

Wildlife Express

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Bison

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American Bison

The bison is not an animal many people associate with Idaho, but they once roamed throughout the state. They still may wander into eastern Idaho from Yellowstone National Park.

Bison are the largest land mammals in North America. Bison can grow to be as big as a small car! Males, called bulls, may weigh over 2,000 pounds; from the top of their shoulder to the ground, they are six to seven feet tall. Females, called cows, are smaller. They weigh about 1,000 pounds and are five to six feet tall at the shoulder. Other than size, it can be hard to tell bulls from cows. Both have horns, a beard and a large shoulder hump. The hump is full of muscles that help hold up the bison's large neck and head.

Don't let the massive size and clumsy look of bison fool you into thinking they are slow and awkward. Bison can run as fast as a horse, up to 35 miles per hour. They can jump a six-foot fence and leap over a stream seven feet wide. Bison may look like a tank, but they move like a race car.

Bison are social animals. They like to live in herds. A herd of bison is usually made up of cows and their young. Females usually do not leave their mother's herd. Young males may stay with the herd until they are about four years old; they then leave and live with other young bulls. During the winter, herds break into smaller groups of 10 to 20 animals. They come together to form larger herds in the spring and summer months.

Bulls join the cows in the summer when it is time to mate. Mating season is called the rut. Bulls challenge each other during the rut. They bellow and make sounds to show off for the cows and to tell other bulls to go away. They walk next to each other and strut around. This helps the bulls see who is bigger. They may charge toward each other. Physical fights don't always happen. When bulls do gore each other, bulls can be badly hurt.

Cows are pregnant for about nine months. They give birth to a reddish colored calf in April or May. Calves weigh about 50 pounds when they are born. They stand and start to drink milk right away. Calves begin to eat after about one month. They learn what is good to eat by watching the herd. In eight to 12 months, calves are weaned (stop drinking milk).

Bison are grazers, eating mostly grass. Bison have a great way to get grass in the winter—their huge heads! Bison swing their heads back and forth and shovel the snow out of the way.

Bison do some interesting things. One thing they do is wallow; they roll around in the dirt. Wallows may be eight to 10 feet across and one foot deep. Wallowing helps bison find relief from biting insects and itchy, shedding hair. Bison also do something called horning. They rub their heads, horns, necks and shoulders against smelly shrubs and trees, like pine saplings. People think the smell of the trees may help keep insects away.

Look for bison if you happen to be in Yellowstone Nation Park. These big, beautiful creatures are hard to miss.

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Bison or Buffalo?



Do you call this month's Wildlife Express animal a bison or a buffalo?

Do you use both names depending of your mood? People will argue and debate over which is the “proper” name. How did this animal end up with two names?

Early explorers and fur trappers were the first to use the buffalo name. When people see an animal they do not know, they may compare it to animals they do know. This is what happened with the bison. Explorers and trappers thought bison looked like oxen and the buffalo found in other places. French fur trappers called bison

“boeufs,” which means ox. Early settlers called them “bufello” because they were reminded of the water and Cape buffalo. The buffalo name became familiar and it stuck.

Bison are very different from buffalo. Bison have a large shoulder hump; buffalo do not have a hump. Bison have short horns; buffalo have long, sweeping horns. Bison are found in North America and Europe; buffalo are found in Asia and Africa.

Scientists believe that bison is the “proper” name, not buffalo. The name buffalo will probably never go away. Bison have been called buffalo for such a long time. Some dictionaries even mention bison and buffalo as synonyms. Which name do you think is correct?



Where the Bison Roamed

At one time, bison roamed across most of North America. People reported seeing brown bison as far as the eye could see. There were 30 to 60 million bison! Now they are only found in a few national parks and preserves. What happened to this brilliant beast? People.

