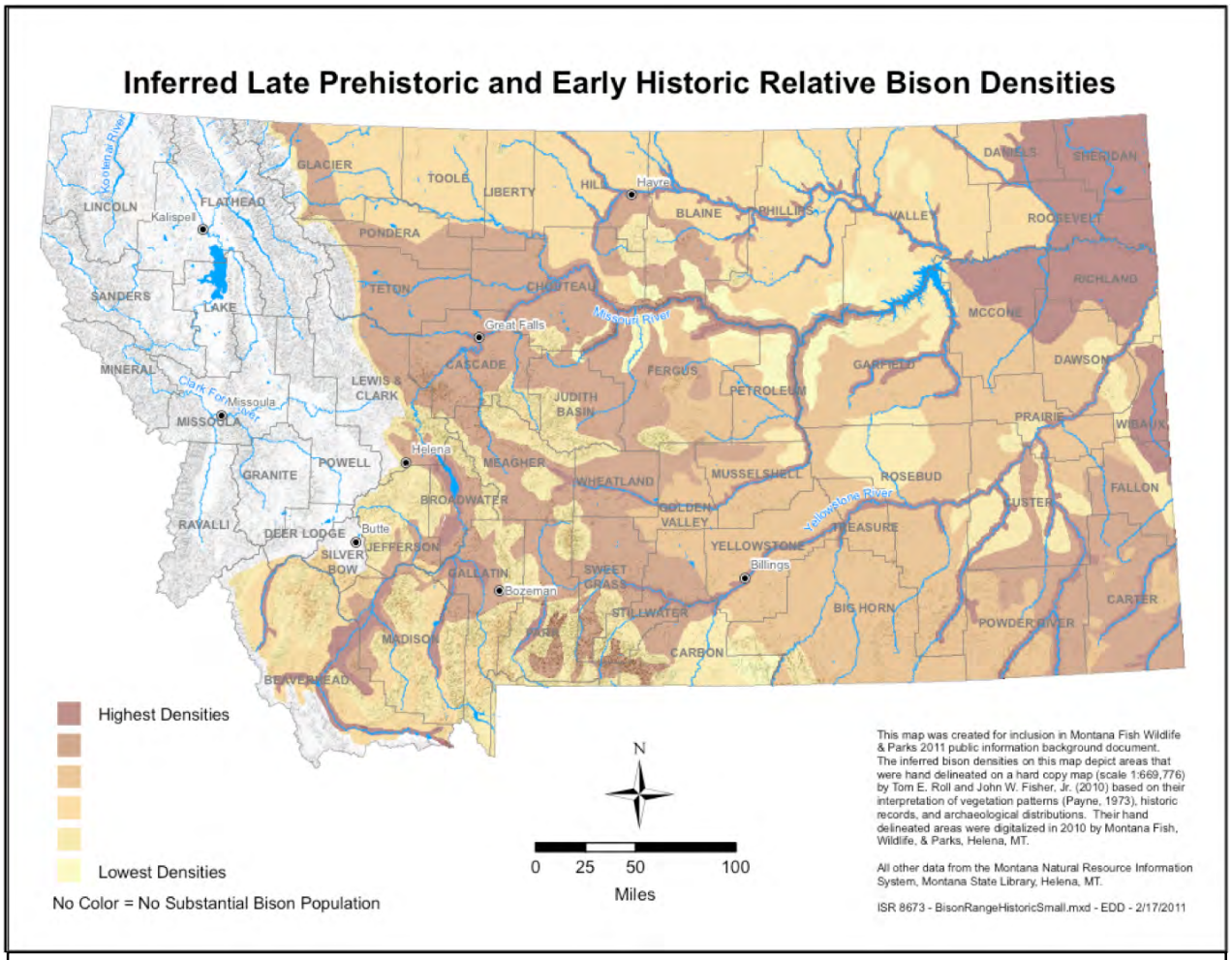
Prehistoric and Historic Distribution and Abundance in Montana

Map 2 illustrates the inferred late prehistoric and early historic relative distribution and densities of bison within the state of Montana. This map was created based on vegetation patterns (Payne, 1973), archeological records, and reports of historic human activities by Roll and Fisher Jr. Though populations of bison were found throughout much of the state, regions delineated as highest and higher densities had the highest estimated year-round populations.



Map 2: Inferred Late Prehistoric and Early Historic Relative Bison Densities. Created by Roll and Fisher Jr. (2010).

