

Name _____ Date _____

AMERICAN BISON

Commonly called “buffalo”, the American bison is actually not a true buffalo, which is found in Africa. Nor are bison closely related to the domestic water buffalo of Asia.

The American bison can grow up to six feet high, and can weigh over two-thousand pounds. Both sexes have horns, and grow heavy fur on their heads and forequarters in the winter. Although bison have poor eyesight, they make up for this with sharp senses of hearing and smell.

American bison live in herds of above fifty, made up of females, their young, and young males animals. Adult males, called bulls, live alone or in small groups most of the year. During mating season, which is July through September, the males come together with the herd. The bulls will stamp the ground and bellow to warn rival bulls to stay away. If a rival approaches, the bulls will charge each other, hitting their heads together until one is considered the winner, who receives the mating rights to the female.

When a herd is attacked by wolves or coyotes, the females surround their young, and the bulls surround the females, horns facing out to protect the herd. Wolves and coyotes are no match for a healthy herd of bison!

American bison live on the open prairies of western Canada and the United States. In the U.S., the bison are primarily found in wildlife preserves and parks. The only original, continuous bison habitat is Yellowstone National Park. Bison were reintroduced to the other areas where they now live.

Bison feed on grasses and other vegetation. A bison herd will forage two miles a day searching for food. Like a cow, a bison will regurgitate its food and rechew it. This is called “chewing cud”. Bison herds migrate south in the fall, and return back north in the spring, though in a much more limited range than in the past.

In the 18th century, there were millions of bison, ranging over a third of the North American continent. The Plains tribes hunted the bison, following the migration north to south each year. These tribes used every part of the bison. Meat was eaten fresh, or mixed with berries and melted fat, then dried to make “wasna”, which was like jerky. Wasna could be easily carried on trips, and eaten raw or softened by cooking. The hide was used for clothing, shoes, blankets, tepees, and travois (a dog- or horse-pulled conveyance to transport goods and children). Sinews were used in sewing, with bone needles, or as bow strings. Scrapers, knives, and arrows were made from bone. Horns became scoops. Even the stomach was used, as a cooking bowl or bag!

Name _____ Date _____

Within a few hundred years of the arrival of the European settlers, the American bison was near extinction. Bison were shot by the thousands, many times for sport, including from train windows, and the carcasses were left where they fell.

Today there are approximately 50,000 bison in wild herds. Bison are also being raised on ranches for meat, as well as crossed with domestic cattle, producing “beefalo.”

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ABOUT BISON

- 1) Where do American bison live? _____

- 2) During most of the year, what animals make up a bison herd? _____

- 3) What were some of the uses the Plains tribes had for bison? _____

- 4) What is the only original continuous bison range today? _____

- 5) What is “chewing cud?” _____

- 6) How does a herd defend itself from predators? _____

- 7) Why are there so few bison today? _____

- 8) What is a “beefalo?” _____

- 9) Describe the migration pattern of the American bison. _____

Name _____ Date _____

BISON- ANSWERS

1. American bison live on the open prairies of western Canada and the United States.
2. During most of the year, American bison live in herds of above fifty, made up of females, their young, and young males animals.
3. Many uses: meat was eaten fresh or dried; hide was used for clothing, shoes, blankets, tepees, and travois; sinews were used in sewing, or as bow strings; bone was used to make scrapers, knives, and arrows; horns became scoops and needles; the stomach was used as a cooking bowl or bag.
4. The only original, continuous bison habitat is Yellowstone National Park.
5. To chew cud is to regurgitate food and rechew it.
6. To protect the herd, the females surround their young, and the bulls surround the females, horns facing out.
7. Bison were shot by the thousands, many times for sport, including from train windows.
8. Beefalo is a cross between a bison and a cow.
9. Bison herds migrate south in the fall, and return back north in the spring, though in a much more limited range than in the past.