



Wood Bison News



Drawing by Wes Olson

Issue Number 4, Winter 2008-09

Wood Bison Imported From Canada!

Last June Alaska's wood bison restoration effort moved closer to the goal of reestablishing wild populations when 53 young wood bison were transported by truck from Elk Island National Park (EINP) near Edmonton over 2,000 miles and released at their temporary home at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC). This was the culmination of several months of planning and preparation involving various state, provincial and federal agencies and organizations in the U.S. and Canada.

The bison were separated from a herd of about 350 animals last January and held in a quarantine facility as we arranged to obtain the remaining import and export permits. Initially the plan had been to conduct the import in March, during cool weather conditions. However, the final import permit required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) could not be issued until early June. EINP staff was concerned about transporting the bison in hot summer weather, but fortunately it was cloudy and cool during most of the trip from Edmonton to Portage. Parks Canada staff separated the bison into groups of animals of similar size, and Pat Hoffman Trucking provided two trailers equipped with air shocks, which gave the bison



Wood bison from Elk Island National Park in Canada arrived at their temporary new home at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center on June 19, 2008.

a smooth ride, even over rough sections of the Alaska Highway. EINP Conservation Biologist Norm Cool and chief bison handler Archie Handel, as well as Bruce Chisholm with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency accompanied the two trucks on their non-stop, two day trip to AWCC. The bison traveled well, and were given water at Watson Lake and in Tok, where the volunteer fire department provided a pump truck to quickly fill the numerous water troughs.



Tok Fire Department volunteer Bryan Thompson helps Bruce Chisholm water the bison.

On arrival at AWCC Bob Gerlach, the Alaska State Veterinarian, and Mike Philo the USDA veterinarian for Alaska, checked the identification of each animal before the bison bounded quickly out of the trailers and into their new pasture. Unfortunately, one of the bulls was injured by another bison during the transport and died a few days after arrival. All things considered, the transport of wood bison from Canada to Alaska went very well and the 52 bison have settled in and are doing fine at their new home at AWCC.

The successful transport is an important milestone in the restoration effort, which had its beginnings in the early 1990s, when Athabaskan elders in the Fort Yukon area shared historical accounts describing how bison were an important resource for interior

Alaska Natives as recently as a few hundred years ago. It is not often that we have an opportunity to restore an indigenous species to large expanses of high quality habitat in its original range. There is a lot of work left to do, but we are now a big step closer to seeing wood bison, one Athabaskan name for which translates as "*big, hefty one on the land*," roaming free again in interior Alaska.

Inside this issue:

Results of Public Comment on the Environmental Review	2
Wood Bison Ceremony Held at AWCC	3
International Cooperation on Wood Bison	4
Safari Club Support	5
Endangered Species Act Update	6
First Alaska Wood Bison Round-Up	7



Wood bison bull in the transport trailer.

Public Comment Shows Strong Support for Wood Bison Restoration

by Randy Rogers, Wildlife Planner

In April 2007 the report "Wood Bison Restoration in Alaska: A Review of Environmental and Regulatory Issues and Proposed Decisions for Project Implementation" (Environmental Review or "ER") was released for public review and comment. A 12 page summary of the ER and a public comment response form were included in the spring 2007 issue of the Wood Bison News. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) accepted comments on the ER through September 30, 2007 and received nearly 100 written responses. In addition, the ER was discussed at several state fish and game advisory committee meetings and presentations to other organizations were provided on request. Over 90% of the comments on the ER expressed support for ADF&G's efforts to restore wood bison in Alaska.

In the Environmental Review ADF&G concluded that wood bison restoration in Alaska can be accomplished with minimal or no negative environmental impacts, and that wood bison restoration can enhance the diversity of Alaska's wildlife resources and could provide significant benefits to people. The three sites evaluated for possible wood

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bison restoration are the Yukon Flats, Minto Flats and the lower Innoko-Yukon River area. ADF&G concluded that all three sites are suitable for wood bison restoration. The Department proposed to proceed with efforts to restore wood bison in Alaska and initiate site-specific planning efforts for both the Yukon Flats and Minto Flats locations, while also increasing efforts to discuss possible wood bison restoration in the lower Innoko-Yukon River area.

