



The (Surprisingly) Quiet Bison Hunt

Unlike 20 years ago, there has been little uproar over the recent hunting of wild buffalo emerging from Yellowstone National Park. Why? **BY SCOTT MCMILLION**

If you didn't hear much about last year's bison hunt in Montana, you are not alone.

The hunt didn't last long.

"It was a one-shot season," says Scott Kremer, of Gardiner, who killed the only bison taken by a hunter last year. He shot the large bull on opening day. And that was the extent of the bison sport and tribal harvest. A mild winter in Yellowstone National Park, home of the nation's largest wild bison population, allowed the animals to find enough grass in the park to stay until the hunting season ended. As a result, the dozens of other hunters who'd drawn Montana's coveted bison license had no chance to fill their tag.

And if you didn't hear much about the previous bison season, that also is understandable. Though hunters from Indian tribes and the general public killed 166 animals in 2007-08, those hunts received little media attention.

Compare that to the overheated atmosphere in the late 1980s. National media descended on Gardiner and West Yellowstone to film hunters shooting bison at near point-blank range, enraged bison advocates and anti-hunters howled their protests on the airwaves, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks game wardens did all they could to maintain public safety.

Why the difference? The main reason is that FWP removed many problems associated with the old hunt. Previously, hunters had to be escorted by a game warden who walked them right up to the bison—and right into criticism of "unfair chase" and "slaughter" from protestors. The new hunt is more sporting. It offers hunters more land on which to hunt, thorough training by FWP staff, and the ability to hunt on their own. What it

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doesn't offer is a guarantee. The old hunts had success rates at or near 100 percent. Today's bison hunting has become more like ordinary elk or moose hunting. Success depends on the hunter, the weather, and the animals.

And when something starts to look ordinary, it becomes less newsworthy.

PUBLIC RELATIONS BLACK EYE

Though bison have come to symbolize the wild American West, for the first half of the 20th century the animals were treated like cattle by the National Park Service. Yellowstone employees turned bison to mountain pastures in summer, rounded them up and fed them hay in winter at the Lamar Valley Buffalo Ranch, and ran scores of them through a slaughterhouse. Then, in 1967, the Park Service adopted a philosophy of "natural regulation." That closed down the ranch's bison operation and ended a controversial population control program, in which park rangers shot bison in the field to cull herds. Without an abundance of natural predators, the bison population mushroomed. As numbers swelled, the wild ungulates spilled out of the park. As a result, Montana began to offer bison hunting permits. Hunting is illegal within Yellowstone, but as bison left the higher elevations of the park, seeking exposed grass on lower ground, they could be harvested in Montana. The hunts, which began in 1985, filled freezers but also stirred

emotion and controversy, largely because of how they were conducted.

Jim Kropp, now chief of FWP Enforcement, supervised game wardens overseeing the 1980s bison hunts near Gardiner and West Yellowstone. He says the idea of having wardens accompany each bison hunter was to ensure all kills were quick and humane so hunters could harvest lots of bison. The efficient process also prevented the animals from straying too far from the park and mingling with cattle. (Many bison were infected with brucellosis, a complicated bacteriological disease that, if transmitted, can cause cattle to abort their calves.) When bison left the park, permit holders were called and informed they had 36 hours to reach the West Yellowstone or Gardiner areas. When they arrived, wardens took them directly to the animals. "We showed them the bison and said, 'Here they are,'" Kropp recalls. When the shooting was done for the day, wardens chased the remaining bison back into Yellowstone, where the animals might stay for a few days, depending on grazing and weather conditions, before heading back out.

The tightly managed bison harvest was efficient—a record 569 bison were killed in the 1988-89 season—but many people considered it unsporting. The hunts were conducted under the magnifying lens of national television crews, alerted by protest groups outraged by the hunting of an animal shot

nearly to extinction in the 19th century by market hunters. Protesters hung banners, called for tourists to boycott Montana, and on rare occasions even interfered with hunts—which got them arrested. TV captured much of the action with remarkable speed. "You could go back at the end of the day and watch yourself on the 5 o'clock news," Kropp says.

By 1991, the Montana legislature had wearied of the arguments, the controversy, the threatened boycotts, and the public relations black eye for the whole state in general and hunters in particular. Lawmakers ended the bison hunt.

DISEASE CONCERNS

For the next 14 years, bison that left Yellowstone continued to die, but not from hunting. For a time, wardens and park rangers shot them in the field, donating the carcasses to Native American organizations and charities. Later, traps set outside the park by the Montana Department of Livestock and federal agencies captured thousands of straying bison, which were shipped to slaughter.

Wild bison are tolerated only in small areas of Montana because roughly half the animals consistently test positive for exposure to brucellosis. After decades of work and millions of dollars in expenses, brucellosis has been nearly eradicated from the United States. Wildlife in the greater Yellowstone area carry the last major reservoir of the disease. If just two Montana cattle from different herds test positive within a 12-month period, as happened in 2007-08, the state temporarily loses its brucellosis-free status, reducing the marketability of Montana beef and requiring costly testing by stockgrowers.

