



Plains Bison

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# Sharing the Plains Bison's Home on the Range

Living in harmony with Canada's biggest land mammal



With its humped back and shaggy mane, the Plains Bison embodies the untamed romance of the Wild West. Wood Bison and Plains Bison are the largest land mammals in North America, the Plains Bison serving as an emblem of the Canadian prairie. But for farmers and ranchers living beside Prince Albert National Park in Saskatchewan, a bison can also mean three-quarters of a tonne of trouble.



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*"There's some who have woken up to 300 bison on a quarter-section of land," said Gord Vaadeland, owner of the Sturgeon River Ranch. "They get running and they get into a big herd and they damage things – damage to fences is most common. The cattle get out and it becomes an all-day event. Only to turn around and do it again tomorrow."*

Human co-existence with threatened species is possible, but the case of the Plains Bison poses unique challenges. That's why Parks Canada is working with landowners like Mr. Vaadeland and the Saskatchewan government on a plan to manage the bison as part of a project entitled "*Reconnecting Grasslands, Bison and People.*"

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## A history of near-extinction

The Plains Bison was designated as threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) in 2004. Yet their decline to near-extinction occurred more than a century earlier. Before European contact, millions of Plains Bison roamed the West, from the Canadian prairies to Mexico. But as settlement progressed through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hunters ruthlessly killed the bison, while farmers ploughed up their habitat.

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As the Plains Bison faced extinction, frontiersmen rounded up a few of the remaining wild animals to create private herds. In 1906, the Canadian government bought the largest such herd, and relocated it to Elk Island National Park in Alberta.

In 1969, 50 animals from the Elk Island herd were released in Saskatchewan's Thunder Hills. About a dozen of them wandered into Prince Albert National Park, where they survived, protected from hunting.

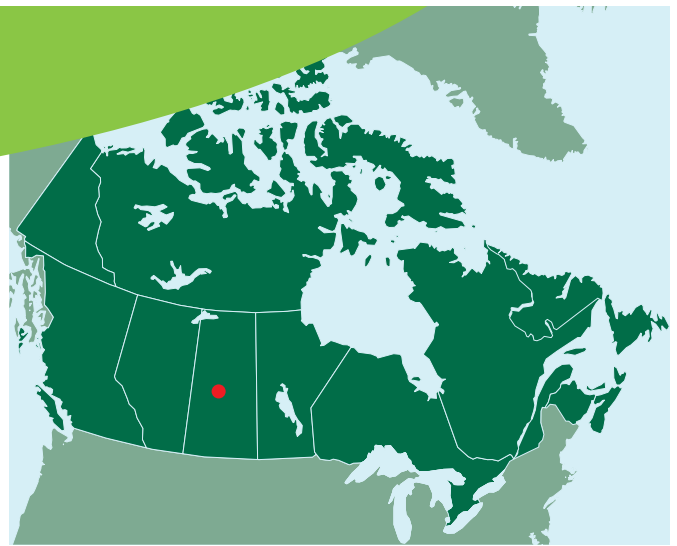
Now numbering in the hundreds, those bison roam an area that spans 700 km<sup>2</sup> in the park's southwest quadrant, and 50 km<sup>2</sup> of adjacent private land. They form the only free-ranging herd within the species' historic range in Canada. They are a unique, living link to the way the West once was.

## Stewardship in the face of hardship

In the 1990s, landowners like Mr. Vaadeland began to organize around the issue of bison wandering onto their lands and causing damage. In 2006, they incorporated as the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards. The stewards agree that the bison should roam free. But they also want landowner's concerns addressed.

To that end, Parks Canada is now working with the Saskatchewan Ministry of the Environment and the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards to develop a bison management plan. The planning kicked off with an international conference in June 2010, and then moved into public meetings. The management plan will seek to answer questions such as: What is the right size for the bison herd? How can damage be mitigated on private property? And how can bison be enticed to stay inside the park?

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Prince Albert National Park of Canada

In an effort to answer the final question, the park is undertaking a program of controlled burns to restore bison-friendly fescue meadows, which have become overgrown. It's hoped this restored habitat will entice the bison to expand their range within the park, rather than roaming outside its boundaries.



Bison Stewards

© Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards

## A shaggy-headed star attraction

If the Wild West could live again, surely the experience would include travelling along a narrow dirt trail, on foot or by horseback, and catching a glimpse of wild bison grazing on the plains. As ranchers like Mr. Vaadeland take advantage of the bison's presence to expand into adventure tourism, Parks Canada is doing its part to offer new visitor experiences. A parking lot that accommodates RVs and horse trailers was recently built in the southwest corner of the park. New trails for both hiking and horseback riding are being designed, allowing visitors to embark on short loops or multi-day, back-country camping trips in bison territory.

After a history of near-extermination, Plains Bison and people are learning to live together again in and around Prince Albert National Park.

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