

Weekly Zoo Article – July 18, 2008
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The month of July is known for many things: vacations, fireworks, cookouts, and hot weather. July is also National Bison Month, the month we recognize the largest living land mammal of North America.

National Bison Month was proposed in 1999 and initiated in 2000. It was created by the National Bison Association (NBA) as a way to increase public consumption of bison products. Cooking competitions and recipe compilations, all using bison products, occur throughout the month of July to help encourage people to “Think Bison”.

These amazing mammals used to roam freely throughout most of the United States. In the 1700s it was approximated that 60-70 million bison traveled in herds across the open fields and grasslands. The bison was an extremely important resource for the Native Americans, who used every part of the bison, including bones, eyes, hooves, and tongues. In the 1800’s, European settlers began to slaughter the bison as a way to control the Native Americans and to feed their rapidly expanding railroad crew. The bison also posed a problem by competing with domestic cattle for grazing pastures and occupying fields that the settlers wanted to use to grow crops. Sadly, hundreds of bison would be destroyed at one time with the carcasses left to rot in the fields where they fell. By 1889 less than 1,000 American Bison were left in the wild. Now these large mammals only exist in protected reserves and parks.

Despite the abuse of the bison in the past, Americans eventually wised up and started protecting the animals they once destroyed. Now the American Bison is no longer considered endangered and has a population of around 55,000 individuals, with the closest descendents of the wild populations living in herds in Yellowstone National Park.

The characteristics of these animals are astounding. Male bison can be 12 feet tall at the shoulders, 6 feet long from the head to tail, and weigh up to 2,200 pounds. Females are slightly smaller but similar in appearance. Some obvious features of the bison include very thick, shaggy fur and a large hump above the shoulders. The hump is actually a large group of muscle that is used to support the massive head. Both male and female bison have horns that curve upward and are very sharp. In the wild they can live to be 20-25 years old.

Bison have incredible smell, hearing, and vision. In fact, a bison can smell water from almost 5 miles away! I have difficulty smelling water when it is in a cup right in front of my face! And don't let their large size fool you into thinking that they are slow, lumbering beasts. Bison are actually very agile and can run up to 30-40 miles per hour. Some people may also be surprised to learn that it is actually an older female, not a male, which leads the herd. Herds usually consist of females and young, with older males only joining the group to breed. Females give birth to one young in the spring after carrying the baby for 285 days (about 9.5 months). The newborn itself can weigh 66 pounds at birth and is able to run with the herd after only three hours.

In Garden City, we are fortunate enough to be able to see these animals as often as we would like. The zoo has a pair of bison on display throughout the year. It is a great opportunity to view these majestic creatures up close, but also from behind the safety of a fence. Then there is the Sandsage Bison Range and Wildlife Area, managed by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks. Located just south of town off Hwy 83, you might even be lucky enough to glimpse the bison while driving in your car. The herd currently has access to the north pasture and is often visible from Sagebrush Road just south of the Arkansas River.

These large animals truly are an important part of American history. For Kansas, they deserve extra recognition because they are our state mammal. So during the month of July, I encourage you to stop and admire the beauty of these creatures or perhaps even try a bison recipe. But most importantly, I encourage you to “Think Bison”.

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