Cattlemen, wildlife protection groups, hunters, Park Service staff, and others have long argued about the legal, scientific, economic, and political issues surrounding the disease. Consensus has been lacking, threats of lawsuit have been common, and debates are unlikely to end soon. Straying bison continue to be "hazed"—chased back into the park by mounted riders, vehicles, ATVs, and helicopters—in late winter and spring to reduce chances of bison infecting cattle with brucel-



THE HUNT RETURNS Photographers document the Clement family, of Belgrade, field dressing the first bison killed as part of Montana's new and improved hunt. The animal was shot by Buddy Clement, 17, near Gardiner on November 15, 2005.

losis. When hazing fails to keep bison in the park, the animals are trapped and hauled to slaughter. Sometimes, only a few dozen die this way. But in 2007-08, nearly half the herd was killed.

The ongoing controversy notwithstanding, some progress has been made in finding compromise. Owners of two properties near the park voluntarily removed their cattle from areas where bison like to roam. That reduces the already small risk of bison transmitting brucellosis to livestock. And it has provided a little extra room for migrating bison, albeit in small parts of the state and for limited periods each year.

That extra roaming room has opened the door for a new hunting season, during which hunters can pursue bison according to the rules of fair chase—which dictate that game animals have a sporting chance of escaping. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, many Montana lawmakers argued for restoring the hunt. They said it didn't make sense for state and federal employees to kill hundreds of bison each year when hunters would gladly pay for the opportunity. FWP agreed, but department officials insisted a new hunt would have to be conducted in ways the public found acceptable. That meant no game warden escorts and, most important, training for all hunters taking

part (see sidebar on page 12). "The idea was to make a substantial change from the old hunts of the 1980s," says Pat Flowers, FWP regional supervisor in Bozeman. "We wanted to re-engage the average hunter to look at bison as a big game animal. They hadn't had that opportunity in a long time."

The first of Montana's new bison hunts began in late fall of 2005. No one knew what to expect.

SOME SIZZLE, THEN SILENCE

Buddy Clement, then a 17-year-old high school student from Belgrade, Montana, killed the first bison of the new hunt on November 15 near Gardiner. Accompanied by his parents and brother, he suddenly found himself the subject of a press conference that included two dozen eager reporters. "I didn't know it was as controversial as it was," says Clement, now a wildlife biology student at Montana State University, recalling that bitterly cold morning. "It was just going out hunting for me."

But media interest soon waned because few protesters appeared and hunters often walked for miles without seeing a bison or firing a shot, similar to other big game hunting. The spectacle was over. "There was nobody wanting to have a press conference with me," says Tom Pulcherz, who killed a



NOT HUNTING'S FINEST HOUR During the 1988-89 bison season, state and national media highlighted the unsportsmanlike conditions of the hunt. "A Firing Squad for Buffalo: Montana-Style Hunting" read a *Newsweek* headline over the picture of a grinning hunter and his blood-drenched trophy. An article in *Time* referred to the hunt as a "public relations disaster" for Montana. Not surprisingly, state lawmakers soon ended the controversial hunt. It took another 14 years for bison hunting to return to Montana.

FWP stresses bison hunter education

When the Montana legislature decided to bring back the bison hunting season, it stipulated that hunts had to be conducted under the rules of fair chase: Hunters had to be on foot, and FWP officials could not tell hunters the specific location of bison. As is the case with other types of big game hunting, it was up to bison hunters to find their own prey.

“It was clear to us that the eyes of the world would be on hunters and the state as people watched to see if the new hunt was a repeat of the past,” says Mel Frost, FWP regional Communications and Education Program manager in Bozeman.

During the first two new hunting seasons, FWP required everyone who drew a bison hunting license to attend an orientation session conducted by department staff members. During subsequent hunts, bison hunters have instead been sent a comprehensive DVD detailing regulations, safety concerns, effective shot placement, and field dressing. On the DVD, FWP officials warn hunters to prepare for hard labor after the kill, because a bull bison can weigh as much as a ton. They also point out that bison advocates may be in the field.

“We emphasize that their hunt could be taped, and that the footage could be shown around the world,” says Frost. “The bottom line is that we want hunters to conduct their hunt according to the ethical standards of fair chase, and for them to show bison the respect these great animals deserve.”



AIM HERE On the bison hunt instructional DVD, regional warden captain Sam Sheppard explains where to shoot the animal, how to hunt safely, and what to do if bison advocates are nearby.



COURTESY TOM PULCHERZ

COLD BUT QUIET With his friend Ken Barrett, Tom Pulcherz (right) poses with a young bull he killed in February 2008. Unlike 20 years earlier, bison hunts like Pulcherz’s attracted little attention from news organizations. Because the hunts were conducted in a way that generated little controversy, they proved uninteresting to the media. Says Pulcherz, “There was nobody wanting to have a press conference with me.”

bison roughly two years later, in February 2008. Pulcherz, a retired U.S. Forest Service official, wasn’t looking for public attention. Just the opposite. He was trying to reconnect with the spirit of early conservationists like Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell. In the early 20th century, these hunters helped save America’s remaining bison and other dwindling big game populations by establishing a public lands system and also by advocating for regulated hunting seasons.

