

Wood Bison News

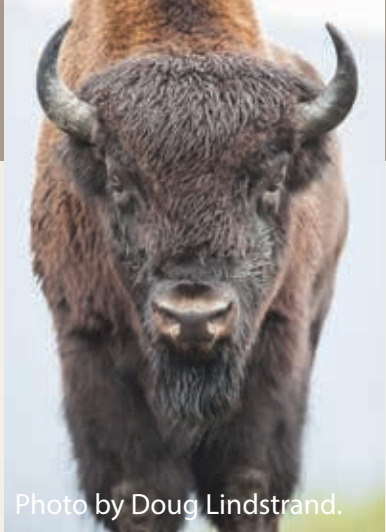


Photo by Doug Lindstrand.

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Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation

Welcome — Alaska has a new wood bison herd!

This newsletter highlights ongoing and future wood bison restoration efforts across Interior Alaska. Two experimental herds now roam the wild, and biologists from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) are preparing to release a third herd in 2027.

Inside these pages are exciting updates on the 2025 release of the Lower Tanana River wood bison herd (referred to in this newsletter as the Lower Tanana herd). Travel west to learn how Alaska's first wood bison herd in the Innoko drainage is rebounding after harsh winters made survival difficult. Finally, get a look at the planning and logistics underway for a future herd on the Yukon Flats.

These successful restoration efforts rely on ADF&G's strong conservation partners, from the Canadian government to national and statewide organizations to local residents.

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"It's big... What I consider to be the most exciting thing in bison recovery in the whole country..."

Steven Rinella, *MeatEater* Podcast, Episode 823



Wood bison featured on popular podcast

Tom Seaton, ADF&G's wood bison project biologist, was featured on *The Meat Eater Podcast*. Listen to his conversation with host Steven Rinella about bison restoration in Alaska at: www.themeateater.com/listen/meateater/ep-823.



A young bull wood bison from the Lower Tanana herd in 2025. Photo by Mark Lindberg.

Wood bison restoration timeline



Evidence of wood bison in Alaska dating back 10,000 years

10,000 years ago



Last oral histories of wood bison in Alaska

1920s

Wood bison near **extinction**, likely due to over hunting throughout their range

1941

Small population of **wood bison found in Canada**; later the source of bison for Alaska's restoration effort

1957



ADF&G begins planning for wood bison restoration

1994

Alaska's first wild wood bison herd

The Lower Innoko-Yukon Rivers wood bison herd (referred to as the Lower Innoko-Yukon herd) is Alaska's longest-established wild wood bison population. Released in 2015, it has occupied the Grayling, Anvik, Shageluk, and Holy Cross (GASH) area for more than a decade. Satellite and radiotracking data show the herd remains anchored to the area biologists intended. Less than 1% of individuals ventured outside this home range.

Herd adjusting after severe winters

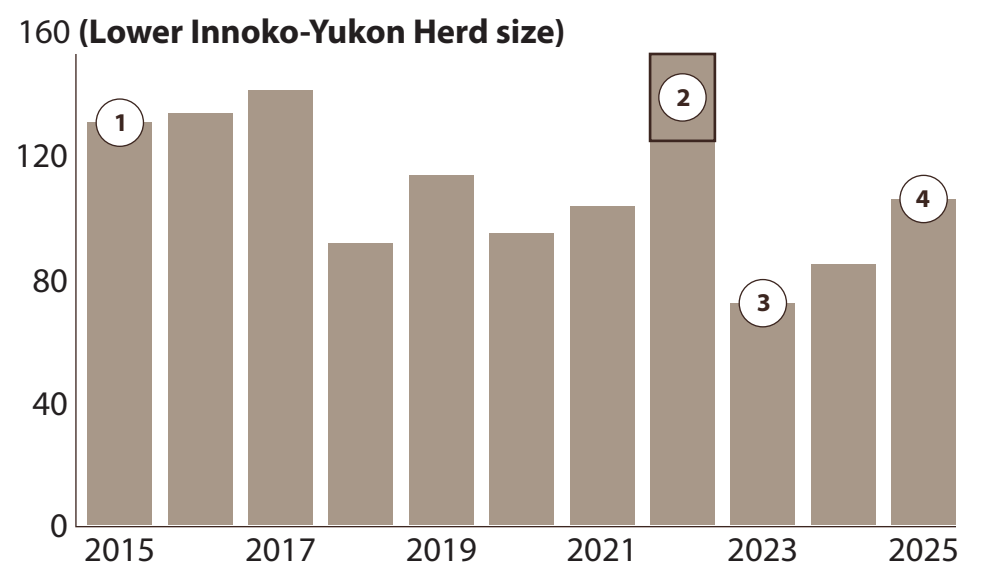
The size of the herd has fluctuated over time, with declines likely due to increasingly wet and warm winter conditions. Heavier snowfall, more winter rain, frequent icing events, and late breakup made it more difficult for bison to access food in 2018, 2020, and 2023. March–April precipitation in western Alaska has increased over the past decade. These late-winter extreme weather events are particularly challenging because bison — and other wildlife such as moose, sheep, and caribou — enter spring with already depleted fat reserves.