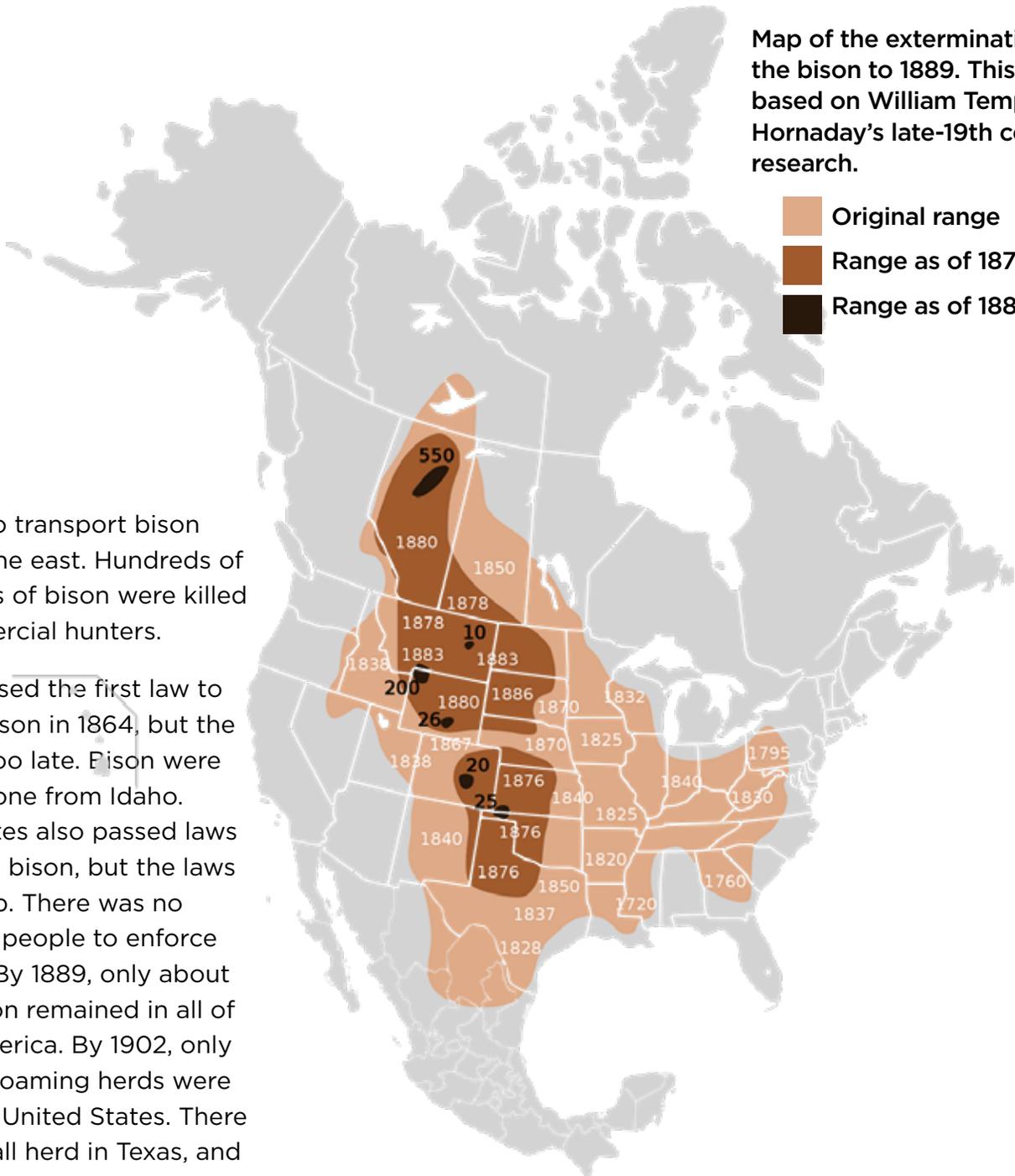
Early Native people needed bison to survive. They hunted individual bison and used bison jumps and bison pounds to hunt herds. Bison jumps were when hunters drove the bison over a cliff. With bison pounds, the bison were forced into a rock or log corral. Hundreds of bison were killed at one time. Many people came together to hunt and butcher the bison. Bison gave these early hunters everything they needed. Food, clothing, tools and shelters all

came from bison. When Native Americans got horses and guns, they became even better hunters.

Early explorers, trappers and settlers put more pressure on the bison. Bison were hunted for hides and meat. A drought made water difficult to find; settlers brought cattle and sheep that had diseases which infected bison. By the mid-1850s, bison robes were very popular and bison leather was used to make drive belts for machines. People saw the bison as a way to make money and become wealthy. Bison were being killed faster than bison were being born. Expansion of the railroads to the west made

Map of the extermination of the bison to 1889. This map based on William Temple Hornaday's late-19th century research.

- Original range
- Range as of 1870
- Range as of 1889



it easier to transport bison hides to the east. Hundreds of thousands of bison were killed by commercial hunters.