The observations of early travelers within the region, archeological records of a variety of bison kill sites, and the oral history of Native Americans support the distribution and abundance of bison within Montana. "What the long view of archaeology teaches us, that historical records cannot, is that nothing ever persists unchanged over great spans of time" (Brink, 2008, pp. xiv). Human hunters are believed to have hunted bison in Montana during the Early Prehistoric period (11,000 to 5,000 BC), though it was during the Middle

Prehistoric period (4,000 BC to 500 AD) that bison hunting was widely developed and the first evidence of bison "traps" was found (Arthur, 1966). Frison (1991) notes that radiocarbon dating of a bison bonebed at the Mill Iron archeological site outside of the town of Ekalaka in southeastern Montana dates back 11,000 years. The Powers-Yonkee archeological site in southeastern Montana dates back to approximately 3,000 years ago (Fisher Jr. and Roll, personal communication). Based on estimates of the number of humans and wolves within the region and on estimates of their respective consumption, there is evidence that during the Late Prehistoric period (1,800 to 200 years ago) humans were the most significant predatory pressure on bison in Montana, with rough estimates of annual human predation of 200,000 bison. In comparison, wolves were roughly estimated to have killed 25,000 bison annually (Fisher Jr. and Roll, 1998).

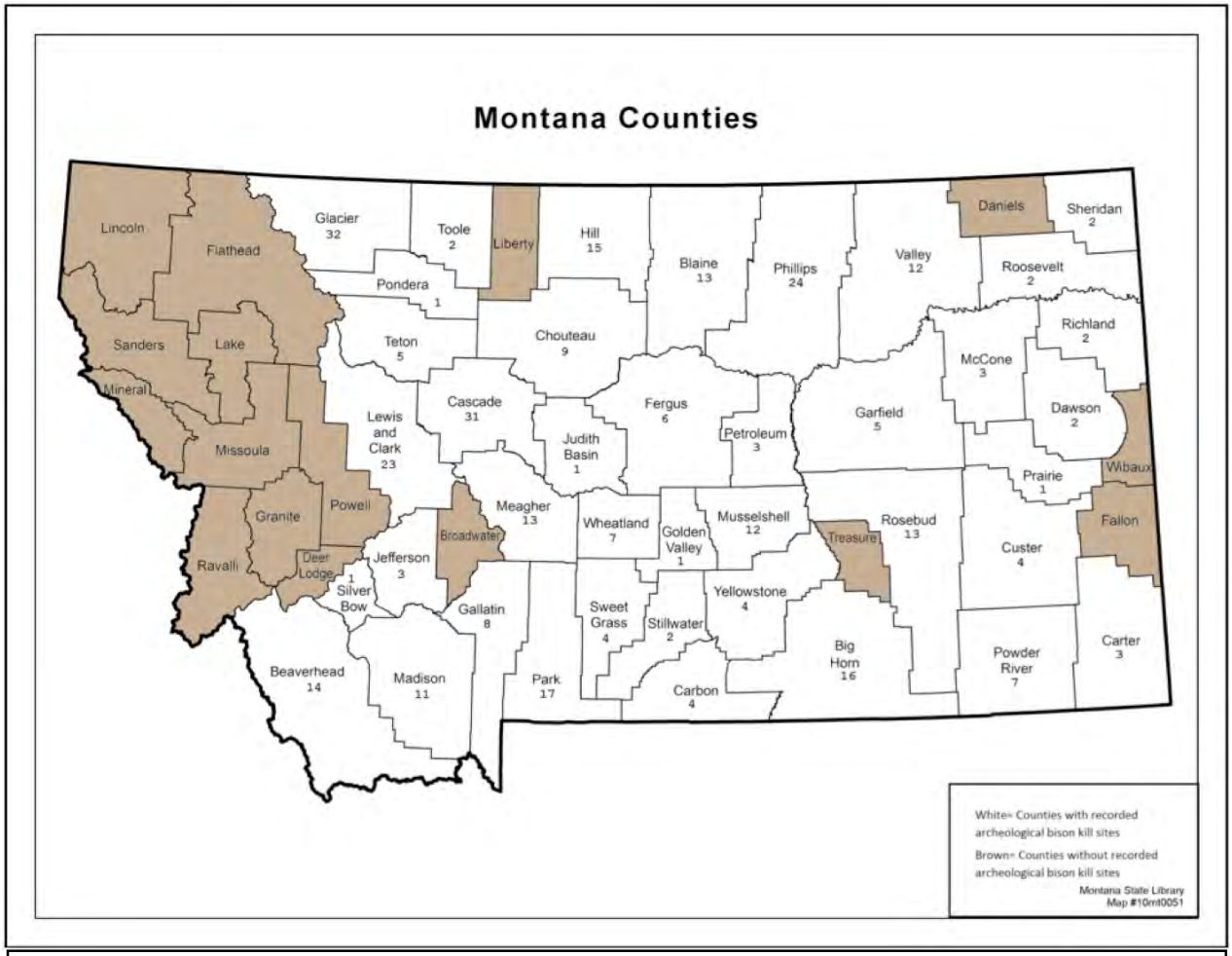
As of 2010, the State Historic Preservation Office of the Montana Historical Society had 320 bison kill sites on record, though it is estimated that these sites are only a small representation of the overall sites that once existed in Montana (data provided by D. Murdo, State Historic Preservation Office, May 2010). The recorded sites also do not account for individual bison kills, which would have represented the majority of bison harvested by humans (Fisher Jr. and Roll, 1999). The recorded kill sites illustrate the two types of hunting techniques employed by Native Americans. The first are bison jumps in which early hunters either on foot or horseback drove bison herds over a cliff (McHugh, 1972; Geist, 1996). These buffalo jumps were often used repeatedly and across generations. "If a herd of one hundred bison were run off a cliff at a single event (a number considered average), there is nothing in the four million years of human evolution when a comparable amount of food was procured at one time" (Brink, 2008, pp. 3). The First People's Buffalo Jump, formerly known as the Ulm Pishkun site, located southwest of Great Falls, is believed to have been used from 1,000 to 1,500 AD (Fisher Jr. and Roll, 1998). Buffalo jumps have been recorded throughout much of the northwest plains, with a substantial number in Montana, which is considered to be one of the main centers for buffalo jumps (Arthur, 1966).