Lower Innoko-Yukon herd cont. pg 3

Lower Innoko-Yukon herd range
This range map shows the primary area used by the Lower Innoko-Yukon herd within the GASH region. Over the past decade, the herd has spent 99% of its time within this (pink line) 60-mile-long corridor along the Innoko and Yukon rivers.



Herd size
This graph shows the Lower Innoko-Yukon herd population estimate since its release in 2015. The numbered circles correspond to the timeline below.



HERD 1: LOWER INNOKO-YUKON



Lower Innoko-Yukon herd established with 130 wood bison

Spring 2015



28 animals added to herd; **maximum herd size reached**, ~152 animals

Summer 2022



Deep snow, thick ice over vegetation, late spring, flooding at melt; **nearly half the herd died** — mostly young animals

Winter 2023



Herd readjusting and steady growth; 111 animals

Winter 2025



Environmental Review decides restoring wood bison to Alaska is feasible, beneficial, limited negatives

2007



Environmental Assessment set the stage for wood bison to be established as a "nonessential experimental population" under Endangered Species Act; allows reintroduction while permitting oil, gas, mining, hunting; Lower Innoko, Minto Flats, Yukon Flats identified as locations

2013



Innoko herd release; first wood bison released in Alaska [see herd 1 timeline for details]

2015

Second herd released in Lower Tanana (Minto Flats) [see herd 2 timeline]

2025

Planning underway for **third herd release** in 2027 in the Yukon Flats [see herd 3 timeline]

2026

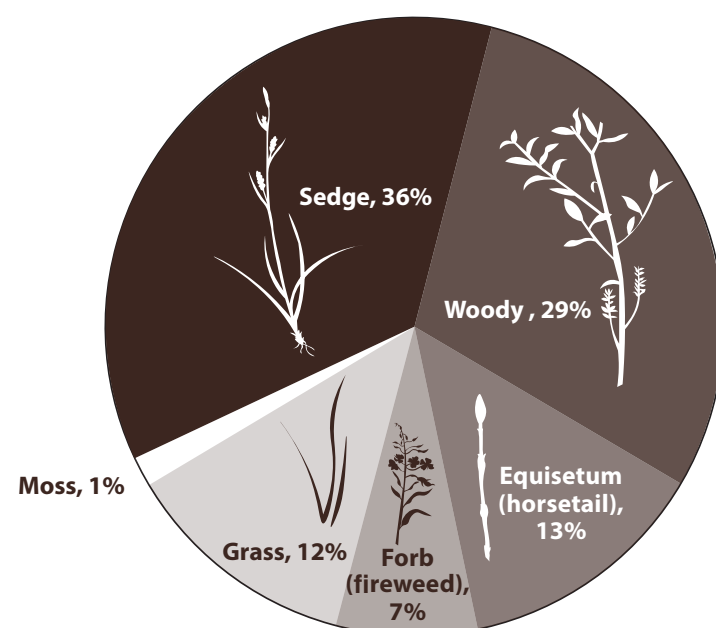
The most significant mortality event occurred during the winter of 2022–2023, which saw repeated icing events, heavy snowfall, and a late spring followed by flooding during break-up. In some areas during the winter, vegetation was covered by more than six inches of ice, making foraging extremely difficult. Nearly half of the herd at the time consisted of calves and yearlings, many of which did not survive. Since that decline, the herd has increased in each of the following two years to a population of 111 in March 2026.

