

THE NATIONAL BISON RANGE ~ From the Past, For the Future

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By signing the Act of May 23, 1908 to establish the National Bison Range in Montana, President Theodore Roosevelt laid a substantial cornerstone in the emerging edifice of wildlife conservation. Never before in the history of America had the U.S. Congress appropriated money to buy lands expressly to provide shelter and space for wildlife—a refuge constructed and operated to help bison recover from the debilitating slaughter of the previous 60 years.

Bison were an essential part of American Plains Indians' lives, providing food, clothing, shelter, utensils, weapons. The animals continue to be of important cultural and religious significance to a number of present-day tribes. Lewis and Clark were able to see bison herds large enough to cover the plains and valleys. Early settlers wrote in their journals about seeing herds of bison traveling pass for a whole day.

The American bison originally ranged from Great Slave Lake in Canada to Mexico, and from Nevada and Oregon to Tennessee and Pennsylvania. The great herds that wandered over the prairies prior to the 1800's contained perhaps 30 to 60 million animals. Pressures on bison started with competition for forage from horses, brought over in the 1500's by Spanish explorers. Further competition came in the form of cattle, which also brought transmissible diseases. The demand for bison robes and leather increased the hunting pressure by native Americans and fur trappers. The railroads paid professional hunters to provide meat to their workers. The 40-year period ending around 1880 marked the major slaughter of the animals. Millions of these great beasts were shot for meat (sometimes only the tongue), for hides, for "sport", for military reasons. Many carcasses were left to rot in the prairie sun. By 1883, they were close to extinction. At the start of 1900, there were less than 100 bison known to exist in the wild. The spectacle of bison covering the prairies was lost forever.

A half-century before U.S. law required a list of endangered and threatened species, the American bison became an icon for the crisis in conservation. Although we can not experience the endless bison herds seen before the turn of the century, we can still enjoy these magnificent creatures at places such as the National Bison Range. The history of the slaughter and the comeback is a story of sadness and triumph, of shame and courage. It is about the people who had the foresight to preserve these animals.

It was through the vision of far-sighted individuals that we still have bison today. Even at the turn of the century, there were people who felt that this magnificent animal was worth saving. Ranchers such as Charles Goodnight of Texas, James McKay of Winnipeg, Canada, Michel Pablo and Charles Allard of Montana, and CJ "Buffalo" Jones were just a handful of the ranchers who maintained a few small herds. Their motivation for

maintaining bison herds was a combination of respect and feeling for the great animals and part for the economic benefits. From these scattered bands, public herds, including the National Bison Range in western Montana, were started.

Bison herds in the Mission Valley dated back more than 20 years when Latatí, a Pend d'Oreille man of the Flathead Reservation, returned home from the plains with six bison calves. By 1884, his herd had grown to 13 animals, when Samuel Walking Coyote sold them to partners Michel Pablo and Charles Allard, both of Indian and European descent. They already herded cattle in the valley's open grasslands. Pablo and Allard bought additional bison from C. J. "Buffalo" Jones in 1893 (but sold them back to him in 1895, when he recovered from financial woes). The Pablo-Allard herd thrived and became one of the largest private bison herds in the country.

When Allard died suddenly in 1896, a division of the herd became necessary. Beginning in 1901, Allard's family began to sell their portion of the bison herd. Part was sold in that year by Mrs. Louise Allard to Charles and Alicia Conrad of Kalispell.

About 1907-08, the U.S. government was developing plans to begin the Indian allotment process on the Flathead Reservation as defined by the 1904 Flathead Allotment Act. It provided that once all eligible Indians had an allotment, reservation lands would be available for non-Indian settlement under public land laws, with persons selected by lottery in 1910. U.S. Senator Henry Dawes championed the Allotment Act of 1887, along with several organizations, like the Indian Rights Association. Despite tribal opposition, the 1904 Flathead Allotment Act passed with substantial support from western Montanans. The bill was pushed through Congress by Montana's U.S. Senator Joseph Dixon, also owner of the Missoulian newspaper.

William T. Hornaday, the President of the American Bison Society (founded in New York City in 1905, with President Roosevelt as Honorary President), assisted by many of its members, actively lobbied Congress to purchase suitable land while committing the American Bison Society to supply the pure-blooded bison to begin a new herd.

In 1908, Morton Elrod, Professor of Biology at the University of Montana, was commissioned by the American Bison Society to locate suitable bison range. He sought assistance from many knowledgeable people, including Michel Pablo, Joseph Allard (son of the deceased partner), and Duncan McDonald, of the Flathead Indian Reservation. On horseback, Elrod and McDonald rode many miles together exploring for a suitable site. Based on McDonald's statements to Elrod, the Indian community would support the Bison Society proposal to buy bison and place them on a Government Bison Range within their reservation. McDonald was explicit, "Every Indian will be glad if the Government can and will save them, and keep them where they can be seen."