The second type of archeological kill site found within Montana are bison pounds, in which bison were driven into a small area enclosed by either stones or logs and then slaughtered (Murdo, personal communication). Once bison had been driven into a pound, Grinnell noted, "The buffalo will not dash themselves against a barrier which is entirely closed, even though it be very frail; but if they can see through it to the outside, they will rush against it . . ." (Brink, 2008, pp. 88).

Bison kill sites are also sometimes referred to as *piskun* or *piskan,* which is a word in the Blackfeet language that is often described as meaning "deep bloody place" or "deep bloody kettle" (Fisher Jr. and Roll, personal communication). Frison (1991) notes that a variation of the classic buffalo jump involved stampeding a small herd over a low bluff or bank into a corral below. An example of this type of site is the Foss-Thomas site, located near Decker, in southeastern Montana (Frison, 1991). Cow and calf groups comprised the small herds that were targeted during communal hunting. "Bulls were, of course, hunted occasionally for a variety of reasons including food, but most of this was solitary, not communal hunting" (Brink, 2008, pp. 67). The fall and winter were the two seasons most

suitable to drive cow-calf groups, "but of the two seasons, fall stands out as the best of all. Not only are cows in the right place, of the right size groups, and at peak body condition in the fall, the weather is also most conducive" (Brink, 2008, pp. 67).

Both the buffalo jumps and pounds were communal hunts, which could efficiently slaughter large quantities of bison. "Teams of people worked together, the chores being too strenuous and the parts too heavy for individuals" (Brink, 2008, pp. 177). There are reports of hundreds and even a thousand bison killed in one hunting event (Krech III, 1999). Evidence from kill sites indicate that many of the large kills resulted in more bison killed than were actually processed and used by the Native Americans (Krech III, 1999). Many-Tail-Feathers, a member of the Blackfeet tribe, recalls that his father, Many-Tail-Feathers the elder, burned their piskan, near Choteau, after having a vision. In the vision he was told by a buffalo bull that "it is that with your piskans you are rapidly killing off us buffalo. If you keep doing it you will soon put an end to the very last ones of us." It is believed that this resulted in the end of the Blackfeet's use of piskans (Schultz, 1962, pp. 312–19).



