

American Bison



Image courtesy of Alan D. Wilson www.naturespiconline.com

Plains Bison in Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming, USA.

The American Bison is the largest land mammal in North America and is the National Mammal of the United States. Bison belong to a larger family of animals known as bovids. Bovid have divided or cloven hooves and are ruminant animals, which means they chew their food and bring it back up to chew again. This family includes cattle, sheep, goats, antelopes, and many others, including African and Water Buffalo (see right).



This ox-like animal has big shoulders (with a hump in the case of males) and can be up to 2 m in height. Its large head has a broad forehead and short, upturned horns and a straggly beard. A covering of brownish black hair on its head, neck, shoulders and forelegs helps keep it warm in winter. Its back half, which ends in a short tail, has much shorter, lighter coloured hair.

Most of the American Bison live on plains though some do live in woodland. They spend much of their time grazing on grasses and sedges, as well as herbs, shrubs and twigs. Despite their size, they can move very quickly across the plains, running at speeds of up to 60 km per hour.

A Part of Culture

Bison have always played a vital part in the lives of many Native American Indians. When bison were plentiful in North America, they provided meat for food, hides and fur for clothing and shelter, and horns for tools. Native American nations are now playing a part in helping to rebuild the bison populations in North America.



A Native American Indian doing a Hopi Buffalo Dance.

Male bison, known as a **bull**, will fight fiercely over females during the mating season. Females, called **cows**, give birth to one **calf** each year.

Around 50 million bison once roamed hundreds of kilometres across the plains in the US and Canada, but due to widespread commercial hunting by settlers, they almost became extinct. Following conservation efforts, today there are about 360,000 plains bison owned as domestic livestock and about 31,000 being cared for as wildlife in public owned herd in the US and Canada.

Bison or Buffalo?

Though bison are also known as buffalo, they are in fact two different animals. Buffalo are native to Africa (African Buffalo) and Asia (Water Buffalo) and look more like large cows with horns.



American Buffalo

African Buffalo

The European Cousin

There are two species of Bison, the American Bison and the European Bison. The European Bison, also known as Wisent, are found mainly in Poland and Belarus and is the National Mammal for both countries. They are slightly larger but less heavily built than the American Bison, have longer legs and live in woodlands. The European species became extinct in the wild after World War I but have been re-established since then from zoo-bred animals. Recent studies have revealed that both species of bison are more closely related than previously thought.

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