



Taking Care of Bison

There are a lot of excellent resources dealing with the care of bison from the National Bison Association, local Bison Associations, and other online sources. However, there is so much information that it can be overwhelming. Seek out information and advice from farmers and ranchers that have programs close to your plans and goals. The advice you get from a rancher raising 1000 head of bison on 10,000 acres using a feedlot system may not be applicable if you plan on having 10 bison on 40 acres.

Here is a very brief guide from our experience going from 3 bison, to 10 bison, to a herd of 75 bison over the last 10 years. This is by no means a comprehensive guide, just a starter.

Bison are not mean.

Although humans tolerate and calm while grazing in the field, never forget that bison are wild animals. While you may become comfortable with your bison, they can never be trusted – you will notice that they are always watching you and you should do the same and always watch them. It is the reason that “bottle baby” bison are probably the most dangerous bison out there – people get too comfortable and trusting of them. Females tend to be very protective of their young and bulls can get ornery as they get older, particularly during the rut. Realize that you have front-facing eyes which make you instinctually a predator of the bison.

The biggest danger and risk, to both human and animal alike, is when you put them in a corner or crowd them (get in their space). This can be intentional (loading, sorting, etc.) or accidental (approaching them or walking by them when they are in the corner of a pasture or paddock). If put into a corner, they may panic and seek an escape and if the only way is through you that is the route they may choose. Anytime a bison does not have an escape route, they are in a corner and that corner can just as easily be other bison as a paddock. Within that context, be careful with closing gates as you do not want a panicked bison to hit the gate into your face. Slam gates are advised. Bison need an escape – always be sure bison have a visible means of escape at all times unless you are intentionally and safely crowding them.

Likewise, in addition to insuring that the bison have an escape route, always make sure you also have an escape route. Don't get too comfortable and always be alert. They can never be trusted and when you start to trust them, you are asking to get hurt.

All that being said, there are always exceptions. I do have a cow that is extremely aggressive and dangerous. Although she has never made physical contact, she is threatening and will charge at me unprovoked. I always know where she is. One day I will probably shoot her.



Although bison can be dangerous, they are not inherently mean. Understand their behavior and stresses.

Bison are not pets.

Do not try to domesticate your bison. While it is okay to build a “*trusting*” relationship, let bison be bison. The undomesticated nature of bison is one factor that makes them easier to raise. Bison evolved in concert with the North American environment, and “*letting bison be bison*” results in less need for managing the animals.

Keep in mind that cattle have been domesticated for over 10,000 years, bison have been kept in captivity for only about 200 years. Bison are not and do not think like cattle.

Also understand that bison have a natural violent social structure. Once they lose their fear of you, you become part of the herd and that violent social structure. At that point they are not being mean, just social and that can be very painful. There are countless examples of bison ranchers (not just tourists in Yellowstone) that have been severely injured by their bison. See accompanying article on bison bottle babies.

Fencing.

You go to one ranch and it looks like Jurassic Park while another ranch has not much more than cattle fencing - perhaps the issue is not fencing but management.



Bison fencing does not have to be like Jurassic park. Most of our fencing is simply 4 strands of barbed wire. Periphery fencing is 5 strands and in vulnerable areas, we add two strands of electric.

Questions about fencing are very similar to the often asked question, how many bison (or cattle) per acre. There are too many variables involved in both those questions to provide an accurate answer. However there are some simple guidelines.

First consider your surrounding area. How close are neighbors? What is the terrain next to your property? What reason would your bison have to leave your property? We are in a remote area and other than a dirt road, we are surrounded by dense woods. Clearly our fencing requirements are much less than what you would need in the open plains. For us, other than the road, 4 strands of barbed wire works for us. Consider your surroundings.

More often than not, 5 strands of barbed wire spaced 11-12 inches apart is more than adequate. Bison are very respectful of electric fencing so a strand or two in high stress/vulnerable areas goes a long way. Once bison experience an electric fence, they become very respectful of all metal wire fencing. Make sure the electric fence is at full capacity for at least a week for them to experience it.

We run 4 or 5 strands of barbed wire, 11 inches apart, on most perimeter fencing. By the road, we also run 2 strands of electric wire (which doesn't work most of the time). Internally (cross-fencing) we run 4 strands, 11 inches apart. Never had bison get out (except when someone forgot to close a gate) and never had a bison jump a fence, internal or external. Again, our surrounding area does not entice them to leave.

