

## 2.3 Bison (*Bison bison*: ssp: *athabasca*, *bison*)

### Appearance and Size

Bison are recognizable by their large size, massive forequarters, shoulder hump, large woolly bearded head, short black horns, and distinctive long tasseled tail. Adult bison have thick coats ranging in colour from coppery brown to dark brown. Young bison are reddish brown for the first two to three months of their lives. Wood bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) are



(Stock Photo)

bison can exceed 1.5 metres in height and weigh between 320 and 545 kilograms. Adult males have thicker horns, more prominent humps and bushier hair on the forehead, chin and neck than adult females.

### Life History

In disease-free herds with low levels of predation, bison can have high reproduction rates. Well-nourished females can reach reproductive maturity in one year, but usually first conceive when three to five years old. Females rarely produce a calf every year. Calves are born from mid-April to early June, after a 9.5 month gestation period. At birth calves weigh between 15 and 25 kilograms. In captivity, bison have been reported to live as long as 30 years. Most wild bison live an average of 10 to 15 years, with few surviving 20 years.



(Photo: Tom Hall)



(Stock Photo)

slightly larger and darker than Plains Bison (*Bison bison bison*), with a more pronounced shoulder hump and shorter hair on the neck and forelegs. Bison are the largest wild land mammals in North America. A typical mature bull can exceed 2 metres in height and weigh between 550 and 900 kilograms. The heaviest wild male Wood Bison recorded was 1031 kilograms. Adult female



(Photo: Tom Hall)

## Abundance and Distribution

For most of the year, bison congregate in herds of adult females, subadults and calves. While mature bulls usually form smaller bachelor groups, lone bulls are relatively common. In northern areas, mating (rutting) may extend from July to September, when groups of cows and bulls mix. Grasses and sedges constitute about 85 percent of the typical Wood Bison diet, with herbs making up the remaining 15 percent. In spring, Wood Bison usually forage in arid, grassy meadows and shrubby savannahs. Bison are rare in British Columbia, and Wood Bison are on British Columbia's Red List of species. Once extirpated, approximately 200 Wood Bison are estimated to exist in isolated pockets in the northeast corner of the province. (*Map 2.3*) Two herds of Wood Bison are located north of Nordquist Flats, along the Liard and Beaver rivers, near the Yukon-Northwest Territory border; and one herd is located at Etthithun Lake near the Alberta border. Occasionally, animals from the Hay-Zama herd in Alberta wander into British Columbia along the Hay River. Plains Bison are more numerous than Wood Bison, and over 1000 can be found in the vicinity of the Alaska Highway near Pink Mountain.

Text and map adapted from: British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2002b and British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection, 2002c.



(Photo: Dave Dickson, ICBC)



track about  
10 cm (4") long



Walking trail

Adapted from: McDougall (1997); and Sheldon and Hartson (1999).



(Photo: Dave Dickson, ICBC)

## Characteristic Features



(Photo: Leonard Sielecki, BCMoT)



(Photo: Leonard Sielecki, BCMoT)

**Map 2.3**

