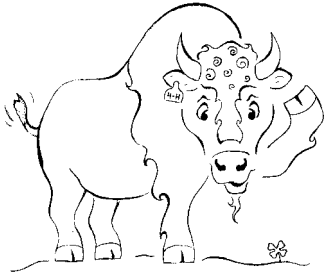


Bison History



Roll Call:

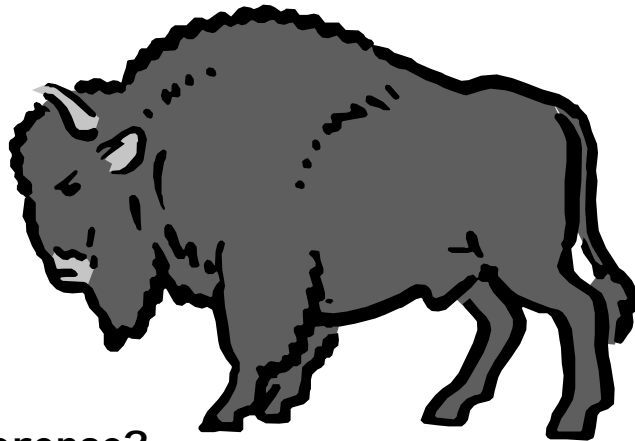
List one thing that you have been told about bison history.

Bison or Buffalo?

There is a little confusion when it comes to what we should call the North American Bison, or is it North American Buffalo?

Although the two names are now used interchangeably, bison is the correct name. When the first settlers arrived in North America they saw vast herds of bison roaming the country. Because of their similar appearance to the buffalo of Africa, Asia and India our North American Bison became nicknamed as a buffalo.

The two kinds that were found in North America were the *bos bison*, or the plains bison, and the *bos bison athabasca*, or the Wood bison.



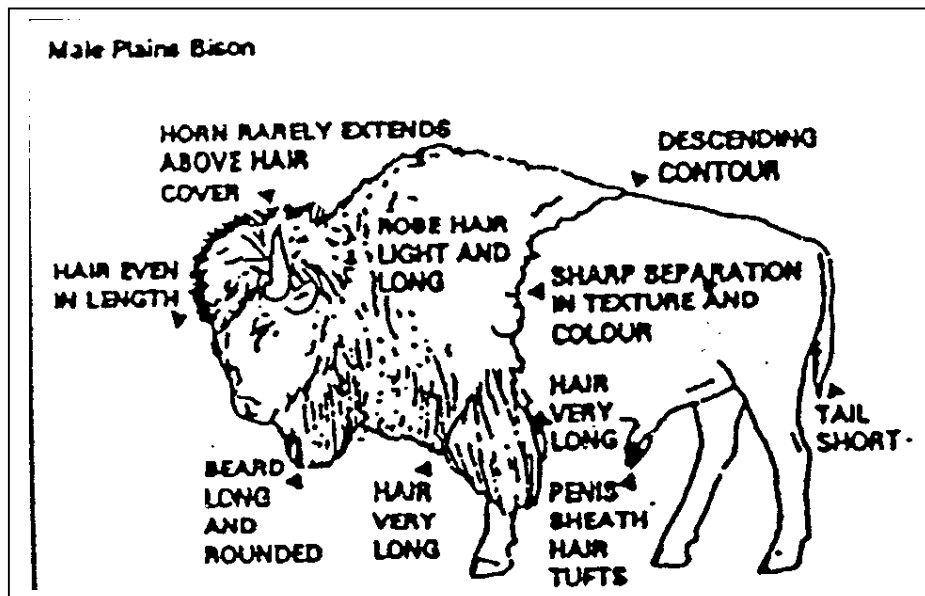
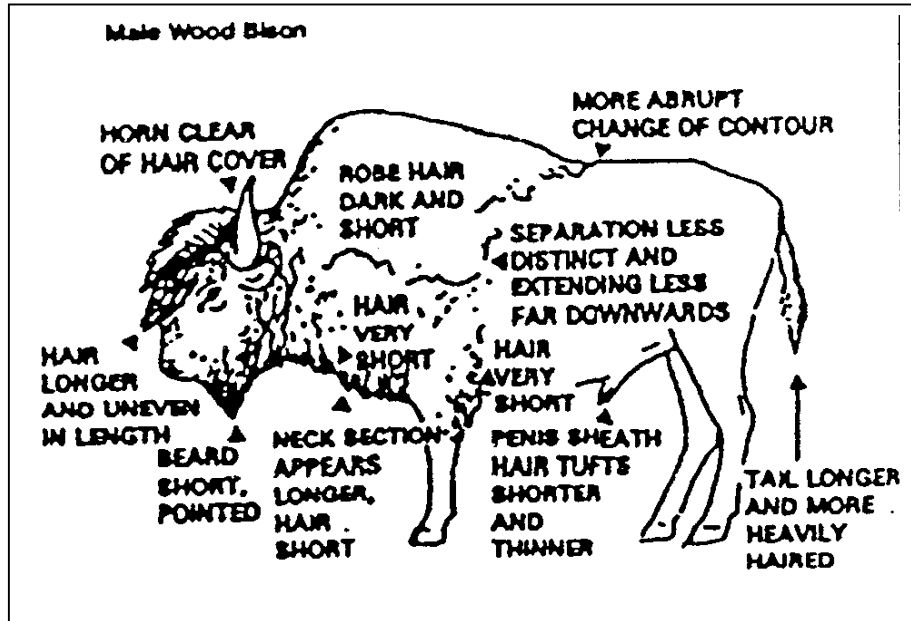
What is the difference?