Idaho passed the first law to protect bison in 1864, but the law was too late. Bison were already gone from Idaho. Other states also passed laws to protect bison, but the laws didn't help. There was no money or people to enforce the laws. By 1889, only about 1,000 bison remained in all of North America. By 1902, only two free-roaming herds were left in the United States. There was a small herd in Texas, and Yellowstone National Park had a herd of 23 bison.

There were also some people that owned bison herds. Samuel Walking Coyote was a member of the Pend d'Oreille tribe. He captured a few orphaned bison calves and started a herd. He sold 10 to Michel Pablo and Charles Allard who started their own herd. The Pablo-Allard herd became the largest bison herd in the United States. At one time, they had 300 bison in their herd.

Bison from the Pablo-Allard herd were sent to other herds. They hoped that the bison would breed, and their numbers would go up. In 1902, about 20 bison were sent to Yellowstone National Park. In 1909, Congress created the National Bison Range and some were sent there to live. Canada got some to help the herds in the north.

Over time, bison herds grew. Bison were saved from extinction, but people will never again see the huge herds like there was in the past.

Keystone



Beneficial Bison

A Keystone Species

Bison are known as a keystone species of the plains and prairie habitats. That means bison are important. Take bison out of a habitat and the plants and animals that live there are all affected.

Bison help just by eating. When bison eat, they nip the plants back but don't stay long enough to trample the grass or compact the soil. Cutting the grass actually stimulates the plant to make more shoots. Shorter grass allows sunlight to hit the grass more evenly, so the grass gets the sunlight needed to grow faster. Bison even give the grass the fertilizer it needs. When bison poop and pee, they spread nutrients around to other areas. Even a dead bison gives nutrients back to the soil with its decomposing body.

Wallowing bison help change the habitat in a good way. The loose soil allows more and different types of plants to grow. Wallows also give water a place to collect. These watering holes attract thirsty animals and nesting birds. Upland sandpipers, grasshopper sparrows, and long-billed curlews are some of the birds that nest around wallows.

A grassland may look like an endless sea of one type of plant, but it is not. Many different grasses and plants make those waves of green. If you find more plants in an area, you usually find more animals too. In an ecosystem, we want to see many different species of plants and animals. This is called biodiversity. A healthy habitat or ecosystem will have a lot of biodiversity. Scientists have found more plants and animals living in areas where bison live. Bison play an important role in keeping plains and prairie habitats healthy.