Bison eat mostly meadow plants

Biologists have collected fecal patties in the lower Innoko-Yukon since the herd was released in 2015. Analysis of these samples and observations of bison and habitat use shows that Lower Innoko-Yukon wood bison use a broad selection of meadow plants like sedges, willows, horsetails, and grasses. Bison diets shift seasonally, and in winter from December to February, sedge makes up more than 80% of their diet. Summer diets are more diverse as bison select for plants that are higher in protein and rarely consume sedge.

Wood bison diet

This pie chart shows the proportion of different plants that make up wood bison annual diet in the Innoko.

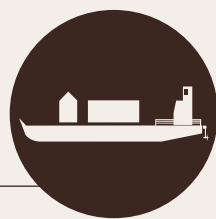


HERD 2: LOWER TANANA



40 wood bison **trucked from Canada** to LARS

April 2024

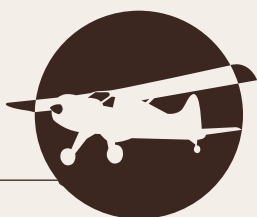


41 young wood bison trucked then **barged from LARS to enclosure** in Lower Tanana

July 2024

17 young wood bison trucked then **barged from AWCC to enclosure** in Lower Tanana

August 2024



Two **additional bison flown** to Lower Tanana via de Havilland Beaver aircraft

April 2025



4 calves born in summer; 3 adults died; **population estimate of 61 bison going into winter**

December 2025

12 bison overwintered at LARS; 44 more arrived from Canada in April; **planned release in 2027**

April 2026

Wood bison herd updates

Lower Tanana herd

Alaska's second wood bison herd was released in the lower Tanana River region in 2025 and is adjusting to the wild. The release area was guided by the planning team and the enclosure was placed based on barge access and forage availability.

Restoration began in summer 2024, when 60 young bison — most of them yearlings — were trucked and then barged down the Tanana River to the Minto Flats State Game Refuge. The animals were moved into a 100-acre soft-release pen, constructed by ADF&G biologists and a team of local people, where they were held for 9.5 months.

The enclosure was used to familiarize the herd to an area with reliable forage that was safely away from human infrastructure and agricultural lands. A rotating team of two to four people camped near the herd throughout the winter, feeding the bison, maintaining the fence, and conducting daily body-condition checks.

Enclosure anchors herd to good habitat

Shortly after spring green-up, the herd was released into the wild and the fence opened. The anchoring strategy proved successful, with many bison remaining in the area.

Because bison herds are matriarchal and led by older cows and females with calves, the herd naturally clustered around a cow that gave birth while still in the enclosure. New mothers and calves tend to remain close to their calving sites, and this female effectively anchored much of the herd. Three additional cows calved in the wild after release. Several other bison made exploratory movements in the area.