I do not recommend fencing higher than 5 feet even though bison can allegedly jump 6 feet. We have 6 foot fencing by the road and what I have learned is that deer can jump 5 feet but not 6 feet. I am constantly repairing that 6th strand and, on more than one occasion, have had deer out hanging upside down on that 6th strand.

Housing.

Bison do not require housing, nor is housing advisable. Housing accomplishes two things: it crowds animals and puts animals into a corner. The violent nature of the bison social structure precludes the use of housing – bison always want an escape route. Trees, if available, provide adequate shelter. Keep in mind that in the Great Plains, there is no shelter or shade. I get calls all the time by new bison owners concerned that something is wrong with their bison – it is 100°F outside, 75% humidity, and our bison are lying in the sun! This is normal: there is no shade in the Great Plains.

Keep them happy.

Make sure at all times that where they are is better than where they can go. That is likely more important than fencing. Always have fresh water available and plenty of quality food, whether green grass or hay. Conditions should be such that they have no need or interest in leaving because if they want to leave, they will.

We provide quality hay even when there is plenty of fresh green grass just in case they have the inclination to want some dry grass (which they often do). All of our fields have a pond and potable water – with plenty of food and water there is no reason to leave. Management is more important than fencing.

How many to start.

This goes a long way in keeping them happy. Bison are herd animals to an almost ridiculous level so it is important to that you have a herd. If you do not have a herd, your animals will seek a herd and that drive will increase as they age. Two is not a herd. At a minimum you need 3 animals, preferably 5.

Less than the minimum and you will need a much stronger fencing as they will have the desire to wander and seek a herd as they get older. Most of the horror stories you hear about bison and fencing is either unhappy bison or too few (no herd) - poor management.



If you do not have experience with bison, we recommend you start with 3-5 calves. This will allow you to grow with them – they will teach you along the way.

If you have never had bison, I would suggest that you start with 3 animals, 2 heifers and a bull. It is much easier to add more bison than take them away.

How old.

Unless you have experience with bison, I recommend 6-month old weaned calves so you can grow with the animals – they will teach you a lot. Even 6-month old animals can be aggressive and intimidating under certain circumstances: you do not want to learn from a 1000 pound cow or 1800 pound bull. In addition, with only a few young animals you will be able to have close and regular contact which will go a long ways in keeping them calm.

Feeding.

Bison can survive in environments where cattle would starve to death. That being said, survival is not the same as thriving. “Cow” hay is fine, “horse” hay is better. We feed a combination of both. Although we prefer an exclusive natural diet of grass and other forage, bison do love grain as much as cattle do. If you choose to feed grain, grain by-products, or other non-forage feeds do so sparingly. Feeding grain will get the bison more comfortable and calmer around you, but will increase your risk of injury. Do you want a herd of bison chasing you down the field because they think you have grain? Might be “fun” and “cool” but would you want a herd of bears chasing you? Don’t be fooled by their calm disposition during tranquil periods.

Bison can eat anything that cattle do, although a bison’s nutritional needs do differ. Understanding these nutritional needs goes a long way in keeping them healthy.

Bison undergo a lifetime cycle of winter weight loss followed by spring summer weight gain. Generally speaking, from December to April, mature bison will lose 10 to 15% of their pre-winter body weight. For example, a 1,000 lb. cow in December will weigh 850-900 lbs. in April. This is normal due to a reduced metabolism during the winter and you should not try to compensate (which you generally cannot) but plan ahead and insure your bison are in good physical shape to withstand that weight loss. Bulls will also lose weight in August during the rut and have little time to regain that weight before winter sets in.

As a general rule, bison will eat 2.7 to 3.0% of their body weight in dry matter during the growing months and only 1.4 to 1.8% during the winter. With this reduced feed intake, whatever you feed, you cannot prevent the winter weight loss; and you should not try. It is a normal lifetime cycle.



Be sure they always have plenty to eat and have access to fresh water at all times. Give them access to hay year-round, even when there is plenty of green grass available.

Whether you decide to feed only grass and forage or not, if these are your first animals, we recommend that you feed your calves some grain. If you got your calves from us, they will not eat grain as they do not know what it is. Sprinkle sweet feed on their hay and in about 2 weeks they will start eating it. Once they are regularly eating sweet feed we recommend you

switch over to range cubes (cakes) because they are big and noisy. Shake the bucket and make lots of noise when feeding. Eventually your calves will come running when they hear the grain bucket. You can now stop feeding grain if you wish.

