



SPIRITUAL SITE During a guided hike to the buffalo jump, used by Native people for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years, park manager Clark Carlson-Thompson shows visitors a pictograph (not visible in photo) depicting a tepee. "This one includes a lightning bolt indicating connections to the spiritual world," he says. PHOTO BY ELIZA WILEY

First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park showcases a revered cultural landmark used by Native people to harvest bison for more than 600 years.

By Peggy O'Neill

A PLACE OF PROMINENCE

The 12-year-old boy, draped in a buffalo calf hide, sits amid a herd of cows and young bulls. His human scent is masked with sage he rubbed on his skin earlier. Though surrounded by dozens of bison that could stamp out his life in an instant, he's proud to have earned this role. He had to compete against other boys in his tribe to prove his courage, strength, and integrity. The elders selected him to be here among the buffalo herd, at the center of the circle of life.

The herd moves slowly, grazing. In the distance, several tribal members wearing wolf hides walk back and forth behind the bison, nudging the animals forward. If the drivers get too close, the herd will spook and race off, but they need to remain visible to keep the buffalo moving in the right direction.

The tribal member have asked these bison to give themselves up for the tribe and will thank the animals later for their sacrifice.

The boy identifies the lead cow. She's the one who keeps an eye on the herd, not letting calves stray too far. Hunched over, the buffalo runner, as he's called, begins to imitate a calf in distress. The cow notices and walks his way. He moves off, drawing the lead cow, and the rest of the herd follows.

The boy leads the herd across the plateau toward an unseen cliff between two rows of cairns. Hiding behind the rock piles are tribal members of all ages holding wolf hides. When the buffalo runner senses it's the right time, he signals to the others to stand, wave the hides, and make noise, frightening the herd into a stampede. ▶▶



He starts running toward a specific spot on the cliff, followed by the frenzied herd racing 35 miles per hour. When he reaches the edge, a tidal wave of bison fur and flesh almost at his heels, he jumps. But rather than plunging off the 50-foot drop to his death, the boy lands on a small sandstone ledge just a few feet below and tucks himself flat against the cliff face. The bison tumbling overhead aren't so fortunate. If the fall doesn't kill them, hunters wait below with arrows to finish them off. The young runner, who has practiced this maneuver dozens of times, safely observes the bloody work underneath from his rock perch.

SACRED EVENTS

"That must have been the first extreme sport!" exclaims Corette Maulding, a visitor to First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park

Peggy O'Neill is chief of the FWP Communication Bureau.

from Texas, breaking the spell of park manager Clark Carlson-Thompson's narrative.

It definitely would have been, except that it was not a sport, explains Carlson-Thompson to a group standing at the park's highest point. "The bison drives here were sacred events conducted by Indigenous people from throughout the region over hundreds or even thousands of years," he tells them.

From this plateau, the visitors can see the Highwood, Little Belt, Big Belt, and Adel mountains. Located near the tiny town of Ulm roughly 14 miles southwest of Great Falls, the park encompasses about 3,000 acres, including a sandstone cliff extending more than 1,500 yards. According to Carlson-Thompson, at least 13 Native tribes used the site as a buffalo jump.

"Tens of thousands of buffalo jumped to their death here," he says. The layer of bones, up to 15 feet thick, stretches along the base of the jump for a mile, creating what

“The buffalo was everything to us.”

author Charles C. Mann described in a recent issue of *National Geographic* as the “relationship of [Native people] and the buffalo inscribed on the earth.”

According to Donald Fish, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe, an instructor of Native American studies, and a former park ranger at the state park, Indigenous people had more than 300 uses for the buffalo killed here, including meat, robes, tools, bowstrings, tepee covers, bowls, and ingredients for blood pudding. “The buffalo was everything to us,” says Fish. “According to our stories, a spiritual being showed us how to hunt the buffalo so we could survive. That made the jumps very special. We were able to kill a large number to feed people and provide hides and other essential materials.”



MYSTERIOUS CREATURE Carlson-Thompson points to a partial pictograph, showing “some sort of animal,” estimated to be 500 to 1,000 years old. The rest of the image was lost when the sandstone cliff broke off. Until it was protected as a state park, the site was mined during the mid-1900s for bison bones, used as crop fertilizer, and sandstone quarried for building construction. Far right: A visitor looks out at Square Butte in the distance.