Herd monitoring shows good health, more calves expected

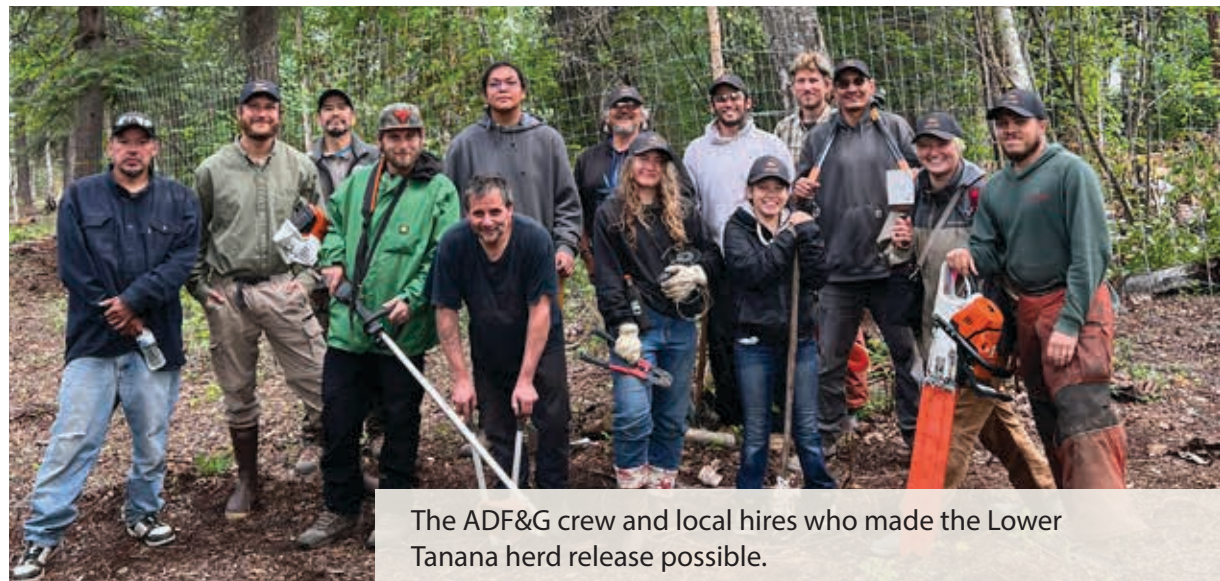
All 60 bison were fitted with ear tags and radio collars at release, and about 50 animals still carried functioning collars as of December 2025. The satellite locations are monitored daily, and the herd is radiotracked monthly by aircraft to observe behavior and body condition, and to collect fecal samples for diet analysis.

As of February 2026, five adult bison had died from winter stress or unknown, non-disease causes.

Because most animals were only two years old at release, summer 2026 will be the first breeding season with the majority of the herd being of reproductive age.



Specially modified conex containers holding wood bison are barged down the Tanana River on their way to release in the wild. All photos on this page are by Mark Lindberg.



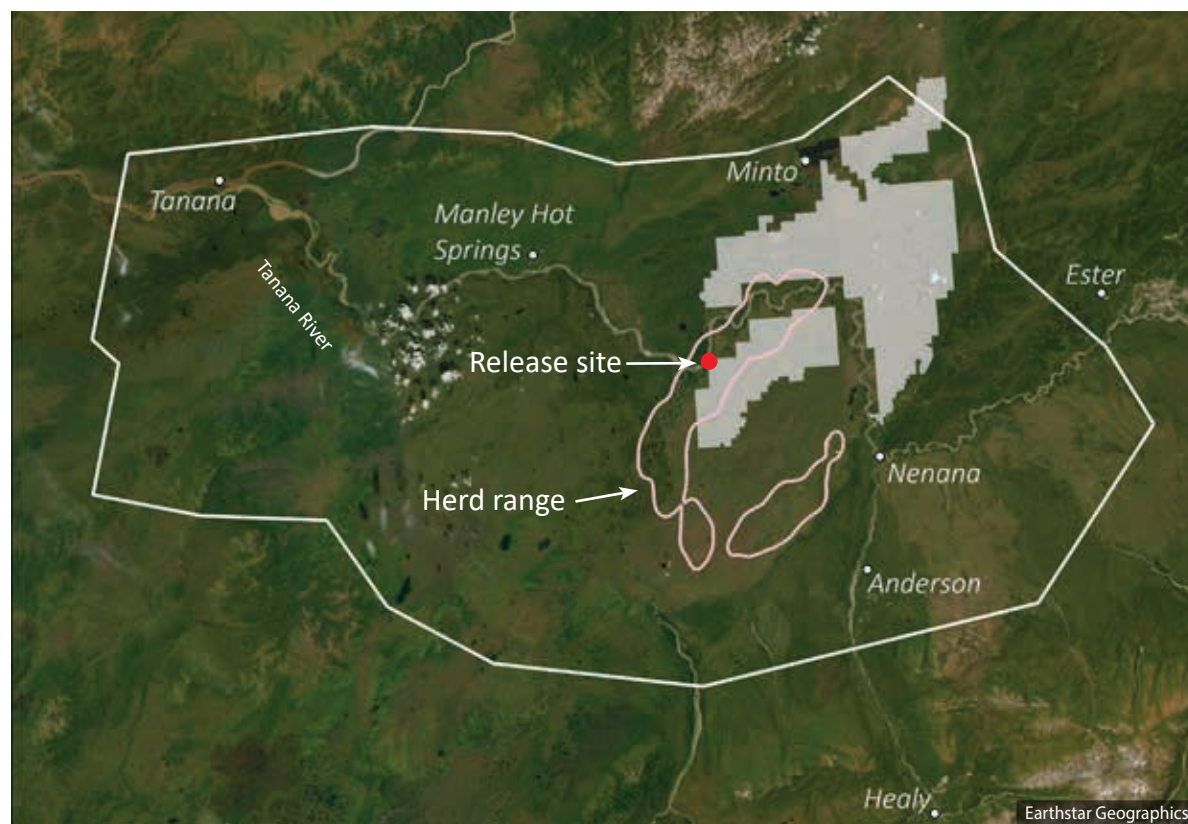
The ADF&G crew and local hires who made the Lower Tanana herd release possible.



