



Teacher Background Information

What is a *Bison bison*?



Bison bison is the official biological species name for the American bison. Bison, or buffalo as they are commonly called, are the largest land **mammals** in North America. Males can weigh over 2,000 pounds! On average, bison are 5 to 6½ feet long and weigh 900 to 2,200 pounds. Males are usually larger than females.

These **herbivores** (plant eaters) make their home in the grasslands and forests of North America. Bison eat grasses and **sedges**, moving continuously as they eat.

Bison live in herds of 20 to 50 animals. The females, or cows, lead family groups. Bulls (males) remain either solitary or in small groups for most of the year. Bison travel as a group and roam great distances in the wild. They can reach speeds of up to 30 mph.

Females produce one calf after a gestation period of nine and a half months. Calves are born in late April to mid-May. The cow protects the young. The **offspring** may remain with the mother for as long as three years after birth.

Bison typically live between 12 to 15 years.

Bison History

Historically, bison numbered an estimated 80 million. Today, approximately 350,000 remain in the United States. Shooting bison for their hides was common in the 19th century. Unregulated hunting nearly eliminated the bison by 1890. In 1893, the first efforts were made to protect the animals.

Bison at Badlands National Park

In 1963, fifty three bison were brought to Badlands National Park. Most of those animals were from Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota. In 1983, an additional 20 animals were added from the state of Colorado. People travel from all over the world to see the bison herd and enjoy the beautiful prairie wilderness at Badlands National Park.

The **habitat** of the Sage Creek Wilderness Area can support approximately 700 - 800 bison. Because there are no natural **predators** to the bison, the **population** grows each year. In order to ensure a healthy population with enough food and water for all, animals are **culled** during round-ups in the park. Park managers try to keep the total number of bison below 800.

During round-ups wildlife managers at Badlands National Park cull excess animals and gather information about the population and **genetics** of the bison herd. The goal is to support a healthy and free ranging bison population within Badlands National Park.

Badlands Round-up

After all the planning, the actual round-up lasts several days. First, horseback riders will gather the animals into holding pens. Then, small groups of animals are divided into pre-processing corrals. Next, each animal is worked through the chute. While confined to a head catch, blood and hair samples are taken from the animal. Also, a tiny computer chip is implanted behind the ear just under the skin.

Animals are sorted according to sex and age. Those selected as cull animals are shipped to the Intertribal Bison Cooperative. Animals that will remain in the park are released back into the Sage Creek Wilderness Area where they will roam just as they have throughout history.

Vocabulary Word Box

Mammal: A class of animals characterized by having hair, being warm-blooded, and nursing their young.

Herbivore: A plant-eater

Sedge: grass-like plants

Offspring: the young produced by a person, plant or animal

Habitat: The place where a plant or animal lives.

Predator: An animal that hunts and kills other animals

Population: The total number of a specific kind of plant or animal living in an area

Cull: to remove members from a herd

Genetics: the study of how traits and characteristics are biologically transferred from one generation to the next