What was the purpose of that exercise? If your bison ever get loose, how do you plan on getting them back? You cannot herd them like cattle. Having animals that will run to the noise of a pail of grain (or even rocks) is a great way to move them. These first animals will likely be dominant (or at least in the top hierarchy of the herd) and the rest of the herd will follow them. We have about 10 original animals that have not had grain in years but shake a grain bucket and they come running and the rest of the herd follows.

How many bison per acre.

This is again one of those questions that have too many variables to give an answer. You can have more bison on well managed pasture as opposed to barren land or the desert. If you have ever seen a bison feedlot (disgusting by the way), you will notice that you can raise bison anywhere and anyhow. It is not just a matter of food and water but whether you want the animals to merely survive or you want them to flourish and thrive.

Keep in mind that bison are migratory animals and do like to roam and wander. The more open space you can give them the better.

Handling and Care.

The general principle is that cattle ranchers can make their cattle do anything they want them to do while bison ranchers can get their bison to do anything they want to do. The recipe for success in handling bison is to mitigate fear, manage separation anxiety, and allow escape. Slow is fast. You will learn very fast that they cannot be handled like cattle and once you get them excited, it is game over.



A dart gun is indispensable and an important tool of the bison rancher. It provides the ability to administer treatments, vaccinations, etc. to individual animals without the need of sorting the herd.

The best care you can give your bison is to let them loose, provide them with plenty of food and water and then leave them alone, and let bison be bison. I visit the herd once a day – I generally have a beer with them every evening. Other than that, they are on their own being bison.

Whether you plan on just a few animals or a large herd, before you purchase any bison you need to consider and have a plan on 1) how will you vaccinate and/or give anthelmintic (wormer) and 2) how will you load animals.

Many producers feel you need an entire handling system before you even consider buying any bison. Although we followed that advice, I disagree. If you have less than 10 animals you can probably get away with a quality dart gun. Not for the purpose of sedation, but a means of administering anthelmintics (wormer), vaccines, or other medication. Once you approach or exceed 10 animals, it becomes very difficult to keep animals calm and keep track of which

animals are which. Even if your plans are to build a sorting and handling system, a dart gun will be indispensable for the treatment of individual animals. So, regardless of your plans, invest in a quality dart gun that can deliver 10cc amounts at reasonable distances (30-50 yards). Don't wait until you need it, buy the dart gun before you even buy a bison.

With more than 10 animals you will need a sorting and handling system which will require a substantial financial investment. You will need a bison squeeze chute (one specifically made for bison), an alleyway, and possibly a tub. In addition, you will need sorting pens that will allow you to sort animals. Bison handling system and sorting pens are a major financial investment.

Regardless of your current plans, plans do change and you really need to think how you will load animals. Bison will not herd onto a trailer like cattle and if you ever have to move them, it will be a problem without a load-out plan and facility. Plan ahead and don't wait till a problem arises.



As your herd increases, you may need to consider investing in a bison handling system to treat and sort your bison. You can design and build your own or purchase a ready-made complete handling system such as this one from Hi-Hog.

Housing with other animals.

Not advisable. You can usually get away with it while the animals are young, but as they mature you will often start having problems. Cattle do not understand the social structure of bison and bison can't understand why cattle are so stupid. Never house bison with, or even near, sheep as sheep are carriers of the virus that causes Malignant Catarrhal Fever which is deadly to bison.

My wife used to keep her horses with the bison, but as the bison got older and her horse was gorged three times, she thought it best to keep them separate. It is best to keep bison by themselves.

When to buy bison.

With spring approaching and the green grass growing, it would seem like the ideal time to get some bison. Unfortunately it doesn't work that way. Bison have a breeding rut that generally runs between July 15 and September 15 which means that bison calves will generally be born in May and June. Allow for at least 6-months before weaning and calves will be available late November-December. At other times they will likely be older animals.

The other issue affecting availability is round-up time. Other than small operations where animals are more confined, animal sales will only occur during an annual roundup which is generally in the fall or early winter. Every time you work a bison herd you risk injury or death and to remove one animal would require working the entire herd. Thus, bison sales generally only occur in the fall when calves are old enough to be separated and weaned.

An advantage to availability at this time of year is that the animals will be more confined, being fed as opposed to grazing, which will necessitate more personal contact before (hopefully) letting them out to graze.

Health Issues.

See our accompanying article on Bison Health.

Other issues.

This file will be updated from time-to-time.

Rod Chiodini
Ozark Valley Bison Farm, LLC
3321 Jimmy Creek Rd, Fox, Arkansas 72051
870-615-9837