Numerous comments indicated a belief that wood bison restoration is an important wildlife conservation initiative and that it will enhance Alaska's natural and cultural heritage and ecosystem biodiversity. Several international wildlife conservation organizations including Safari Club International, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and World Wildlife Fund endorsed wood bison restoration in

Alaska as a significant wildlife conservation initiative. The Alaska Outdoor Council stated "The concept of restoring wood bison to their former range is a conservation goal of the highest order in terms of ecosystem and human values."

Many people submitted comments emphasizing the importance of both local and non-local hunters having opportunities to share in future harvest of wood bison. Some comments opposed establishing a subsistence priority for use of wood bison. Several also acknowledged that local residents have some proprietary interest in the use of local resources, and that there does need to be mechanisms to ensure that local residents have adequate opportunities to harvest wood bison. Several comments from local residents highlighted the importance of having opportunities to benefit from the harvest of wood bison near local villages, and the need to protect wood bison from illegal harvest, especially while the herds are growing.

ADF&G remains committed to ensuring that the benefits of wood bison restoration are shared among local and non-local residents of Alaska and others. Future harvest management will be an important topic during site-specific planning efforts in which both local and non-local interests will be involved.

Several respondents agreed that predation should not be a significant threat to wood bison restoration in Alaska, while others expressed concern that wolf predation on wood bison could be significant and limit success of the restoration effort. Based on experience in Canada, ADF&G continues to believe that predator control is not likely to be required to ensure that wood bison restoration is successful.

Several comments addressed the status of wood bison under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Most of these comments emphasized the need for ADF&G to continue to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and others to ensure that any risk of wood bison restoration interfering with other resource development is minimized.

(Continued on page 3)





Wood bison cow and calf at AWCC.
Photo by Doug Lindstrand

(Continued from page 2)

Most comments received agreed with the ADF&G proposed action to start site-specific planning on both Yukon Flats and Minto Flats, and continue discussing possible wood bison restoration with residents of the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. There were a significant number of comments that recommended put-

ting wood bison on state lands at Minto Flats where implementation costs would be lower because of road access and which is largely under the control of state land managers and the Alaska Board of Game.

Based on public comment and other considerations, Minto Flats will be the first priority for wood bison planning and restoration.

Some of the reasons for restoring wood bison on the Minto Flats first include:

- ♦ The majority of lands in the Minto Flats area are within the Minto Flats State Game Refuge, which was established to ensure protection and enhancement of habitat, conservation of fish and wildlife, and continuation of hunting, fishing, trapping and other compatible uses.
- ♦ The Minto-Nenana, Tanana-Manley-Rampart and Fairbanks State Fish and Game Advisory Committees (AC) have all expressed support for

wood bison restoration on Minto Flats.

- ♦ Availability of road access to Minto Flats will help to reduce logistical complications and costs.
- ♦ Because there is little to no federal land in the Minto Flats area the Alaska Board of Game will have responsibility for decisions about subsistence use and future harvest allocation.

While the above factors are reasons to initially work towards establishing wood bison on Minto Flats, the size of the area limits the potential size of the herd to about 500 animals. Habitat assessments indicate that Yukon Flats can easily support a herd of 2,000 or more bison, and ADF&G remains committed to the objective of reestablishing one or more larger herds of wood bison to help maintain the genetic diversity of the subspecies and provide additional hunting and viewing opportunities.

The Yukon Flats and Grayling-Anvik-Shageluk-Holy Cross Advisory Committees have passed resolutions of support for wood bison restoration on the Yukon Flats and in the lower Innoko/Yukon River area. The Department hopes to proceed with wood bison restoration in one or both areas at the earliest opportunity.

Wood Bison Celebration Held at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center by Cathie Harms, Master of Ceremonies

On July 8 nearly 100 people attended a welcoming ceremony at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC) in Portage for the wood bison that arrived at the facility in late June. AWCC Board of Director's President Chris Von Imhoff and Executive Director Mike Miller welcomed representatives from conservation organizations, state and federal agencies, Native groups and the government of Canada. Mike noted that he is honored to have the opportunity to be involved in the effort to restore a species back to its former range in Alaska.

