



Wood Bison

(Bison bison athabascaae)

The wood bison is the largest native extant terrestrial mammal in North America. Average weight of mature bulls is about one ton (2,000 pounds). They have a large triangular head, a thin beard and rudimentary throat mane, their horns usually extend above the hair on their head, and the highest point of their hump is forward of their front legs. These physical characteristics distinguish them from the plains bison which is the subspecies that roamed the vast prairies of the continental United States.

Status

Wood bison became listed in the United States under the 1969 Endangered Species Conservation Act when it was included on the first List of Endangered Foreign Fish and Wildlife, which was published in 1970. In 1974, the wood bison appeared on the first list under the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA), based on their inclusion on the original 1969 list. They were classified as endangered and retained that classification until May 3, 2012 (Federal Register, vol. 77, p.26191), when they were reclassified as threatened under the ESA based on the success of recovery efforts.

Range and Population Size

Historically, the range of the wood bison was generally north of that occupied by the plains bison and included most boreal regions of northern Alberta; northeastern British Columbia; a small portion of northwestern Saskatchewan; the western Northwest Territories; most of the Yukon Territory; and much of interior Alaska. During the early 1800s, wood bison numbers were estimated at 168,000 in Canada, but by the late 1800s, the subspecies was nearly eliminated with only a few hundred remaining.

Doug Lindstrand





Wood bison cow and calf at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. Doug Lindstrand

Range and Population Size Cont.

Because of conservation efforts described below, there are currently seven disease-free herds in Canada, with a total of about 4,400 animals. No wood bison occur in the wild in Alaska at present. The date of extirpation from Alaska is not known with certainty but occurred within the last few hundred years.

Threats

Overharvest and an overall loss of meadow habitat originally played roles in the species' demise. Although wood bison are hunted in Canada, hunting is strictly regulated and is not a threat to the species like it once was. Current threats occur from the presence of diseases, which were unintentionally introduced to wood bison in the early 1920s, and loss of habitat, primarily from agricultural activities, including the production of plains bison. The large-scale production of plains bison for human consumption removes habitat that could be occupied by wood bison and increases the potential for hybridization.

Management and Protection

Conservation efforts in Canada have successfully reestablished several herds that are flourishing. In 1978, there was one free-ranging, disease-free herd with 300 individuals, the Mackenzie herd in Canada. By 2000,

the number of disease-free herds in Canada had grown to 6, with a total of approximately 2,800 individuals. Since 2000, an additional herd has been established bringing the total number to seven, and the number of disease-free, free-ranging bison has increased to approximately 4,400. In addition there are approximately 4,500 free-ranging animals in Canada, in which a portion of the animals are infected with bovine tuberculosis, bovine brucellosis, or both. Management efforts are directed at preventing dispersal of the animals from the diseased herds to uninfected herds.

Captive herds of disease-free animals have been established in both Alaska and Russia. The captive herd in Alaska, which is being cared for at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC), may ultimately be released in the wild in one or more sites along the Yukon River. The non-profit AWCC has been caring for wood bison since 2003, when 13 animals were transferred there. In 2008, an additional 53 disease-free wood bison were imported to the facility from Canada. The AWCC has the expertise and facilities to maintain a healthy and expanding captive herd as they await release to the wild. Under their care the herd has grown to over 100 animals.

For years, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) has been working on a plan to reintroduce wood bison back to Alaska. The Service supports the ADF&G's efforts to release wood bison in Alaska, as one of the goals of the Canadian recovery plan is to establish additional disease-free, free-ranging herds to provide additional security to the long-term viability of the species. Additionally, the Service is working within the legal framework of the ESA to designate the new herd(s) as "nonessential experimental populations," which will allow for a wide range of management options, and provide assurances that the establishment of the wild herd(s) won't have any unintended consequences for landowners, industry, or Alaska Natives.

**For more information contact:
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1011 E Tudor Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99503**

Bruce Woods
bruce_woods@fws.gov
(907) 786-3695

Sonja Jahrsdoerfer
sonja_jahrsdoerfer@fws.gov
(907) 786-3323