



EUROPEAN BISON  
POLAND  
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GOLD AWARD  
66 4/8

*Wisent* (G), *Bison d'Europe* (F). Its closest relative is the American bison, a separate species.

**DESCRIPTION** (*male*) Shoulder height 6-6-1/2 feet (1.8 to 2.0 m). Weight 1,750-2,000 pounds (794-907 kg). Females are considerably smaller, weighing 1,100-1,300 pounds (499-590 kg). The wisent is the largest European game animal. Both sexes have a high hump on the shoulders and a short, broad head that is carried low. The body is relatively narrow, especially in the hindquarters. There is a mane of coarse, woolly hair on shoulders and neck, a short beard and a tasseled tail. Color is a uniformly dark brown. Both sexes have short horns that curve out and up from the side of the head. Females have slimmer horns, a thinner neck and a smaller hump than males.

Compared with the North American bison, the wisent is a taller, longer-legged animal with weaker forequarters and stronger hindquarters, and it has straighter horns, a shorter mane and a longer, bushier tail.

**BEHAVIOR** Lives in herds of 10-30 led by an old bull. Old animals of both sexes are often solitary. Mates during August-September with one calf born the following May-June. Sexually mature at age 2-3. Females give birth every 1-2 years. Longevity in the wild about 20 years, in captivity as much as 40 years.

A woodland browser and grazer, feeding on leaves, buds, twigs, acorns and grasses. Usually travels at a walk, but can run well enough if necessary. Swims well. Sense of smell is very good, hearing good, eyesight not as good. Shy and difficult to approach in the wild.

**HABITAT** Deciduous forest with scattered open glades.

**DISTRIBUTION** Once widespread over much of Europe, it was exterminated in the wild in the 1920's, then reintroduced from captive stock. Herds in Eastern Europe (Poland, Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Letonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria) it is believed to be purebred from the original captive stock. In Western Europe (all countries, except those named under the "Eastern Europe" geographical description) the origin of the "European Bison" is unknown of, with possibilities of interbreeding with Caucasian Bison and American Bison. SCI has therefore decided to split the "European Bison" category into an "Eastern" and a "Western" geographic description.

**TAXONOMIC NOTES & STATUS** Although a few biologists treat the European bison as a subspecies of North American bison, we follow the majority who regard it as a separate species. There were two subspecies: *bonasus*, which is the typical European bison, and *caucasicus*, the Caucasian or mountain bison, which was said to have even less pronounced forequarters than the European subspecies. Both were exterminated as wild animals, but *bonasus* survived in captivity and has been reintroduced in several areas in Europe, whereas *caucasicus* probably is extinct.

The European bison declined because of the expansion of human settlement and agriculture until, by the early part of

the 20th century, it survived only in a few areas. Wisent of the typical race (*bonasus*) had been protected by the Russian czars since 1803 in the Bialowieza Forest hunting preserve in what is now the border area between Poland and Russia. Others, in the Duke of Hochberg's estate in the Pszczyna Forest near Pless, were descended from four animals received as gifts from the czar's preserve in 1865. The Bialowieza herd was killed off in 1919 during the Russian Revolution, and by 1921 the Hochberg herd had been reduced to three animals. But, in 1923, Polish zoologist Jan Sztolcman combined the three Hochberg animals with three others from European zoos, and these six formed the nucleus for present-day world populations.

At the beginning of the 20th century, about 500 Caucasian bison survived in the Kuban district of the western Caucasus, where they were protected by the czars; however, it is believed they failed to survive the October revolution. One report (Bashkirov) states that what were probably the last three individuals were killed by herdsman on Mt. Alous in the Caucasus in 1925-1926. Another report relates that the last member of this race, belonging to Hamburg animal dealer Karl Hagenbeck, died in 1925. Bison were reintroduced in the Caucasus beginning in 1940, but, unfortunately, they were probably of the European subspecies *bonasus* or just possibly a mixture of *bonasus* and *caucasicus*, if specimens of the latter race still existed. It is also rumored that American bison are included in the mix.