The ceremony was held in a field of lupine on a point of land overlooking

Turnigan Arm and the Chugach Mountains between two of AWCCs' wood bison pastures. Teck Cominco Alaska generously sponsored the event. Karl Hanne-man, the company's Manager for Public and Environmental Affairs noted how it is fitting that a company with mining interests in both Canada and Alaska would support the international wood bison restoration project.

ADF&G Commissioner Denby Lloyd called wood bison restoration in Alaska "one of the most significant conservation initiatives in decades," and thanked Elk Island National Park in Alberta for their support and cooperation.

Elk Island National Park Super-

intendent Marilyn Peckett highlighted the international cooperation involved. John Morrison of the Alaska chapter of Safari Club and Bill Moritz of the Safari Club International Foundation pledged continuing assistance for the project. Kaush Arha,

(Continued on page 5)



AWCC Executive Director Mike Miller speaking at the wood bison welcoming ceremony.

Elk Island National Park of Canada: A Proud Partner in Alaska' Wood Bison Restoration Project

By Marilyn Peckett, Superintendent Elk Island National Park

It was my great pleasure to be present for the wood bison celebration at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center last July. It was an exciting day for Alaska and an exciting day for Canada. The United States and Canada have so much in common. Shared histories; shared experiences; and shared successes. The wood bison restoration project is one of those shared successes as we get one step closer to the reintroduction of wood bison to Alaska.

We officially welcomed 53 wood bison from Elk Island National Park of Canada to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center. Historically, hundreds of thousands of bison roamed in North America. In the early part of the 20th century, the numbers of wood bison dwindled to a few hundred.

In 1978, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada initially assessed wood bison as endangered. This status was improved to threatened in 1988, thanks to successful recovery actions under the Canada National Wood Bison Recovery Program.

Through the efforts of that program, there are currently in excess of 4,000 wood bison in Canada. Canada is committed to the recovery of species at risk – such as the wood bison – not just in our country, but throughout its historic range.

As the Superintendent for Elk Island National Park, I am particularly proud of our contribution to the recovery of species. Elk Island, located near Edmonton in Alberta, has a long and successful history of relocating disease-free ungulates.

Dating as far back as 1937, Elk Island's herd of elk has been used as a source herd for re-establishing elk population throughout North America. Over the years, more than four thousand elk have been relocated in Canada in such places as Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Yukon.

This is a fine example of international cooperation for the protection and recovery of a species at risk.

In addition, we have assisted Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina in the United States to re-establish viable elk populations. Since 1967, Elk Island has provided disease-free bison for reintroduction throughout North America – and in 2006, we transferred 30 wood bison to the Republic of Sakha of the Russian Federation. And now we can add Alaska.

The transfer of wood bison from Elk Island to Alaska is a major milestone in the Alaskan wood bison restoration project. The bison transfer is also an important part of Canada's plan to ensure that several disease-free herds exist, not only in Canada, but also in other parts of their historic range.



Marilyn Peckett, Superintendent, Elk Island National Park, Canada.

This is a fine example of international cooperation for the protection and recovery of a species at risk. The great State of Alaska, Parks Canada, and Canada's Wood Bison Recovery team have been working on this international conservation project for over ten years with the assistance of other supporting departments in the United States and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

I would like to acknowledge the dedication and contribution that all parties have made in order for this project to move forward. We should all be proud of our efforts.

Established as Canada's first wildlife sanctuary in 1906, then declared a national park in 1913, Elk Island is Canada's only entirely-fenced national park. Located less than an hour away from Edmonton, Elk Island National Park protects the wilderness of the aspen parkland, one of the most endangered habitats in Canada. This beautiful oasis is home to herds of free roaming plains bison, wood bison, moose, deer, and elk. Also boasting over 250 species of birds, the park is a bird watcher's paradise.

Elk Island National Park Parc national Elk Island