The site sits on the Old North Trail, what the Blackfeet call *Miisum Apatosiosoko*, which runs north-south along the east flank of the Rockies between Alaska and Mexico and was used by travelers for thousands of years. The jump itself is a stretch of sandstone cliff in the shape of a horseshoe. According to Dr. Rachel Reckin, an archaeologist who manages the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Heritage Resource Program, the site was used as a buffalo jump between 900 and 1,500 years ago and perhaps as long ago as 6,000 years.

SIGNIFICANT TO MANY

“The jump is absolutely massive—not just in size but also from a cultural and archaeological perspective,” says Reckin. She notes that First Peoples is one of the two largest buffalo jumps in North America (the other is Head-Smashed-In World Heritage Site in southern Alberta). “It was significant to people throughout the region, and is part of the oral histories of the Blackfeet, Nez Perce, Salish, Kootenai, Pend d’Oreille, Shoshone, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre, and other tribes.”

According to Kqyn Kuka, FWP tribal liaison and diversity coordinator and a Blackfeet member, FWP changed the park’s name in 2007 from Ulm Pishkun (*Pishkun* comes from a Blackfeet word sometimes translated as “corral” and sometimes as “deep blood kettle”). “The idea was to respect the other tribes that also had used this site and considered it to be culturally and spiritually important,” she says.

Kuka adds that FWP recently acquired a new lease that expands the park by nearly a square mile. The department is working with archaeologists to survey the new area and interview members of various tribes to learn what has been passed down in songs and stories about the buffalo jump.

One story concerns the ways various tribes coordinated use of the site, says Dugan Coburn, director of Indigenous education for Great Falls Schools and a Blackfeet member. “What our knowledge keepers have told me is that other tribes such as the Salish would ask the Blackfeet to use it for one or two weeks at a time, maybe offering shells or other items as payment,” he says.

LANDSCAPE ENGINEERS

The jump sits at the edge of a vast grassland stretching for miles, which would have



LEFT TO RIGHT: ELIZA WILEY, ANDY AUSTIN



attracted large herds seasonally migrating along the Front throughout the year. “It’s the sheer size of the bison habitat above the jump that made it so popular with such a wide range of tribes,” Reckin says.

Even with vast numbers of bison nearby, using an entire landscape to harvest the large, dangerous animals required specialized knowledge, planning, and coordination. “The whole operation was enormously complex, starting with people on the plateau slowly nudging the bison toward the edge—sometimes over a period of several days,” Reckin says. Other tribal members were strategically stationed behind rock cairns, built as “drive lines” to funnel stampeding bison toward a specific spot on the cliff.

Tribal leaders also had to consider wind direction, weather, topography, bison behavior, and other factors in what archaeologists call “landscape engineering.” “They basically used the environment and everything in it as a tool for harvest,” Reckin says.

Coburn notes that driving and processing bison involved the entire tribal community. “Everyone—women, men, children, older people—had a role,” he says. “A bison is a huge animal, and it takes great skill and hard work to butcher and skin it, scrape and tan the hide, make clothing and repair tepees from the hide, render the fat, make tools from the bones, and so on.”

According to Reckin, no one knows why or when people stopped driving bison off the cliff at First People’s Buffalo Jump. One theory is that the arrival of horses, originally from Spain, made it easier to hunt bison with spears, bow-and-arrows, and, later, rifles. “Use may have continued well into the 18th century, but we can’t say for certain,” she says.

European settlers quarried the sacred site for sandstone, some of which is still visible in Helena churches. Others mined the phosphorous-rich layer of bison bones for use in fertilizer and munitions. Between 1945 and 1957 alone, up to 150 tons were removed.

TRAILS AND TEPEES

Though the buffalo jump is the park’s centerpiece, it’s not the only attraction. Set back from the jump is a 6,000-square-foot visitor center that includes a fully mounted bison bull and an immersive interpretive hall furnished with murals, models, and



INSIDE THE VISITOR CENTER Clockwise from top: The main exhibit hall in the park’s visitor center provides details of the buffalo jump process and includes a tepee, drying rack, and encampment display surrounded by a mural depicting changing seasons; part of the vast diorama giving readers a sense of what the landscape looked like hundreds of years ago; visitors watch a demonstration by an AmeriCorps volunteer on the many uses of bison hides, including as clothing, containers, and sinew-based rope and lashings.

