

# Facts & Figures About Canadian

# Bison

## In General:

- Bison is another name for the North American buffalo
- Bison were once endangered in North America, but their numbers have rebounded
- There are over 500,000 bison in North America
- Bison are raised for their meat, horns and hides
- A mature cow weighs between 1000 and 1200 pounds (454.5-545.5kg). Calves weigh between 40 and 50 pounds (18.2-22.7kg).
- Bison cows have a calf once every three years
- It is rare for bison to have twins, but not impossible
- Bison are found on farms and ranches across Canada
- Plains bison are found in the grasslands; Wood Bison are found in the northern regions



## You were asking about...Bison

### Housing: Where do Bison Live?

Bison are a hardy species well adapted to life on the Canadian grasslands. Because they were not domesticated until fairly recently, they do not require the special care most domesticated farm animals do. Bison are comfortable on open pastures year-round, and do not need barns to live in thanks to their thick winter coat. Bison do require tall, strong fences to contain them, as they have retained their wild traits such as great amounts of strength, speed and athleticism. These fences are important for both human and animal safety. As long as the bison are kept content and comfortable, with plenty of pasture and water available, they will not challenge the fences.

Bison can live on marginal lands with lower quality grasses than cattle can, so specialty blends of grasses are not needed. This is due to the fact bison evolved on the grasslands of North America. A bison cow and her calf will require between 4 and 16 hectares of pasture land

to meet their grazing needs. The amount needed fluctuates with weather and range conditions.

Handling practices are kept to a minimum with the animals usually only being handled for practices such as calving, weaning, vaccinating, tagging and de worming as needed. This amounts to once or twice a year at most.

Due to the bison's size and wild instincts, learning how to care for and handle them properly is very important before starting a bison ranch. Bison farmers care for their animals in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Recommended Code of Practice, which has been developed by farmers, government, animal protection groups, researchers and processors. Copies may be found at [www.livestockwelfare.com](http://www.livestockwelfare.com).



## **Nutrition: What do Bison Eat?**

Bison are ruminants, similar to cattle, sheep and goats. This means they eat plant matter, and digest it in a series of four stomach compartments. When a bison eats, it chews and swallows and the feed enters the first stomach compartment, the rumen, where it is mixed with fluids containing bacteria and other microorganisms to help break down the cellulose fibres. The bison will then “chew its cud”: regurgitate the food and re-chew it into smaller particles. The chewed cud is swallowed again and eventually passes into the second stomach compartment, the reticulum, for further processing. Then it is on to the third stomach compartment, the omasum, which removes a lot of the moisture from the mixture. The fourth stomach compartment is the abomasum, which, like the human stomach, is very acidic for the digestion of proteins. Because bison have a slow digestive system, grass stays in their stomach longer than it does in cattle’s stomachs. The extra time the

feed spends in the stomach enables the bison to extract the maximum nutrients.

Bison eat grass and plants during the summer, and hay and sometimes grain during the winter months when grass is scarce. Bison do well on the perennial grasses which grow in the agricultural regions of Canada, so specialty blends of grasses are not needed on their pastures. In this way, bison farming is helping preserve Canada’s natural grasslands. During winter months when grazing is scarce, bison require supplemental feed. This will consist mainly of hay, and some grains. Because bison evolved on the plains of North America, they have unique characteristics which help them through winters. During the cold winter months, bison can slow their metabolism to reduce energy needs. Water is necessary for bison, but during the winter, bison obtain the water they require from snow, so a heated trough is not necessary.

## **About the Life Cycle of Bison**

Cows (female bison) are bred by natural mating to a bull (male bison) at approximately two years and three months. Bison have a nine month gestation (length of pregnancy), and have their first calf at three years old. Bison cows are bred during the late spring or summer months, and calves are born the following spring, though cows can potentially breed at any time during the year. As with cattle, multiple births are possible, but are very rare.

Cows give birth to calves once every three years, and do not require assistance at calving. The cow will then care for the calf for the first three years of its life. Cows begin calving at three years old and bulls are active breeders at four years old, although bison do not finish

growing until they reach eight years old. Cows can reproduce well into their 20s, and adult bison can live approximately 25 to 30 years. A mature cow weighs between 1000 and 1200 pounds and a mature bull weighs between 1500 and 2000 pounds. Calves are between 40 and 50 pounds at birth.

Calves have yellowish-reddish fur at birth. As they grow and age, the coat will turn into a reddish-brown colour, and they will grow a shaggy mane of hair over their front quarters and head. All adult bison, male and female, have horns. Unlike deer and elk, bison will only grow one set of horns in their lifetime.

## Breeds

There are two breeds of bison farmed in Canada, the Plains Bison and the Wood Bison. Plains Bison live in the grasslands, while Wood Bison live in the northern regions.

The Plains Bison are a lighter brown than the Wood Bison, and have a stocky build. The Wood Bison has a taller, longer-legged and less stocky build. The Plains Bison, although appearing to be the heavier of the two breeds, is actually lighter than the Wood Bison.

