



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Threatened and Endangered Species

Wood Bison

(Bison bison athabascae)

The wood bison (*Bison bison athabascae*) is the largest native land mammal in North America. 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 (*Bison bison bison*), which is the subspecies that occurs on the prairies of the continental United States.

Protected Status

The wood bison is listed as threatened under the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA). In Canada the wood bison is protected as threatened under the Species at Risk Act.

Range and Population Size

The wood bison is adapted to meadow and forest habitats in subarctic regions. Historically, its range 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 overhunting nearly eliminated the subspecies. By the late 1800s, only a few hundred remained in Canada. In Alaska, wood bison declined to low levels and were likely gone by the early 1900s. No wood bison occur in the wild in Alaska at present.

Threats

Overharvest and an overall loss of meadow habitat originally played roles in the wood bison's near-demise. Although wood bison are hunted in



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

Canada, hunting is strictly regulated and is not a threat to the species as it once was. The main threats are diseases of domestic cattle (bovine tuberculosis and bovine brucellosis), 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).

Current Population Status

Conservation efforts in Canada since the 1970s have successfully reestablished seven flourishing herds, and the number of disease-free, free-ranging wood bison has increased to approximately 4,400. In addition, there are approximately 4,500 free-ranging animals in Canada in herds where a portion of the animals are diseased. Management efforts are directed at preventing dispersal of animals from diseased herds to

uninfected herds. Captive herds of disease-free animals have been established in both Alaska and Russia.

Alaska's Captive Herd

The captive herd in Alaska is being cared for at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Portage. The nonprofit 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 a captive-bred population at Elk Island National Park, Alberta, 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 and remains disease-free.

Reintroduction in Alaska

For years, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) has been working on a plan to reintroduce wood bison back to Alaska. To support these efforts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is designating a Non-Essential Experimental Population (NEP) area under the ESA. The NEP area includes much of the wood bison's historical range in Alaska; however, not all of the area within the NEP is suitable habitat for wood bison. Any wood bison in this area will be considered part of the NEP.

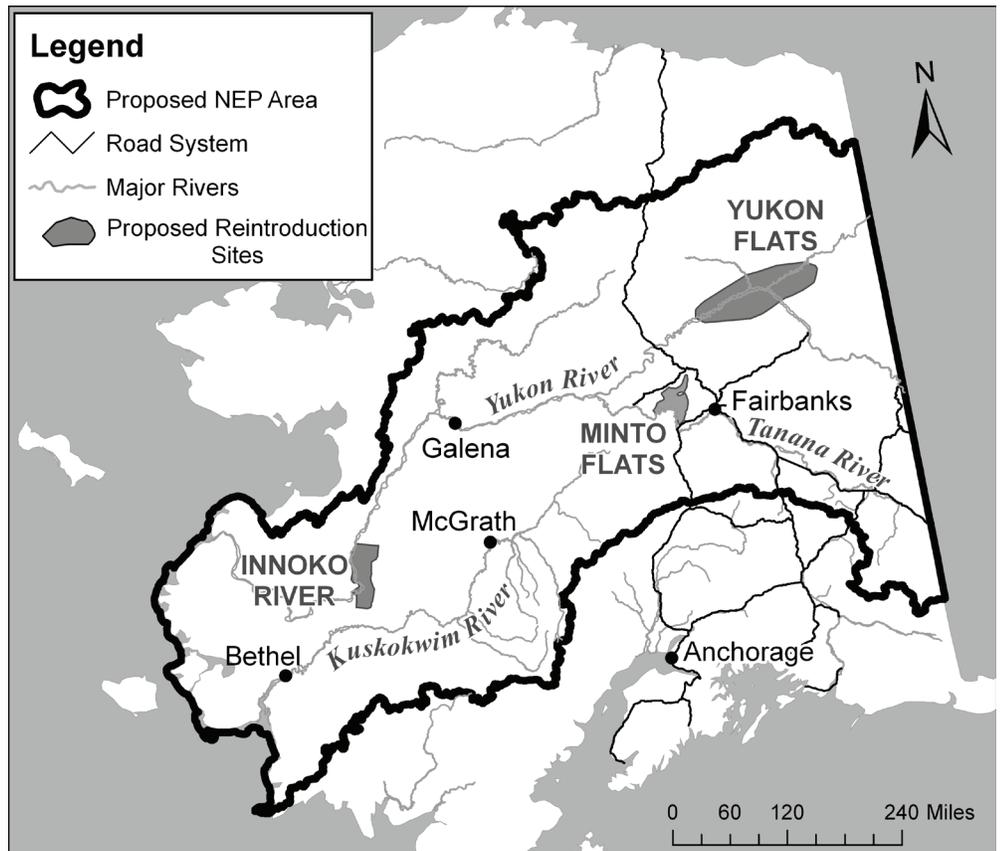
Within the NEP area, ADF&G proposes to reintroduce wood bison into one or more of three areas within their historical range: Yukon Flats, Minto Flats, and the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. The wood bison to be used in these reintroductions will come from the captive herd at the AWCC.

Management Authority for Wood Bison

ADF&G is the lead agency for this reintroduction, and will have primary responsibility for leading and implementing the wood bison restoration effort, managing wood bison populations, and setting and enforcing hunting regulations. The Service will retain responsibility for ensuring compliance with all provisions of the ESA. ADF&G will manage the reintroduced wood bison in the NEP area to maintain healthy populations with sustained yield, while preventing populations from becoming established outside the NEP area.

"Take" of Wood Bison

The definition of "Take" under the ESA is: *to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect or attempt to engage in any such conduct.*



Boundaries of the wood bison Non-Essential Experimental Population area, or NEP (black line), and location of the three sites for wood bison reintroduction in Alaska (gray areas within the NEP area).

ADF&G will establish appropriate hunting regulations for reintroduced wood bison populations, based on sustained yield principles. Hunting of wood bison in the NEP area will be allowed under the ESA, if they are taken in accordance with the applicable State fish and wildlife conservation laws and regulations.

If a wood bison in the NEP area is injured, killed, or harassed incidentally in the normal course of an otherwise lawful activity (not intentionally or negligently), it will not violate the ESA.

Monitoring and Reintroduction

ADF&G will monitor reintroduced wood bison herds through aerial surveys to document their productivity, survival, and population size. The Service, other Federal agencies, local or tribal governments, or contracted species experts may also participate in population monitoring and other management activities.

For more information contact:

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http://www.fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/endangered/species/wood_bison.htm

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