A wood bison leaves the enclosure in spring 2025 during release into wild in the lower Tanana.

Lower Tanana herd range map

This range map compares the area currently used by wood bison on the lower Tanana (pink lines) with the potential habitat that the herd could use (white line). The white shaded polygon represents the Minto Flats State Game Refuge, where the herd was initially released along the Tanana River.



HERD 3: YUKON FLATS

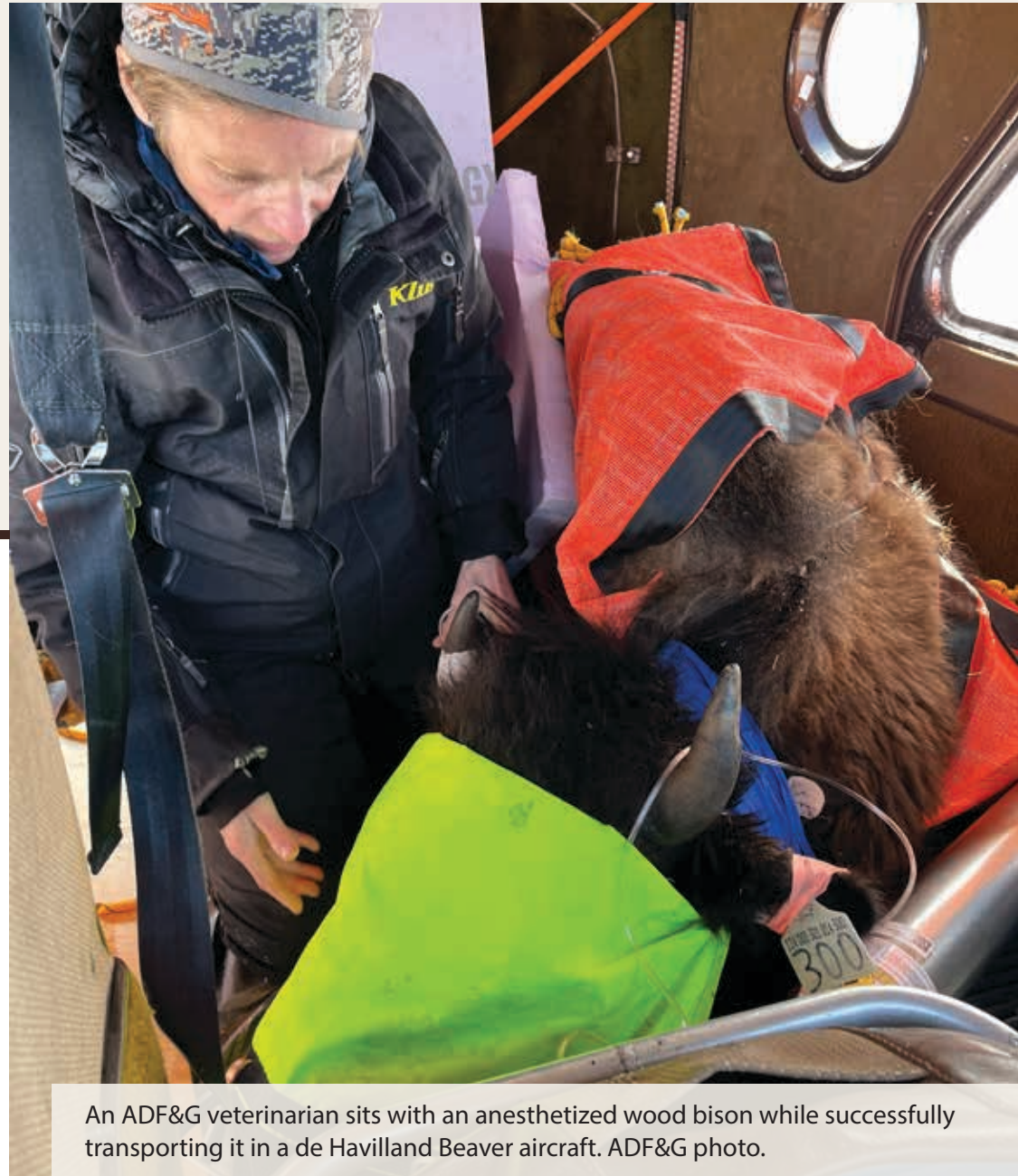


Public planning
meetings with Yukon Flats
interest groups

2023–2025

Anticipated release
of third herd on state
land in Yukon Flats

2027



An ADF&G veterinarian sits with an anesthetized wood bison while successfully transporting it in a de Havilland Beaver aircraft. ADF&G photo.

Planned release in 2027

An environmental review completed by ADF&G in 2007 identified three potential wood bison herd locations in Alaska: the Lower Innoko-Yukon (released in 2015), the Lower Tanana (Minto Flats; released in 2025), and the Yukon Flats. ADF&G has recently completed the public planning process for the third herd covered under that review.

The planning team included representatives from local communities, Alaska Native groups, wildlife conservation organizations, industry representatives, landowners, regional population centers, and state and federal agencies. Together, they developed management recommendations that are being compiled into a report. This public report will inform a management plan that must be approved by the Alaska Board of Game before the herd is released.

On the ground and in the air logistics

Beyond these regulatory requirements, ADF&G is working out the logistics for transporting and releasing bison in the Yukon Flats in summer 2027. Biologists selected a potential release site at a dry lakebed on State of Alaska land with high-quality sedge and grass habitat. The site includes a stand of young cottonwood trees where a temporary enclosure may be located.

