

## Bison

Symbol of the Nature Center, the shaggy bulk of a bison reminds us of the huge herds that once roamed the grasslands of North America. Even before the first 40 acres of Pioneers Park were set aside as a wildlife sanctuary in 1963, the park was home to a small herd of these magnificent mammals. Our herd currently has eight animals.

Bison are superbly adapted to the harshness of a prairie winter and can be seen doggedly facing into the bitter winds. Their fur is seven times as thick as that of a cow. They can dig down as much as four feet with their hooves, sweeping aside snow with their muzzle to reach the



grass on which they depend. Their hump stores fat from the abundance of summer. Related to cows, a bison eats five times a day, and rests in between, regurgitating and rechewing its cud.

The largest surviving land mammal of North America, a male bison can weigh a ton and stand six feet at the shoulder. Females are smaller, rarely weighing more than 900 pounds. Both have curved horns, though a female's are more slender. Females make a grunting sound when it calls her calf, and bulls have a booming bellow during rut season in late summer.

In spring, a cow gives birth to a single calf that weighs 30 to 70 pounds, has a reddish coat and is able to run within three hours. The calf will stay with its mother for a full year. Bison can live 15 to 20 years in the wild, and up to 40 years in captive herds.

Bison herds contribute to the maintenance of prairie. Their feeding encourages new grass growth. They carry seeds on their fur, create plowed ground with their hooves where seeds can find space to grow, and tread seeds into the ground. And their habit of rubbing against trees to thin out their thick winter coats discourages tree growth.

Bison have poor eyesight but can smell water up to six miles away. Healthy adults have no predators except for humans, but wolves or grizzly bears preyed on calves or weakened adults. Horns and hooves are formidable weapons, and bison can run more than 30 miles an hour - a stampede can be a fearsome thing.



Many people call these massive animals buffalo, which is not scientifically accurate. Buffalo live in Africa and Asia and have horns that grow straight out from the top of their head. Whether we call them bison or buffalo, it is a gift to have them here where we can watch them and dream of a time when they wandered free among the grass.