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artifacts that help visitors experience the relationship between bison and the people who relied on them.

In the exhibit hall, visitors can hear recordings of Native people telling about the buffalo jump and their traditional lifestyle, says Karlene Faulkner, a member of the Great Falls-based Little Shell Band of Chippewa who has worked as a parks technician at the park since 2014. “We also have an authentic tepee, bison hides, and other displays showing what life was like here hundreds of years ago.” A gift shop sells Native crafts, tribal music CDs, and wildlife books.

Faulkner says the first time she visited First Peoples Buffalo Jump, she knew she wanted to work at the park. “I feel a great sense of peace here, of connecting spiritually with the land,” she says.

Outside the visitor center, a network of hiking trails provides vistas of the prairie and the Rocky Mountain Front. Visible 15 miles to the southwest stands Square Butte, one of several buttes that rise up along the Front. Hikers can find dozens of tepee rings, formed over centuries when people laid stones on the edges of buffalo-hide tepees to keep the relentless winds from blowing in. They can also borrow an interpretive guidebook from the visitor center to learn about the area’s geology, native vegetation, and wildlife, such as the highly vocal prairie dogs scampering across the park’s 200-acre prairie dog town.

The park holds no live bison, but visitors willing to drive a few hours can see the real deal at the National Bison Range north of Missoula and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation east of Glacier National Park.

Snakes are another story. The park is home to plains garter snakes, bull snakes, yellow-bellied racers, and prairie rattlers. “Snake hikes” are led by Dan the “Snake Man,” who teaches participants where the reptiles are most likely to be found and what to do when encountering them on trails.

ATLATL LESSONS

First Peoples Buffalo Jump also holds powwows and an annual kite festival, and offers weekly interpretive programs. Each August the park holds its annual Mammoth Hunt celebration, which features tomahawk throwing and long bow shooting, along with traditional



TOURING THE JUMP Above: A hiker nears one of the navigational guides on the Main Loop Trail. Right: Karlene Faulkner, a member of the Great Falls-based Little Shell Band of Chippewa who has worked at the park since 2014. “I love working here and informing visitors about this spiritual place and all that went into driving and processing the buffalo,” she says. Far right: During a fall hike, visitors descend the top of the buffalo jump to a bench that connects to the main park trail.



“This continues to be a spiritual place for so many Native people.”

children’s games like “Run and Scream,” which challenges participants to run as far as they can while yelling at the top of their lungs.

Mammoth Hunt visitors can also learn how to throw an atlatl from Jim Ray, a competitive thrower and expert at using this 10,000-year-old weapon, which predates the bow and arrow. “I was always interested in history and pre-history, and I’ve found that you learn about people by using their things,” says Ray, a self-taught thrower who makes his own equipment.

You also learn about people by walking in their footsteps, says Coburn. First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park gives visitors the opportunity to exit the rush of nearby Interstate 15 and take a walk back in time to a site sacred to people of the past and the present. “This continues to be a spiritual place for so many Native people,” he says. 🐾



First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park hours

- April 12–September 12: 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily
- September 13–April 11: 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Wednesday–Saturday; noon–4 p.m. Sunday.

Visit fwp.mt.gov/stateparks for more information. Contact the park at 406-866-2217; ccarlson-thompson@mt.gov.

Watch a YouTube video showing footage of the park at: youtu.be/Z6jb_C94E9s



ALL PHOTOS: ELIZA WILEY (EXCEPT STICK BALL AND BISON); CANDY AUSTIN AND KARLENE FAULKNER (FWPTOM DICKSON)



ACTION PACKED Clockwise from above left: Under the watchful eye of a volunteer, a boy throws a tomahawk at a target during the park’s annual Mammoth Hunt celebration; a family plays “shinny,” a precursor to modern field hockey, using traditional chokecherry branches and a ball made of buffalo hide stuffed with hair; longtime volunteer Jim Ray helps a novice select an atlatl dart and thrower. An atlatl expert who competes in tournaments, Ray taught himself to use the 10,000-year-old weapon. Native people used atlatls to kill short-faced bears that stood 12 feet tall, mammoths weighing up to 10 tons, and other beasts that once roamed the region in and around First Peoples Buffalo Jump State Park; a life-size bison mount greets guests in the park’s museum-like visitor center.