Map 3: Distribution and Number of Known Archeological Bison Kill Sites. Created by FWP based on data provided by the State Historic Preservation Office of the Montana Historical Society

Based on data provided by the State Historic Preservation Office of the Montana Historical Society, bison kill sites have been recorded in 40 of Montana's 56 counties. The only counties in which archeological bison kill sites have not been recorded are Broadwater, Daniels, Deer Lodge, Fallon, Flathead, Granite, Lake, Liberty, Lincoln, Mineral, Missoula, Powell, Ravalli, Sanders, Treasure, and Wibaux (See Map 3). While the state records do not contain reports of bison kills sites in these counties, it is probably more a reflection of errors in the records than an actual absence of kill sites. For example, the Rinehart-Leavitt Site(s) were misreported and are actually located within Liberty County (Roll, personal communication). It is likely that many additional bison kill sites have been lost through erosion, geological processes, vandalism, bone mining, and development (Fisher Jr. and Roll, personal communication).

There is a large concentration of sites in the Upper Yellowstone Valley. The Long Ridge Jump, near Livingston, in south-central Montana, was one of the earliest sites used by the Crow tribe. Medicine Crow (1962) recalled that "it faced east toward the Yellowstone River. The runners got on top of the mountain and brought down elk, deer, and even rabbits, along with the buffalo" (pp. 47). Medicine Crow (1962) also noted that there were many sites used by the Crow tribe in Big Horn County. Some of the kill sites used by the Crow tribe were located near where Hoodoo Creek and Dry Head Creek split, along Grape Vine Creek, and near the town of Lodge Grass. Medicine Crow (1962) learned from his grandmother that the area near St. Xavier where Beauvais Creek and the Big Horn River meet is referred to as "place of many buffalo skulls or dried heads" and is now called Dry Head Country. The name came from the tribal practice of removing the heads of the bison and stacking them in one spot following a communal bison kill (Medicine Crow, 1962, pp. 37).

Native American Oral History and Records of Their Activity

Much of the record of the historic distribution of bison in Montana has been preserved through this sort of oral history of Native Americans, and in records of their activities. "Tipi rings," which are stones arranged in a circle, are the most frequently found archeological feature in Montana. It is believed that these rings were associated with the skin-covered pole lodges used by historic nomadic buffalo hunting tribes (Arthur, 1966).

As new technology became available to Native Americans, communal hunting techniques were altered from bison jumps and pounds to large horseback hunts. "The abandonment of traditional techniques can be traced to the sudden availability of new technology in Plains culture: guns and, especially, horses. The introduction of these two elements into traditional culture spelled the end of the pedestrian-based hunting methods and brought about dramatic changes for the Plains groups" (Brink, 2008, pp. 246). Father Pierre-Jean De Smet recorded a hunt he observed near the three forks of the Missouri. The party had camped on the middle branch of the Missouri (Madison) and the plains were abound with bison. "Finding themselves therefore in the midst of abundance, the Flatheads prepared to lay in their winter supply; they raised willow scaffolds about their lodges for drying meat, and everyone made ready his fore-arm, his bow and his arrows. Four hundred

horsemen, old and young, mounted in their best horses, started early in the morning for their great hunt . . . At a given signal, they rode at full gallop among the herds; soon everything appeared confusion and flight all over the plain; the hunters pursued the fattest cows, discharged their guns and let fly their arrows, and in three hours they killed more than 500" (De Smet, 1905, pp. 231–32).

The region between the Yellowstone and the Missouri Rivers was used as a bison hunting ground not only by regional tribes, but also by tribes that resided west of the Rocky Mountains (Farr, 2003). The Lemhi Shoshoni tribes would travel east to hunt bison, often joining with other bands of their own nation or with the Flatheads for added security against the aggressive tribes that controlled the eastern prairies (Teit, 1930; Farr, 2003). Teit (1930) noted that "others crossed the Rockies by passes farther north, and skirting the eastern foothills to the Gallatin Range, went north on both sides of it to Livingston and beyond. Some of them went to the Musselshell River, and occasionally as far as Lewistown and Fort Benton; but they did not seem to cross the Missouri" (pp. 305). Teit (1930) noted that the Bannock tribes also began to cross the mountains upon acquisition of horses, though they hunted alone and did not venture as far north and east into hostile territory as the Shoshoni.