The main difference between the two subspecies of bison is the overall body size. The frame of the wood bison is larger than the frame of the Plains Bison. The wood bison generally have longer appendages and horns, wider hooves, and a denser and darker hair coat. The two subspecies can interbreed and produce viable fertile young.

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Find a color picture of each and paste it over the description provided in the space below.



If only bison could talk

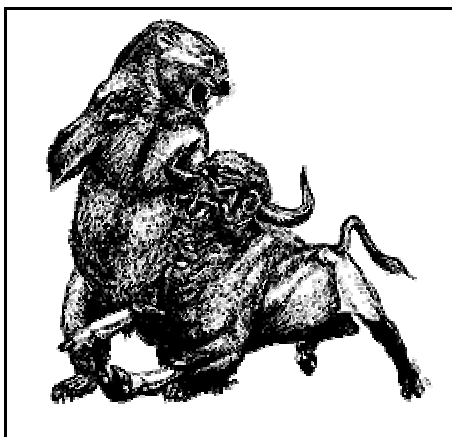
If only bison could talk they could tell us great stories about how their ancestors survived the attacks of Saber-tooth cats and Short-faced bears, how they dominated the American landscape and how humankind almost caused their extinction. If we could only step into a time capsule and go back in time, what do you think we would see?

At the time of the Ice Age massive sheets of ice covered a large percentage of the Earth's water causing a drop in the sea level. A large wide spread passage from Siberia to Alaska allowed the movement of a large number of animals, and even people from one continent to another! This huge wet plain is what brought animals such as the bison, mammoth, mastodon, camel, deer and horse to the Americas.

The animals looked quite different from today's North American animals! The following picture is artist L.A. Ramsey's interpretation of some Pleistocene mammals on the shore of a North American lake.

What about predators?

There certainly were predators! The giant Short-faced bear and the Saber-toothed cat followed the herds of other animals.



Ink sketch by Bonnie Dalzell.

All available information suggests that the short-faced bear was the largest and most aggressive carnivore. This massive bear could not be matched in speed, strength or ability.

The largest bears were nearly 1.5 meters high when walking normally, and if they stood up on their hunches they could reach more than 4.3 meters.

That is about 1.2 meters above a standard basketball hoop!

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This diagram shows the size relation between the modern grizzly and the short-faced bear. The short-faced bear was thought to be approximately 700 kg. The largest polar bear recorded in Canada, weighed 660 kg.

