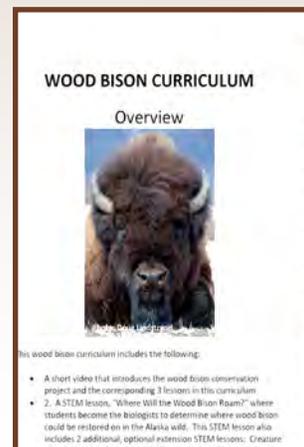
A special thanks to all of those who received and filled out one of our surveys. You are contributing important information that will help manage wood bison.

Local Students Learn About Wood Bison

Teachers from Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk and Holy Cross schools took advantage of the wood bison restoration project to provide students with place-based lessons about wildlife conservation. Groups of students traveled via snow machine to watch the bison arrive on cargo planes and exit the shipping containers into the pens. Students drew pictures of bison, learned about wood bison biology and listened to ADF&G presentations about bison natural history and safety. Students in Shageluk also assembled the wood bison skeleton kit.



Shageluk elder and bison enthusiast, Arnold Hamilton, teaches students about the wood bison project.



Want to teach about Wood Bison? Check out the online wood bison curriculum.

Want to check out the wood bison skeleton kit? Contact Mike Taras mike.taras@alaska.gov

<http://beartrust.org/wood-bison> or
<http://www.alaskawildlife.org/wood-bison-curriculum/>

Release Strategies

A “soft release” was used for the cows and juveniles transported in March. The animals were held in a temporary enclosure to become acclimated to the area. Then they were led out of the pen and allowed to explore their habitat just as the snow melted, new vegetation emerged, and calving was about to occur. This strategy was employed for the cows and juveniles in an attempt to anchor them to the region. It appears to have worked.

A “hard release,” in which bison are immediately released after transport, was used for the mature bulls. The main goal with the big bulls was to get them as close to the cows and juveniles as possible so they would be near the herd as breeding season approached.



Thanks For Your Help!

Soon after the announcement that bison would be released in the Lower Innoko/ Yukon River Area, everything shifted into fast gear. In a very short window of time, a fenced enclosure needed to be constructed three and a half miles outside of Shageluk. That’s when, according to wood bison biologist, Tom Seaton, “about every able-bodied man in Shageluk stepped up.” Some people from Grayling and Anvik also showed up to help.



The crew cut a fence corridor through trees, and in some places set posts into the ground. ADF&G transported fencing materials, nails, fence pullers, and all equipment needed to Shageluk. The crew fenced in two holding areas— one a little over four acres and another just under two acres. In addition, a mile-long corridor was fenced across the Innoko River to guide the bison to their new habitat during the final release.



In addition to building the fence, many local people helped with offloading the bison from the airplane, feeding and watering the animals during the following two weeks. After the release, all fencing was taken down, rolled and put away. All phases of the project were daunting, but with the expert help of local people, they were accomplished.



Address

Wood Bison Safety

Compared to moose, or even plains bison, very few people have ever been injured by wild wood bison. There is a chance, however, that one could be startled and put a person in danger, so ADF&G is working with village residents to minimize that risk.

A few wood bison have visited the village of Shageluk and the airports at Shageluk and Grayling. Bison roll in dirt to protect themselves from insects. They appear to like the dirt roads and areas where construction activities have created exposed dirt. None of the bison has shown any aggressive behavior, and appear to be indifferent to people. As long as people do not approach the bison they are unlikely to approach people.

Efforts are underway to train bison to stay away from airports and villages. Some “aversive conditioning” has been used to help bison learn that runways and towns are negative places. Selected residents of villages are being trained as “bison guards.” They will accompany bison as they move through the village or airport, notify the community and ADF&G, and also help move the bison away from town or the runway.

Basic bison safety rules:

- Do not approach bison, keep dogs away, and don't throw things at them.
- As with moose and other wildlife, keep a safe distance from bison and have a potential escape route identified.
- If you find yourself too close to a bison, do not run. Back away slowly.

A bison is agitated and may charge if it:

- Stops what it's doing and looks at you or turns to face you.
- Swings its head back and forth while staring at you.
- Paws at the ground or hooks the ground with its horns.
- Makes short bluff charges at you or snorts loudly.
- Moves straight toward you.



If a bison raises its tail in an arc above the plane of its back it is getting agitated. This bison is agitated and warning other bison or people to move away.

If you have questions be sure to call! We want people in the region to feel safe and know how to safely enjoy the wood bison. 907-459-7235 or 459-7206.