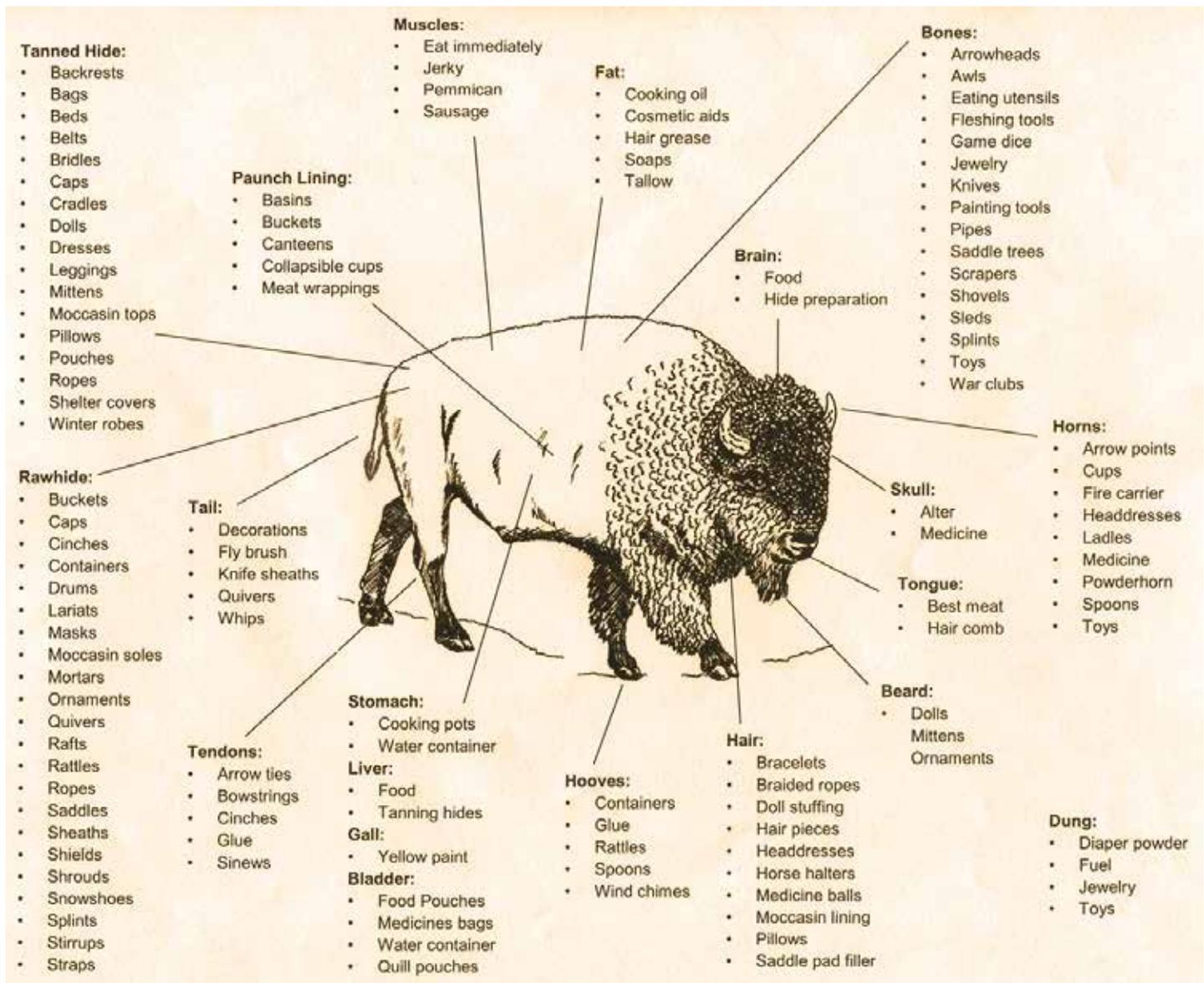
Bountiful Bison Gifts

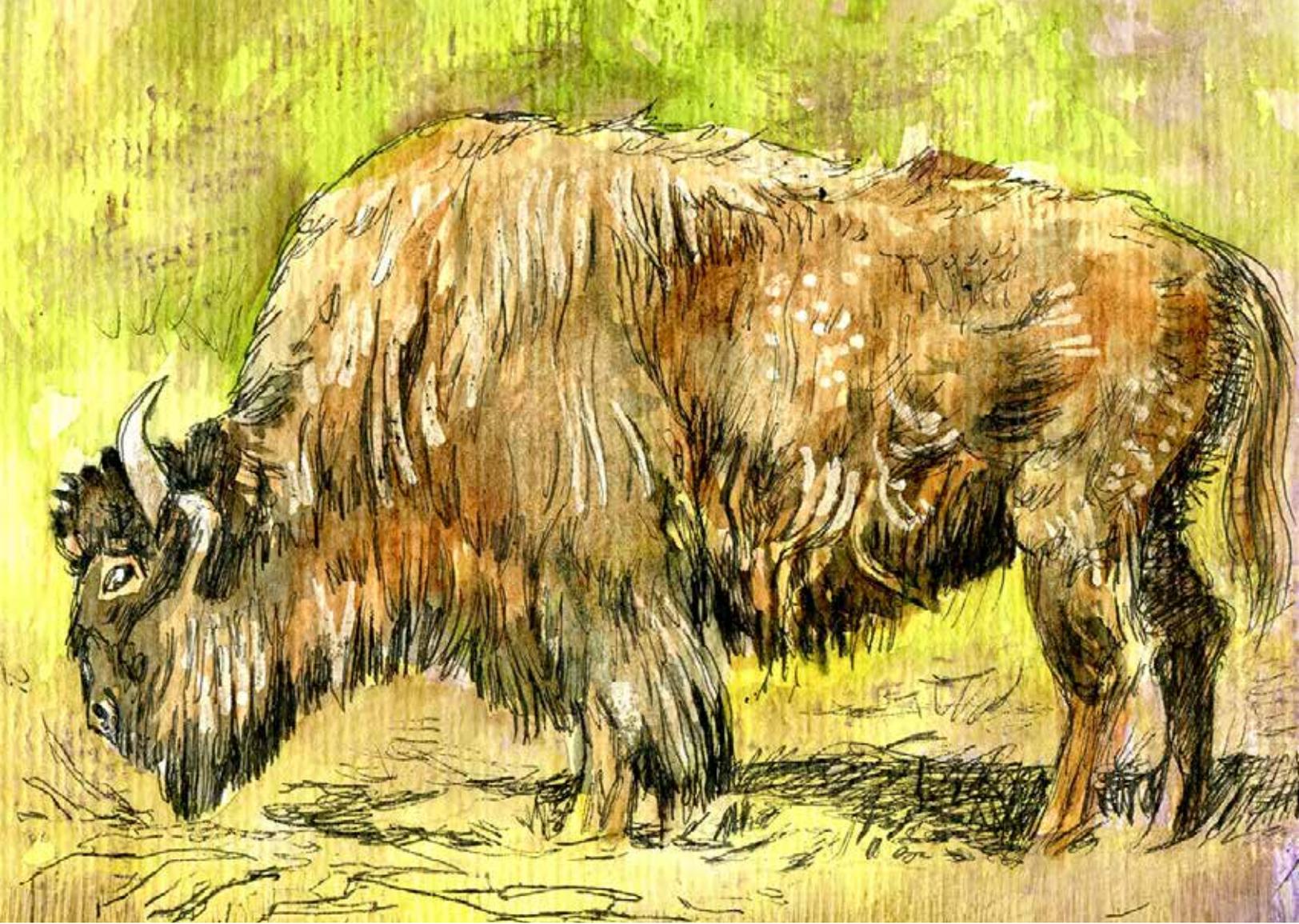
Animals have always been important to human survival. Animal meat has been used for food, and animal skins have been used for clothing. Native Americans, fur trappers and early pioneers had to depend upon wildlife and wild plants for much of their survival. Both in the past and today, animals' bodies supply people with what they need.