In summer 2026, biologists and local hires will construct a soft release pen where bison will be held before release. The herd will be transported by aircraft, which has been successful in past efforts. Barging and overland travel are not options in the proposed release area.

Yukon Flats potential release map

This map shows the 2027 planned release site for the Yukon Flats herd (red dot) on State of Alaska land (white shaded polygon). The white line indicates the area with potential wood bison habitat.



Meadow habitat in the Yukon Flats near the planned release site. ADF&G photo.

Partners in restoration

Honoring Paul Williams Sr. from Beaver

The late Paul Williams Sr. was a longtime resident of the Yukon Flats and is revered for his extensive knowledge of Gwich'in Athabaskan traditions and his tribal leadership. He was among the last remaining elders of the region with surviving oral history of wood bison passed down from his elders.

Mr. Williams discovered several ancient bison bones while on the land in the Yukon Flats and submitted them to ADF&G. These specimens helped biologists better understand the species' history in the region. Paul Williams Sr. made significant contributions to the restoration of wood bison in Alaska. Though he is missed by many, his knowledge and charisma have been passed on to his surviving children and grandchildren.



Paul Williams Sr. poses for a photo in Beaver, Alaska. Photo courtesy of ADF&G.

The Bison Guardian Program

The Bison Guardian Program includes local communities in wood bison restoration efforts and contributes to their economies. ADF&G trains and pays community members to deter wood bison away from infrastructure and assist with other projects.