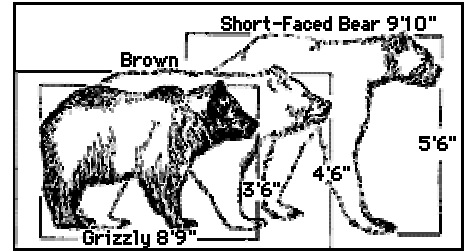
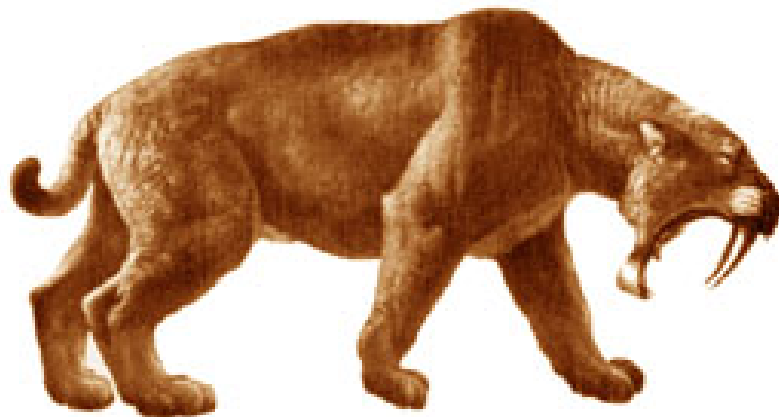


Figure 2: Relative size comparisons of grizzly, brown, and giant short-faced bears. Illustration by Ruth Ann Border, 1988.

The Saber-toothed cat was about the same size as the modern African lion. Bison and horses are believed to be the main prey for this cat. The Saber-tooth cat, also sometimes called the Saber-toothed tiger, became extinct about 11,000 years ago.

Paleontologists have reconstructed the skeleton of the Saber-toothed cat. Using this reconstruction they have determined that the cat likely hunted by ambush rather than speed. It would appear that the cat used the long canines to bite open the soft belly of its prey, and hunted in packs similar to how the modern day wolves will hunt the bison herds.



Who am I?

Identify the following animals by filling in the blank.

1. Plains Bison
2. Wood Bison
3. Saber-toothed cat
4. Short-faced bear
5. Horse



_____ I am larger than my subspecies relative. I have longer legs and longer horns. My coat is thick and dense.

_____ My long canine teeth allowed me to penetrate the soft stomach area of my prey.

_____ I also traveled across the vast land bridge to come to America, and my ancestors have also contributed a lot to the progress of humankind.

_____ I am the most common of my modern day species. I am slightly smaller than my subspecies, but I didn't need to browse on brush and trees.

_____ I was the most predominant predator of my day. I stood high above my modern day relatives, and my speed and agility made me a powerful animal.

Jump to the 1800's

The bison thrived in North America. By the mid 1800's there was believed to be approximately 50 – 60 million bison roaming the continent from Alaska to Mexico.

One observer made the following statement:

“Of all the quadrupeds that lived upon this earth, probably no other species has marshaled such innumerable hosts as those of the North American bison. It would have been as easy to count or evaluate the number of leaves in a forest as to calculate the number of bison living at any one given time during the history of the species prior to 1870.” William T. Hornaday

North American native people

The aboriginal people used the products from the bison for food, clothing, shelter, tools and toys. The following is a long list of things that the North American native people made from parts of the bison.

Rawhide

Containers, shields, buckets, moccasin soles, drums, splints, mortars, cinches, ropes, sheaths, saddles, blankets, stirrups, bull boats, masks, ornaments, lariats, straps, caps, quirts, snowshoes, shrouds.

