

Bison or Buffalo?

by Jamie Kelley, Naturalist, Pioneers Park Nature Center

What did the buffalo say to its son when he left for school?
Bison!

Did you know, even though the names bison and buffalo are used interchangeably, bison and buffalo are different species? When early explorers first came to North America the large mammals they saw look a lot like the buffalo of Africa and Asia. They started calling, what actually was a bison, a buffalo. Even though we now know they are different the name has stuck. The more accurate name is American bison but if you can the animal a buffalo we'll know what you are talking about. American bison and the African buffalo and water buffalo are members of the same family, the bovidae family. Antelopes, gazelles, and cattle are also members of this family.

Bison are herbivores, meaning they only eat plants such as grasses, sedges, and forbes (or wildflowers). When bison are not on the move, grazing, they spend time resting. A bull bison (a male) can weigh up to 2,000 pounds and stand up to 6.5 feet high (measured at the shoulder). Making the bison the largest mammal native to North America. The cow bison is smaller reaching 1,000 pounds and standing 5.5 feet high. Shaggy brown fur covers their head and shoulders. There is thickest in the winter and slough off in the spring creating a thinner spring coat for warmer weather.

American bison have lived in the Great Plains for over 5,000 years. It is estimated that at one time between 30-50 million bison lived in North America. Unfortunately, the bison population decreased to fewer than 2,000 in the early 1900's. Today, in the United States, bison now live on private land or in parks and preserves, like the Pioneers Park Nature Center.

The small herd of bison at the Nature Center is cared for by Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department. Many people enjoy driving through the park and seeing the bison at the top of the hill as they loop through the Nature Center. Hiking the Lowland Prairie trail also gives our visitors a scenic view of the bison at their wallow, a small pond in the prairie. In the winter, the bison can be found in one of the fields just west of the Prairie Building.



Photo Courtesy of Adrian Olivera

Other fun facts about Bison:

- Bison can jump up to 6 feet high and run up to 30 miles per hour. They can also swim!
- The biggest predator to bison were once humans. Hunting bison in the 1800's almost cause this species to become extinct.
- Bison have an acute sense of smell and good eyesight.
- A bison uses its tail as a flyswatter. You can also tell if the bison is calm, excited, or threatened by its tail.
- Bison like to roll in the dirt and dust, first on one side, then on the other, this is called wallowing. The dirt helps keep insects off of them and helps to keep them cool in the summer.
- Bulls and cows both have curved horns. Bull bison will have larger horns and wider heads.
- Bison's have a large hump across their shoulders. This hump is made up of bone and muscle. This hump helps a bison hold up its large head.