

## Canadian Bison – A Brief History

This information was extracted from the 2016 book – The Last of the Buffalo – Return to the Wild Edited by Harvey Locke.

**Objective:** Although much has been written on the evolution of bison, this brief history describes what has transpired since the 1880s. The objective of this chapter is to provide a brief history of the Canadian bison herd, information on bison conservation in Canada as well as information on recent conservation activities.

By 1879 wild plains bison had largely disappeared from the Canadian part of the landscape although a few stragglers were found in Alberta and Saskatchewan in the Saskatchewan watershed until 1883 but were not seen again after that.

Two Manitobans Charles Alloway and Honourable James Mackay joined Metis bison hunting and captured bison calves. Five survived. With the death of Mackay, Alloway had to sell. Governor Sam Bedson of Stoney Mountain Penitentiary bought the herd at an auction with financing provided by Donald Smith, Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, the head of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Smith was a supporter of Rocky Mountain Park (Now Banff National Park). He eventually received 27 animals from Bedson and donated 13 to the park. They arrived in the park in 1898. There were three animals already in the park that were donated by Toronto Lawyer T.G. Blackstock who acquired them from Charles Goodnight. The Blackstock gift and the Strathcona gift were significant as they were the first donations made by private individuals to found a public bison herd in North America.

The most important event in the life history of the American bison was the 1907 purchase by the Canadian Government of the Pablo-Allard herd of 628 bison and transporting 398 of them to Elk Island National Park. This purchase was considered one of the world's most significant wildlife events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By 1908 there were 400 bison in a small park. Buffalo Park was created near Wainwright, Alberta. The Wainwright Park became a failure. Although they started out well and grew in numbers, bison contracted disease, overgrazed the area, and were shipped to Wood Buffalo National Park where they infected and interbred with that herd. Buffalo Park was eventually disbanded to become Canadian Forces Base Wainwright.

It was fortunate that a few of the bison from the Pablo Allard herd were retained at Elk Island to become the most important herd on earth for plains bison.

Canada ended up buying 708 animals from Pablo and proudly shared its achievement with the American Bison Society's annual report.

Here are the Pablo-Allard herd shipments from the United States to Canada:

Two Shipments 1907 – 410 head  
Third Shipment July 1909 -190 head  
Fourth Shipment October 1909 – 28 head  
Fifth shipment June 1910 – 38 head  
Sixth Shipment October 1910 – 28 head  
Seventh shipment May 2011 – 7 head  
Eighth shipment – June 2012 – 7 head  
**Total - 708 head**

The 708 head were far more than the Canadian Government thought they were going to receive.

The Canadian Report written in the American Bison Society annual report indicated there were about 1006 buffalo in National Parks distributed as follows: 27 head in Banff, 61 at Elk Island Park and 918 in Buffalo Park. It was also noted that the experience with the first bison in Banff was the foundation of Canada's Bison Conservation efforts.

By 1919 between Buffalo Park, Elk Island, and Banff, Canada's National Park Service owned 4033 bison.

Although bison were being released in the wild, bison remained confined in the Banff Buffalo paddock till 1998. Plains bison were in the park paddock till the 1980s when they were replaced with wood bison to conserve disease-free wood bison.

In the summer of 1978, 28 wood bison were introduced into Jasper National Park. Because of the shortage of funds to support a soft release of two years, the bison were released after 43 days. Some were found in a framers field near Grande Prairie and were captured while others were spotted from time-to- time for a number of years.

In 2003 plains bison from Elk Island National Park were introduced to Old Man on His Back, a Nature Conservancy Property in Saskatchewan.

In 2005, Grasslands National Park reintroduced 75 plains bison from Elk Island National Park.

Parks Canada submitted a feasible proposal for wild bison restoration to Parks Canada in September 2010.

In September 2014 a treaty was signed by US Tribes and Canadian First Nations to after several “buffalo talks” to call for the return of the buffalo. In 2015, more tribes and First Nations also signed the treaty. In September 2016, more signatures were added.

After years of planning and engaging many stakeholders, in 2017, during Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, bison were reintroduced into Banff National Park. In April 2017, after 140 years the first bison was born in the wild in Banff National Park.