Range land was purchased by the Government from five allotments and from the Flathead Nation in 1908, removing it from lands to be made available in 1910 to non-Indian settlers. Meanwhile, after the President signed the Bison Range Act, the American Bison Society began soliciting donations throughout the country to purchase bison. This effort predated radio broadcasts by which to seek donors and was heavily focused in the East. Hand-written letters, newspapers and group meetings served to send forth the messages of need. While a few wealthy donors came forward to support the effort, there were many small donations of \$1 to \$5, much of which were collected by women's groups. In all, people from 29 of 46 States then in the Union contributed \$10,560.50 during the one year effort; in 2007 dollars that equals \$245,474.80 based on Consumer Price Index adjustment.

Fences and loss of open grazing due to the Allotment Act meant Michel Pablo would have to sell his bison. Hornaday attempted to buy bison from Pablo, still corresponding as late as June of 1909 for possible delivery to the new range in October. Pablo and Hornaday did not make a deal nor could Pablo find another American buyer. He sold and delivered 700 bison to the Canadian government.

However, bison with Pablo-Allard genetic heritage were still available in Kalispell. By 1909 Charles Conrad had died, but his wife Alicia had become a staunch supporter of the bison cause. She agreed to sell 34 bison to the American Bison Society and then donated a bull and cow she described as her two finest animals. During the same time William Hornaday persuaded Charles Goodnight, the famous Texas rancher to donate two bison from his Texas panhandle bison herd. Goodnight's bison were shipped to Alicia Conrad where they were added to the herd (one of which died before reaching the new Refuge). From New Hampshire, Austin Corbin donated three more. Together, these were the animals that became the herd all National Bison Range visitors enjoy today. Only twelve new bison have been added since 1910.

As one of the three initial reserves set aside for the preservation of the American bison, this National Wildlife Refuge has played an important role in the great success story of recovery of the once endangered plains bison. Today the Bison Range herd is maintained between 350 and 500 animals and excess bison are sold or donated to provide a gene pool and breeding stock to start or augment other herds. Animals are also donated to tribal governments and the Inter Tribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC) to support bison restoration on Tribal lands. The National Bison Range herd shows high genetic diversity in relation to bison of the federal herds. The Range's herd will play an important role in the continued recovery of the species.

The stated mission of the National Bison Range in the original enabling legislation was "to provide a representative herd of bison, or buffalo, under reasonably natural conditions, to help ensure the preservation of the species for continued public benefit and enjoyment". To help round out the wildlife component, other large mammals were brought to the Refuge. Even before the final 3 bison from New Hampshire arrived in 1910, 4 white-tailed deer

donated by the City of Missoula arrived and were released into the hills. Antelope from Yellowstone National Park (with capture and shipping costs donated by the Boone and Crockett Club of New York) were released on the Range in December 1910. The first 7 elk, donated by the State of Wyoming, arrived at the Range in April 1911. Mule deer were brought to the Range from Yellowstone Park in 1918. Twelve Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, donated from Banff National Park in Canada, were released on the Range in 1922. The final large mammal component of the Range was released in 1964—Rocky Mountain goats. Each new species brought challenges and new requirements for their incorporation into the ecological complex of the Range. Progeny from these original Bison Range reintroductions have been captured and used to restore wildlife populations across Montana.

The wildlife roam an extensive native Palouse Prairie at the Bison Range, one of the largest remnants of this rare prairie, which once covered lands in Idaho and eastern Washington. Predominant grasses of the Palouse system are rough fescue, Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Other habitats at the refuge include montane forests of Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. Along the rivers and creeks grow cottonwoods and Rocky Mountain juniper. The diverse habitats and ecosystems represented on the National Bison Range provide for a wide diversity of wildlife species which share the Refuge with bison. The refuge was also designated a bird reserve in 1921.

Today, the Refuge and its ecosystems are intact but fresh studies and adjustments are often necessary and desirable. The Range animal and plant complex is the result of dedicated Service employees, volunteers and partners seeking ways to overcome difficulty and achieve desired outcomes. The National Bison Range represents a full Century of successful development and application of important land and habitat management practices for large mammals within a dynamic, enclosed system. It is a National Treasure, a gift from the past for future generations.

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**100 Years
1908-2008**

**National Bison Range
Moiese, Montana 59824
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