Sketches of the two breeds, along with more information about wild bison, is available at Hinterland Who's Who ([www.hww.ca](http://www.hww.ca)).

## Off to Market

Bison are taken to market at less than 30 months of age for the meat market. Some provinces require completion of a transport manifest before bison can be moved off of the owner's property. In addition, all bison born since 2006 must have a species-specific radio frequency identification (RFID) tag. Bison born prior to that must have a CFIA-approved tag. The RFID tags allow tracking from the farm to the table.

## BISON TRIVIA

- Cows can reproduce well into their 20s
- Adult bison can live approximately 25 to 30 years of age
- Bison were an endangered species before farmers, ranchers and conservationists began breeding them
- Bison are native to the North American grasslands and Arctic regions
- Bison are raised for their meat, horns and hides
- Native Americans have a use for every part of the bison so there is no waste
- Bison are very athletic, although their size makes them appear slow
- The bison cow's instincts to protect her calf and her herd are strong enough to keep away predators and rustlers
- Bison can reach a top speed of 30 mph (48kmph) in just a few strides
- Bison grunt and roar to communicate
- Bison meat is gaining popularity because it is low fat, low calorie and low cholesterol
- Bison farming preserves natural grasslands
- Bison can distinguish smells from 3km away
- Bison move into storm winds, rather than with them, as a survival tactic

## Bison Dictionary

Here are some terms that will come in handy on a bison farm

- **Bull:** a male bison
- **Calf:** a newborn bison
- **Calving:** the process that occurs when a cow gives birth to a calf
- **Cow:** a female bison that has had a calf
- **Hectare:** 100m x 100m, or 2.5 acres. One hectare is about the size of two soccer fields
- **Herd:** a group of bison raised by a bison farmer
- **Hide:** the cured skin of an animal
- **Plains Bison:** the breed of bison native to North American grasslands and the most commonly-farmed bison
- **Range:** vast, natural expanses of land, in this case in the form of grasslands and tundra
- **Ruminant:** an animal with four stomach compartments that chews its cud. Includes bison, cattle, sheep, goats and deer
- **Tagging:** the act of putting a radio frequency identification tag in a bison's ear for tracking purposes
- **Tanning:** the process of curing an animal hide for use as leather
- **Vaccinating:** the process where the bison farmer needles bison to prevent disease
- **Weaning:** the process of separating a cow from the calf
- **Wood Bison:** the breed of bison native to Canada's Arctic
- **Yearling:** a one year old bison

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## Bison: The Product

Today, bison are raised for their meat, horns, hides and as breeding stock. If buffalo milk is referred to, it is not from the North American buffalo or bison, but rather from water buffalo.

Bison meat is gaining in popularity because of its health and environmental benefits. The meat is low fat, low calorie and low cholesterol compared to other red meats. Canadian bison meat is sold across Canada and some is exported to the EU. Bison meat is described as being similar to a fine beef, with a slightly sweeter and richer taste.

Bison horns are used for buttons and for costume jewelry, and skulls are used for decorative purposes.



Bison hair is produced into sweaters, coats and robes. Bison hides are tanned and manufactured into leather used for furniture, hats, coats, vests, handbags, shoes and boots.

Canadian bison farmers sell some animals as breeding stock to introduce a new strain of genetics to another breeder's herd, or to help a new breeder establish a herd. Canadian producers sell breeding stock to the USA, and at times to the EU.

## History of Bison

The bison dominated North America between the last ice age and the settlement of Europeans. Native Americans used every part of the bison for anything ranging from food to shelter to clothing. However, as North America became more settled, the bison lost large areas of homeland. They were also hunted for commercial hides during the 1800s. Between 1800 and 1899, bison numbers dropped from an estimated 60 million to an endangered 1000 or less.

With small herds being kept by conservationists at national parks and by ranchers on their land, bison numbers slowly began to grow again. In the 1990s, the industry began to grow more quickly due to the increasing popularity of bison meat.

Today there are over 500 000 bison in Canada.

### About Bison: Additional website links

Canadian Bison Association

Visit: [www.canadianbison.ca/producer/index.htm](http://www.canadianbison.ca/producer/index.htm)

BC Bison Association

Visit: [www.bcbuffalo.ca](http://www.bcbuffalo.ca)

Bison Producers of Alberta

Visit: [www.bisoncentre.com](http://www.bisoncentre.com)

Saskatchewan Bison Association

Email: [saskbison@sasktel.net](mailto:saskbison@sasktel.net)

Manitoba Bison Association

Visit: [www.manitobabison.ca](http://www.manitobabison.ca)

Ontario Bison Association

Visit: [www.canadianbison.ca/producer/The\\_CBA/OntarioBisonAssociation.htm](http://www.canadianbison.ca/producer/The_CBA/OntarioBisonAssociation.htm)

Union québécoise du bison

<http://www.bisonquebec.com>

A logo for the 'Bison Fact Sheet' featuring a stylized green leaf and a blue checkmark. The text 'Bison' is in green and 'FACT SHEET' is in blue.

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