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“EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT BUFFALO”

By

Donnis Baggett



Few things are more rewarding to a bison rancher than seeing the herd run to the truck at feeding time.

Ranchers who raise bison — commonly called “buffalo” — are asked a lot of questions.

Here are a few of those questions, along with the answers:

“Is it buffalo or bison?”

Well, it’s actually bison. But the animals don’t mind if you call them buffalo. Most bison ranchers don’t, either.

“What do you *do* with them?”

We sell breeding stock and meat animals — pretty much like a cattle ranch.

“Is the meat good?”

Delicious! Not only is it tasty, but it’s low in fat, cholesterol and calories.

“But aren’t bison endangered?”

No, they’re not. Thanks to more than a century of restoration efforts by ranchers and other conservationists, the American plains bison has made a remarkable comeback.

“Is there a strong market for bison?”

You bet. We can’t meet the demand here in Texas.

“Don’t you have trouble keeping them in the pasture? Don’t you need expensive, heavy-duty fences?”

No. A good fence is important, of course, but a five- or five-and-a-half-foot-high combination of field fence mesh topped with two strands of barbed wire is plenty for a buffalo

pasture. If the fence is good and their food, water and companionship needs are met — and if they're not being chased around the pasture — bison are no tougher to keep at home than cattle are. And well-settled animals that are fed regularly will meet your pickup at the gate when they see you coming.



A mature bison cow such as this one can weigh 1,300 pounds. A mature bull can weigh a ton or more.

“What about prices?”

A weanling heifer calf is worth \$1,300 or more in today's market. A two-year-old bull headed to the feed yard will bring around \$2 per pound live weight. If he's had good grazing, he

should weigh around 700 pounds. A higher-quality breeding bull of the same age will bring at least \$2,500, but often sell for much more.

“What do buffalo need to eat?”

Bison evolved eating low-quality forage in drought-prone regions, so they're not too finicky. If they have decent grass and a little mineral supplementation, they usually do very well. They'll do even better if you supplement them with a little energy or protein when range conditions dictate.

“Are they hard to handle when you work them?”

Not if you use low-stress handling techniques and you have working facilities designed with that in mind. The best thing to do is to take your time and let the buffalo do the same. The worst thing to do is play cowboy. Ropes, cattle prods and yippee-ti-yays are best left in the pickup.

“Do bison have any calving problems?”

Almost never! It's so rare that you can mark that off your worry list.

“So, do you enjoy raising buffalo?”

Immensely! Few things are more gratifying than watching the sun set over your buffalo herd---Or watching the animals thunder up to the truck for some range cubes.---Or watching a newborn burnt-orange baby nuzzling up to its mother.



American Plains Bison are no longer endangered but are thriving, thanks to the efforts of ranchers and other conservationists.

“How can I get more information on raising bison?”

You may visit the Texas Bison Association website at www.texasbison.org or the National Bison Association website at www.bisoncentral.com.

We’re glad you’re interested, and we hope you’ll get involved. We need more bison in Texas — and more bison ranchers. Here are some facts about bison that you might find helpful.

BISON FACTS

- Nearly 95 percent of the bison in the United States are raised in private herds.
- Texas has more bison ranches than any other state — 618, according to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture figures. The runner up was Kansas, with 208. But Nebraska had the highest population of bison: 17,859 animals. Texas producers reported a total of 5,890 head.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture now considers the growing bison industry significant enough to regularly report bison meat prices.
- Bison are gentle on the land and vegetation because they move around steadily and do not crop the grass as closely as other ruminants. They can thrive on fodder that won't support beef cattle. Their hoof prints leave depressions that collect water and their dung serves as a powerful fertilizer: both assist in seedling germination and establishment.
- Bison are raised without antibiotics or growth hormones. With a rich beef-like flavor, bison is easily substituted in most recipes calling for beef. Bison meat is approved by the American Heart Association.
- A 100-gram serving of cooked bison has 2.42 grams of fat. A 100-gram serving of salmon has 10.97 grams of fat.
- Bison are sometimes inaccurately stereotyped as inherently dangerous animals. In reality, like most bovines they are quite docile when their basic needs of space, food, water and companionship are met and they are not being harassed.
- A well-managed bison herd can be moved safely and efficiently with minimal stress on animals or their handlers. Quiet, calm handling is the key.

Author: Donnis Baggett and his wife, Beverly Brown, are the owners of the Lucky B Bison Ranch just outside Bryan, Texas. Baggett has been ranching in Texas for more than two decades and has raised bison for the past 14 years. He is a board member of the Texas Bison Association and a past vice president of the National Bison Association.

Editors' Note: You may wish to explore and discover The Lucky B Bison Ranch by visiting their website at <http://www.luckybbison.com>.

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