Horns

Arrow points, cups, fire carriers, powder horn, spoons, ladles, headdresses, signals, toys, medication

Beard

Ornamentations, dolls, mittens

Teeth

Ornamentation

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Buckskin

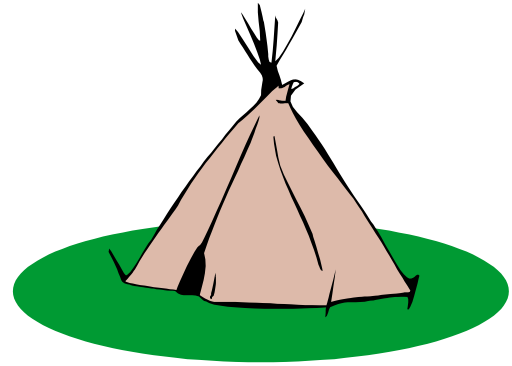
Cradles, moccasin tops, winter robes, bedding, shirts, belts, leggings, dresses, bags, quivers, tipi covers, tipi liners, bridles, backrests, tapestries, sweat lodge, covers.

Hair

Headdresses, pad fillers, pillows, ropes, ornaments, hair pieces, halters, bracelets, medicine balls, moccasin lining, doll stuffing.

Bones

Fleshing tools, pipes, knives, arrowheads, shovels, splints, sleds, saddletrees, war clubs, scrapers, quirts, awls, paintbrushes, game dice, and tableware.



Blood

Soups, puddings, paints.

Meat

Immediate use, sausages, cached meat, jerky (dehydrated), pemmican (processed).

Liver

Tanning agents.

Stomach contents

Medicines, paints.

Stomach liner

Water containers, cooking vessels, sausage.

Paunch liner

Wrapping (meat), buckets, collapsible cups, basins, canteens.



Scrotum

Rattles, containers.

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Skull

Sun Dance, medicines, prayers, and other rituals.

Tongue

Meat of choice, comb.

Bladder

Pouches, Medicine bags.

Tendons

Sinews, sewing, bowstrings.

Fat

Tallow, soaps, hair grease, cosmetic aids.

Tail

Medicine, switch, fly brush, decorations, whips.

Gall bladder

Yellow paints.

Hind legs skin

Pre-shaped moccasin.

Hoof, Feet, and Dewclaws

Glue, rattles, spoons.

Brains

Hide preparation, food.

Muscles

Glue preparation, bows, thread, arrow-ties, cinches.

Chips (bison waste)

Fuel, diaper powder, toys, jewelry.



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WOW!! Now we can better understand why our first nation people were so dependent on the survival of the bison.

“For centuries aborigines of the plains utilized the meat and hides of the buffalo without making the slightest impression on their fabulous numbers. This was left for the white man to accomplish. Peak of the slaughter was reached sometime after the middle of the past century – a crescendo of such sadistic butchery of a big game animal as the world has ever known. Millions were wiped out in a few decades.” J. Dewey Soper

Can you think of any other items that could be made or used from parts of the bison?

Time capsule

Here is a really fun way to recreate the past. Create your own diorama using a shoebox. Dioramas are a three dimensional picture. Use your imagination! How do you think the landscape looked? What animals were there?



Materials:

Modeling Clay (or some other dough form)

Shoebox Tempera paint

Paintbrushes Cotton balls

Glue Your imagination!

Paint the background in the shoebox. This could be a blue sky, brown for the ground etc. Basically imagine the scene in your head and go from there. Bring your diorama to the meeting and see what the other members imagined our country to look like at that period of time.

Now that's history!

What a fascinating history these majestic animals have seen, and we are only part way through it!! In the next level we will discover why the bison is not still roaming free all across the provinces.

“We all see that the day is coming when the buffalo will all be killed and we shall have nothing more to live on and then you will come into our camp and see the poor Blackfoot starving. I know that the heart of the white soldier will be sorry for us and they will tell the Great Mother who will not let her children starve. We are getting shut in; the Crees are coming into our country from the north and the Whites from the south and east and they will all destroy our means of living; but still, although we plainly see these days coming, we will not join the Sioux against the whites but will depend upon you (the Mounted Police) to help us.” Chief Crowfoot