Using traditional wood-and-rawhide snowshoes, Pulcherz and hunting partner Ken Barrett sweated their way across an arm of frozen Hebgen Lake to reach a peninsula known to attract bison during winter. They eschewed conveniences such as Polarfleece and relied on wool clothing for warmth. Pulcherz carried a replica of an 1885 .45-70 Winchester with open sights. The weather during that February hunt was brutal, with temperatures dropping to near zero and snow blowing sideways.

On the fourth day of hunting, after turning down other opportunities, Pulcherz selected a young bull. He toppled the bison with a single shot to the heart, fired from about 35 yards. Then the work began. Even an immature bull bison weighs twice as much as an adult bull elk. The men spent hours field dressing and skinning the animal before dragging the meat on a sled to a road several hundred yards away. Even in the cold weather, the work had to be done quickly. A bison’s thick hide and massive bulk trap heat that can spoil meat if the animal isn’t butchered immediately and trans-

ported to cool storage.

Despite the difficulties, Barrett and Pulcherz say the hunt was well worth the effort. “It was better than driving up on a snowmobile, getting off, and popping one in the head,” says Pulcherz, who prefers to hunt on foot in the backcountry.

Other hunters have taken a more practical, meat-gathering approach. Kremer, the sole successful hunter last season, was aware of how difficult it would be to handle a 1-ton carcass in the field. He says he “waited until (the bison) was in a really good spot” before shooting. Then the hunter and his family—brother, wife, parents, and two teenage children—tackled the field-dressing job, dulling numerous knives cutting through and removing the bison’s thick hide. They got lucky when a neighbor with a horse came by and helped haul the meat a quarter mile to a road.

Those who’ve killed bison say the animals aren’t hard to approach; the massive, impassive beasts face down threats rather than run. The challenge is in precise shot placement—a killing shot to the brain requires hitting a target the size of a cell phone—and the skill to handle a huge carcass quickly and efficiently, sometimes in tough conditions.

COMPLICATIONS CONTINUE

Despite the improved hunting conditions, Montana’s new bison season is not without controversy and complications. People still oppose bison hunting, often on the grounds that so little of the state has been made available for the wild animals, especially for year-round use. “No habitat, no hunt. We’re

maintaining that position,” says Stephany Seay, spokeswoman for the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC), an advocacy group for the park’s bison. Group members do not disrupt the hunt, however. “We oppose it, but we don’t interfere,” she says. Nevertheless, BFC members are in the field every winter with video cameras, which is why FWP informs hunters that their actions could be videotaped and posted on the Internet. Sam Sheppard, FWP warden captain in Bozeman, tells bison hunters that BFC members—as well as other protesters—have every right to be in the field. Documenting a hunt is not interference or harassment under state law, he says.

Another component of the bison hunt is the presence of tribal hunters. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana and the Nez Perce of Idaho have federal treaty rights allowing them to hunt off their reservations. (The Shoshone-Bannock Tribe in Idaho also has approached FWP officials about establishing their own hunt.) Montana acknowledges the rights of the Nez Perce and the Salish-Kootenai to hunt according to the provisions of their treaties. The treaty language allows tribal members to hunt only on “open and unclaimed” land, which land managers and tribes have agreed means national forest and Bureau of Land Management lands. Tribal wardens travel to the Yellowstone area to enforce those rules.

Though Montana does not dispute the rights of tribal hunters, negotiating details can be challenging. The state’s goal, Sheppard says, is “fair and equitable sharing of the resource.” While asserting they are entitled to far more bison, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Nez Perce in recent years have agreed to divide between them the same number of bison as are provided to the public by FWP permits. If Montana issues 50 tags to the public, for instance, the tribes provide a total of 50 tags to their members. The participation of additional tribes will further complicate matters. “Each year, it’s going to be a new negotiation,” Sheppard says.

The bison don’t make things any easier. Like other game animals, the shaggy grazers are frequently uncooperative. Bison herds

often abruptly decide to migrate considerable distances, appearing or disappearing overnight. That means hunters sometimes can pick from many targets or—as was the case this past season—see no bison at all.

Even with the uncertainty of finding a bison and the grueling task of butchering and hauling the meat of a harvested animal, the hunt appeals to many people. This year more than 10,000 Montana and nonresident hunters applied for the state’s 44 non-treaty licenses. That enormous interest, says Flowers, the FWP regional supervisor, reflects the huge appeal of bison. “Hunters are excited about taking part in a hunt they thought they’d never see in their lifetime,” he

says. The fact that Montana now offers an opportunity to hunt bison, even if only to a handful of lucky hunters each year, is a notable conservation achievement. A century ago, only a couple dozen wild bison remained in the United States, all of them in Yellowstone. Today, after decades of conservation work, bison are bountiful enough to be hunted again in Montana.

The hunt isn’t easy, and it’s still controversial and complicated. But at least it’s under way.

Even if you don’t hear much about it. 🐃

► To learn more about Montana’s bison hunt and apply for a license for the 2010-11 season, visit fwp.mt.gov and search for “bison hunt.”



COMEBACK After decades of protection, the Yellowstone bison population is now large enough to sustain a regulated hunting season in Montana.

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