

This Day in History... November 5, 2022

National Bison Day

Since 2013, National Bison Day has been held on the first Saturday in November, which falls on November 5, 2022. Once close to extinction, bison populations have recovered due to prolonged conservation efforts and in 2016, the bison was made America's national mammal.



Bison calves are referred to as red dogs.



Cody killed more than 4,000 buffalo in just two years but later called for their protection.



Yellowstone National Park is the only place in America where bison have lived uninterrupted since pre-historic times.

The American bison, often incorrectly called the buffalo, is a symbol of the Wild West. As recently as a couple hundred years ago, American bison roamed in vast herds from the northern ice lakes of Canada to the middle of Mexico. Prior to the arrival of European settlers, Native Americans hunted huge herds of bison on the Plains. In that time, bison populations are estimated to have been between 30 and 70 million.

In the 1830s, Comanche and other Plains Indians used the bison as a source of trade as well as supplying for their families' needs. With the introduction of guns and horses, the Native Americans became proficient hunters who sold the furs and meat for export. The price of products made from bison kept increasing and the number of professional hunters grew. By the 1880s, about 2,000 to 10,000 bison were killed each day. Railroad cars traveling east were stacked high with hides.

Numerous factors led to the bison almost becoming extinct, most of them centering on 19th century American practices in the West. Hunters sought the hides – a good winter pelt could sell for as much as \$50 at a time when a laborer rarely earned more than \$1 per day. As railroads crossed the Great Plains and linked East with West, railroad companies paid hunters to clear herds that threatened the trains. And the US military encouraged the slaughter of bison to pressure Native American tribes to relocate, as bison were a fundamental part of their diet.

The federal government also sponsored programs to decrease bison populations because they were seen as competition for cattle. Both animals needed land to graze on, and since cattle were a more valuable food source, bison were targeted for slaughter. By 1889, only about 550 bison were left in the US.

Ironically, some of the people who were slaughtering the bison were among the first to start calling for their protection. "Buffalo Bill" Cody – so named because of his success in killing buffalo – was one who realized the hunting was too great for the species to survive, and called for protection. And James "Scotty" Phillip of South Dakota purchased a small herd of five captured bison in 1881 for the purpose of preserving them. By the time he died in 1911, his herd had grown to more than 1,000.

Eventually, the government realized how grave an error they had made. They began working to bring back the bison population. Thanks to many successful conservation and breeding programs, the American bison made a comeback. Though their numbers may never reach what they once were, today, the population is over 500,000.

For several years, people called for the bison to have its own day of recognition. A bill was submitted, but has never managed to get passed. However, each year since 2012, the Senate has recognized the first Saturday of November as National Bison Day. And in 2016, the National Bison Legacy Act officially declared the bison America's national mammal.

Bison or Buffalo?

Bison are often referred to buffalo, but they are in fact two different animals. For starters, there are two living species of bison, the American bison and the European bison. There are also two types of buffalo – the African buffalo and the water buffalo. The confusion over what to call them seems to date back to the 1600s, when Europeans came to America. Historians think the use of buffalo to describe bison in America came from the use of the French word for beef, boeuf.

How do you tell them apart? Bison have larger heads, beards, and thick coats, as well as large humps around their shoulders. Bison also have sharper, shorter horns, compared to the larger, longer horns of buffalo.



Bison can live up to 20 years, jump 6 feet high and 7 feet horizontally, and reach speeds of 35 miles per hour!



Bison herds are matriarchal, meaning females lead herds.



The American bison is the largest land animal in North America, weighing up to 3,000 pounds.



The first US stamp to picture a bison, though the title calls it a buffalo.



The bison is the state animal of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wyoming.

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