



AMERICAN BISON
CANADA, Saskatchewan
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MECHISLAV KLIMOVICH



SILVER AWARD
63 3/4

Bison (G), *Bison Nord-Américain* (F). Called **buffalo** by most North Americans, but it is not a true buffalo like those found in Asia and Africa. Scientists tell us its forebears reached North America from Asia by crossing the Bering land bridge during the Pleistocene, some two million years ago. The American bison, and its close relative the European bison, belong to the tribe Bovini, which includes the world's cattle, buffaloes and bisons.

DESCRIPTION After the walrus, the bison is the largest North American game animal. Large bulls can measure 5-6 feet (1.5 to 1.8 m) at shoulder, and weigh 1,600-2,200 pounds (725-1,000 kg), occasionally as much as 3,000 pounds (1,350 kg). Females are much smaller, weighing about 900 pounds (400 kg) or less.

Both sexes have a large hump on the shoulders and a massive head that is carried low. The body is rather narrow in cross section, especially in the hindquarters. The head, neck, and forequarters are covered with thick, shaggy hair, and there is a short beard. The tail is short and tasseled. The summer coat is a pale yellowish-brown; the winter coat is dark brown, becoming almost black on the head and shoulders. Albinism occurs occasionally. (In the days of the plains Indians, an albino bison hide carried great spiritual significance.) Both sexes have short horns that curve out and up from the sides of the head. Females have slimmer horns, a thinner neck, and a smaller hump than males.

Compared with the European bison, the American bison is shorter and more massively built, but has slimmer hindquarters. It has a longer and thicker mane, a shorter and less bushy tail, and horns that are more curved.

BEHAVIOR One of the world's most gregarious mammals. One 19th century herd was said to be 25 miles wide and 50 miles long (40 x 80 km), containing an estimated four million animals.

Although zoologists view such figures with suspicion, it is nevertheless true that very large herds did exist.

Bison feed almost exclusively on grasses and drink water regularly. Unlike other hoofed mammals, they will face into a storm because the heaviest part of their coat is in front. The usual gait is a plodding five mph (8 km/h), but able to gallop as fast as 30 mph (48 km/h) if necessary. A good swimmer. Eyesight is poor, hearing is good, sense of smell is very good. Mating occurs in the summer, with a single calf born the following spring. Life expectancy 20-25 years, occasionally as much as 40 years.

