

AMERICAN BISON



Bison bison

STATUS

- Lower risk – Conservation Dependent.
- The population of over 60 million was almost completely destroyed within two decades in the 1800s, by uncontrolled hunting. Only about 800 were left at the beginning of the 1900s.
- A last minute rescue by conservationists and native Americans saved the species from extinction and later returned some to the wild.
- In 1995 there was an estimated population of 200 000.
- The European bison *Bison bonasus* is an Endangered species.

ORIGIN

- An estimated 60 million bison roamed one third of the North American continent when Europeans first settled there. This is believed to be the greatest concentrated mass of land mammals ever to tread the globe.
- Today's bison are the last survivors of animals that roamed through southern Eurasia 20 000 years ago, along with the Przewalski's horse (at the end of the Palaeartic Glacial period.)
- Fossil evidence and early cave paintings by prehistoric peoples, found in southern France and northern Spain support this.

HABITAT

- North American bison live in spacious open areas and woodland. They are now spread throughout North America in protected areas. Bison are grazers, feeding on various kinds of grasses and herbs.
- In winter they move their heads and horns sideways to clear snow to get to food: dry grass, lichen and moss.



SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

- Frequent fighting, especially during breeding season.
- Extremely playful up to two years of age.
- Highly curious, good hearing and highly developed sense of smell. (They can scent water over 7 - 8 kms away).
- Will charge quickly when cornered and able to recognise the enemy.
- Like to scratch and to roll in loose dust and sand to get rid of insects.
- Lots of grooming – Bison rub heads, necks and sides on trees and branches, especially when shedding the heavy winter coat in spring.
- Social groups include bull herds of two to twelve and cow herds of over twenty, which include calves and sub-adult bulls.

DESCRIPTION

- Bison are the largest mammal of the American continent. Males weigh up to 1 000kg and are approximately 2m high at the shoulders. Females are about $\frac{3}{4}$ of this size.
- Males and females have short, sturdy horns at the sides of the skull. They can span 90cm across.
- They have a Heavy coat, tan to dark brown, for insulation against the blazing sun and intense cold on the plains.
- A large hump of muscle on the shoulder is needed to support the massive head. The head and hump are covered with dark brown, woolly hair.
- Bison are good swimmers
- Bison have good mobility, speed and agility, despite their size: they can wheel around and charge quickly when threatened.