Guardians receive specialized training and are essential to restoration success. They are paid to deter bison from communities, runways, highways, railroads, and agricultural lands. Because they live near the herds, guardians can respond more quickly than ADF&G when issues arise. They also collect biological samples, scout and observe bison locations, and serve as liaisons to local communities.

In the lower Tanana, nine young bison showed up at the developing Nenana-Totchaket Agricultural Project. Bison Guardians have worked to prevent the animals from establishing a pattern of use there by checking for bison and hazing them as needed.



Wood bison feed within a fenced area at the UAF Large Animal Research Station in Fairbanks. UAF photo.

The role of holding facilities

Some wood bison pass through holding facilities on their way to release, while others remain there for much of their lives. In some cases, calves born while in human care later can be considered for release. Holding facilities also give the public an opportunity to see wood bison, and become more familiar with the species.

ADF&G has partnered with the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) on wood bison restoration since 2003 and with the Large Animal Research Station (LARS) at the University of Alaska Fairbanks since 2022. These organizations support restoration efforts by providing essential, high-quality animal care.

The AWCC herd now numbers 34 bison and typically produces eight to ten calves annually, resulting in 15–20 animals potentially available for release every other year. LARS currently cares for 56 bison, including 44 that arrived in April 2026. All of these bison are eligible for release into the wild. All of Alaska's wood bison originated from Elk Island National Park (EINP) in Alberta, Canada, which is managed specifically for restoration. ADF&G has an agreement with Parks Canada to receive surplus wood bison from EINP every other year, typically about 40 animals.

Co-existing with humans & wildlife



Wood bison in the wild on the lower Tanana shortly after release. The ear tags visible in this photo help identify individual bison for monitoring as they transition from holding facilities to the wild. Photo by Johane Janelle.

Wood bison restoration doesn't limit resource development

Because wood bison are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), there were concerns that restoring them could conflict with resource development activities that may harm bison or their habitat. To address this concern, the State of Alaska and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, with input from in groups, spent five years developing a Nonessential Experimental Population (NEP) rule. Under the NEP rule, wood bison in Alaska do not receive the full protections typically provided under the ESA. Because of this, the ESA cannot be used to limit or manage the impacts of oil, gas, or mining activities on wood bison or their habitat, making it virtually impossible for restoration to inhibit development. The NEP ruling also allows for possible future hunting of wood bison.

Are wood bison aggressive toward people?

Human injuries from wild wood bison are extremely rare. They have occurred in captive settings, where bison are being intensively handled and pressured to move through pens or chutes. In the wild, wood bison are generally considered less dangerous than moose. Like moose, they typically avoid people but may defend themselves if cornered or threatened.

At Elk Island National Park in Canada, very few bison-related injuries have been reported despite 1,000 bison sharing space with 500,000 visitors a year — including more than 50 miles of hiking trails. Wood bison have occupied the GASH area for the past decade and have occasionally moved through nearby communities without reports of aggressive behavior toward people. Plains bison have lived in Alaska for 95 years without any reported human injuries.

Vehicle collisions with bison do occur in areas where herds live near roads in Canada and Alaska. In Alaska, herd placement, hazing away from roads, and hunting of wood bison near roads minimizes risk and the presence of bison near human infrastructure.

When can bison be hunted?

The decision to allow wood bison harvest begins with a public planning process and requires approval from the Alaska Board of Game. From a biological perspective, a growing herd of 400–500 animals has a strong chance of long-term survival and can support regular harvest. None of Alaska's wood bison herds currently are hunted.

Bison and moose coexist



Bison and moose have distinct foraging strategies. A large portion of their intake is very different, both in plant species consumed and height above the ground. Because of these ecological differences, bison and moose have coexisted across North America for thousands of years.

In Alaska, plains bison and moose have coexisted successfully for nearly a century. Monitoring of the Lower Innoko-Yukon wood bison herd, combined with long-standing evidence of moose and wood bison coexistence in Canada further supports this pattern. No detrimental effects on wildlife are expected in any of Alaska's wood bison restoration areas.