Bison were important to Native Americans. Some Native Americans believed that their ancestors came from bison. When a bison

was killed, it was treated with great respect. All parts of the bison were used. Nothing was wasted.

Native Americans used bison skins for clothing and shelter. They ate all the meat. Bison bones were used to make tools and weapons. The sheath on the horns made marvelous containers. Just about anything could be stored in a bison horn; food, gun powder, water and all sorts of supplies were stored and carried in them.





If you had been a Native American child, one of your favorite toys might have been a rattle. To make a rattle, you would need three things: an outside container, inside pieces to shake and something to sew everything together. A piece of rawhide, a stomach liner or a bladder will work nicely for the container.

Put pieces of bison hooves in the container, and sew the rattle together using sinew (SIN-yu). Sinew is tendon that holds the muscles to the bones. The bison also supplies the decoration for the rattle; red paint from blood and yellow paint from gall.

How does a drink of buffalo cider sound? Buffalo cider is the fluid in the bison's stomach. You may think that you would never drink

anything from a bison. What if you are traveling on a hot, dusty trail for days? Water is difficult to find. By great luck, you are able to find and kill a bison. Buffalo cider may be what keeps you from dying. It was an important source of liquid when water was difficult to find.



Even bison droppings were put to good use. 'Buffalo chips' were used as fuel on fires. They were also broken up into a dust and used as diaper powder to sooth baby bottoms!

Today, we may not have to depend upon wildlife for our survival, but many wild animals are still used to make clothing, cloth and jewelry.



Be Outside in Winter!

Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Winter is a wonderful time to explore the outdoors! A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.

Winter activities are many. Skiing and skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding and snowshoeing. Even if you do not have any equipment, you can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your gloves and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals. Take a walk in new snow to see what

animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, do some winter bird watching to look for bald eagles and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear nights can give you some great opportunities to see the stars.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snow pants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun and don't forget a hat and gloves. Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing. So, get into your winter clothes and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!



Bison Word Search

S H M V X Q Y C H Z J R O N B
 X Y P U K V X C U U W T N S B
 S E I C E P S E N O T S Y E K
 N W R S G G Z T E R U S D K H
 R O A O R I S Q H I S W W G U
 O C M A V E P U W A L L O W N
 H B Z L G I M T R H P V A L T
 E E I G J P B G F K U Z Y C E
 R H I D E S D R L C N D Q A D
 H B L A M M A M E I C O T L U
 S O D G E X O J H H G U S F L
 F J O R P B Z A F T R S D I M
 F R N V E Q U Z A S R H U Q B
 N G W Q E H Y L V L R N G L G
 G W J I R S Z C L T S A F D O

Words

- BIGGEST
- BISON
- BULL
- CALF
- COW
- FAST
- GRASS
- GRAZER
- HERBIVORE
- HERD
- HIDES
- HOOVES
- HORNS
- HUMP
- HUNTED
- KEYSTONE SPECIES
- MAMMAL
- RUT
- THICK HAIR
- WALLOW

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov

or

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