

Conservation Corner

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“The moving multitude darkened the whole plains.” Meriwether Lewis, 1806

Last week we took a look at the buffalo through the eyes of a Kiowa-Plains legend as we introduced our new Nature Center display featuring buffalo artifacts and tools. This week I thought perhaps it would be good to learn more about the behavior and biology of these magnificent animals.

You may be confused about the correct name – bison or buffalo? Their scientific name is *Bison bison*, from the Greek word for an ox-like animal. The more common terms American buffalo or simply buffalo come from the French word *bœufs*, which means ox or bullock. Either one is fine.

American buffalo are descended from the giant bison who crossed the Bering Land Bridge into the New World during the Pliocene Epoch some 400,000 years ago. Two subspecies are now found in North America, the plains bison and the wood bison.

Buffalo are the largest land animal in North America. Bulls may stand 6 feet at the shoulders and weigh up to a ton. Despite their size, buffalo are quick and agile and may reach speeds up to 40 mph. They are near-sighted but have excellent senses of smell and hearing.

Members of the bovine family, bison are herbivores, foraging on prairie grasses and sedges. Throughout the day they graze, rest, chew their cud, and then repeat. During winter months their large heads help clear away snow. Did you know their shaggy brown fur coat is so well insulated that snow doesn't melt off their backs?

Buffalo mate in late summer with females giving birth in the spring to one calf. Reddish-brown in color, the calves weigh 30-70 pounds at birth and are usually weaned at 7 months. Wild buffalo live in small groups of about 20 animals with a dominant male or female. In centuries past, buffalo would also congregate in large migrating herds.

As we discussed last week, the massive herds that Lewis & Clark witnessed disappeared from the landscape due to loss of habitat, bovine diseases, commercial hunting, and mass slaughter. In 1884, with less than 500 buffalo remaining nationwide, Congress ordered the Army to protect the wild buffalo at Yellowstone National Park from poachers. In 1905, the American Bison Society was founded. Efforts to save the buffalo succeeded, their numbers gradually increased, and once again buffalo are raised for their meat and hides.

Here in Pocahontas County, the last buffalo was killed in 1863 by Old Rolfe. The last wild buffalo in Iowa was seen in 1870. Today buffalo may be found on both private and public lands, including herds at the Neil Smith National Wildlife Refuge east of Des Moines and Broken Kettle Grasslands in the Loess Hills.

In 2016, the National Bison Legacy Act was signed into law, naming the American Bison our National Mammal for its role in our country's history and culture. As in years past, the American Bison lives again as a symbol of freedom, strength, and unity.