Cow and calf moose. Photo by Mark Emery.

Bison benefit ecosystems



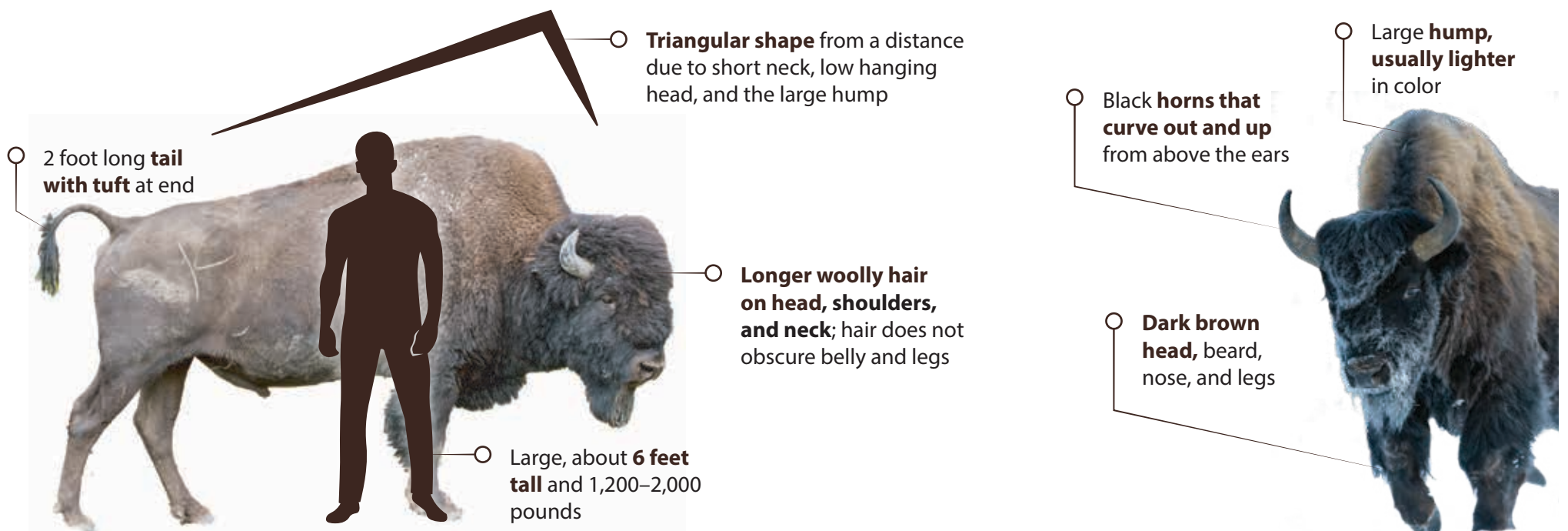
Wood bison contribute to ecosystems in multiple ways. Small birds and mammals use shed bison wool to line their nests, contributing to survival. At the same time, bison accelerate nutrient cycling by converting plant matter into urine and feces, enriching soils and supporting plant and insect communities. These insects become food for frogs, fish, birds, and small mammals, which in turn support animals throughout the food web. In the future, wood bison are expected to enter the human food supply through harvest, extending their ecological benefits to people.

Report a wood bison, get a hat



Have you seen a wild wood bison?

If you see a wild wood bison in Interior Alaska and send a **photo, location** and **date** to ADF&G, we will send you a wood bison restoration hat! Report to Luke Rogers: luke.rogers2@alaska.gov, 907-459-7235, 1300 College Rd. Fairbanks, AK 99701.



More on wood bison



Follow us on Facebook for updates

Search “ADF&G Wildlife Conservation - Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska.”



Wood bison restoration resources

In-depth information and downloadable resources on wood bison history, research, management, and k-12 lessons: woodbisonrestoration.adfg.alaska.gov.



Wood bison FAQs

Still have questions about wood bison? Check out our frequently asked questions page: www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=woodbisonrestoration.faqs.

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Photo caption: Wild wood bison walk across a sedge meadow in the lower Tanana area in 2025. Photo by Mark Lindberg.

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