When the tribes ventured into the plains to hunt bison, they faced threats from the fierce tribes who controlled the plains (Farr, 2003). Many tribes associated going to buffalo with going to war. For many western tribes, hunger was not the sole motivation for traveling east; they also viewed the buffalo plains as "their" hunting grounds (Farr, 2003, pp. 8). "After 1811, when the Salish and Kootenais acquired guns from the traders of the North West Company, these Indians resolutely attempted to recover the hunting grounds east of the mountains from which they has been driven by various Blackfeet tribes" (Farr, 2003, pp. 8). Trexler (1921) noted that "Hell Gate, just east of Missoula, is said to have been so named by the early whites on seeing the Indian skeletons lying about as the result of battles over buffalo meat and ponies" (pp. 358).

The Flathead tribes also ventured over the Rocky Mountains on horseback in search of bison. According to Turney-High (1937) the Flathead traveled on two annual hunts—the first was a brief summer hunt to obtain hides in which they usually went no farther east than Helena, while the second was a large winter hunt to the Musselshell River and the valley of the Yellowstone, as well as along the Missouri River occasionally as far south as Fort Hall. In the fall of 1838, Trapper Joseph "Joe" Meeks accompanied a group of Flathead and Nez Perce hunters east to procure winter meat. Meeks recalled that "we started off slow; nobody war allowed to go ahead of camp. In this manner we caused the buffalo to move on before us, but not to be alarmed. We war eight or ten days traveling from the Beaver-head to Missouri Lake, and by the time we got thar, the whole plain around the lake war crowded with buffalo, and it war a splendid sight" (Victor, 1870, pp. 248). Meeks commented on how the Native Americans prepared and executed the hunt, "a thousand men, all trained hunters, on horseback, carrying their guns, and with their horses painted in the height of Indians' fashion . . .by this time the buffalo war all moving, and we had come to within a hundred yards of them. Kow-e-so-te (a chief) then gave us the word, and away we went, pell-mell. Heavens, what a charge! What a rushing and roaring—men shooting,

buffalo bellowing and trampling until the earth shook under them! It war the work of half an hour to slay two thousand or may be three thousand animals" (Victor, 1870, p. 248).

The Native Americans of Lemhi Valley traveled to eastern Montana annually to obtain bison meat, which was the basis of their winter food supply (Thomas, 1991). Frank McCloed reported that his grandmother, who was a member of the Colville tribe of Washington, would travel with the Flatheads to the North Fork of the Sun River to hunt bison. During an interview in 1941, McCloed stated that his grandmother told him, "we made our camp at the mouth of the north fork of Sun River. Early the morning after our arrival, our men left camp for a hunt on the prairies. Empty handed, they returned late that night. They informed us they had seen many large herds stampeding in a northerly direction, but that they were unable to get within killing distance of the animals. They said that buffaloes were so numerous that the pounding of their hoofs made a noise like the rumble of thunder" (Whealdon, 2001, pp. 39).

Fleshing of a hide. PHOTOGRAPH BY L. A. HUFFMAN; FROM THE COLLECTION OF GENE AND BEV Allen

Louise Roberts reported that her mother, a Colville Indian, "used to go with her people on buffalo hunts east of the mountains. They would go to those regions in Montana that are now called the Sun River Country, Judith Basin, and often to that part called the 'Crow Indian Reservation'" (Whealdon, 2001, pp. 31). Francois Skyema, of the Flathead tribe, recalled that as a youth he had gone on buffalo hunts in the "Judith Basin country" (Arthur, 1966, pp. 53).

Oral history also indicates that there was a small bison presence in the western portion of the state. While accompanying a Salish tribe on a winter hunt in 1842, French missionary Father Nicolas Point noted that the tribe had "set out, and before the sun sank they had taken one hundred and fifty buffalo" south of Missoula near Hells Gate (Donnelly, 1967, pp. 150–55; Franke, 2005). In his study of the Flathead tribe of Montana, Turney-High (1937) noted that the Flatheads recalled that in former times, "bison did come in small numbers as far west as the Bitter Root Valley. A small but adequate supply could usually be taken on the low benches around Missoula. These were merely stalked, often in disguise, or ambushed" (pp. 115). Dr. Suckley, who traveled west on the Stevens expedition from 1853–55, wrote in December 1853 that "buffalo were formerly in great numbers in this valley (the valley of the Bitter Root, or St. Mary's River, one of the sources of Clarke's Fork of the Columbia), as attested by the number of skulls seen and by the reports of the inhabitants. For a number of years past none has been seen west of the mountains, but, singular to relate, a buffalo bull was killed at the mouth of the Pend d'Oreille River on the day I passed it. The Indians were in great joy at this, supposing that the Buffalo were coming back to them" (Hayden, 1877, pp. 516).

In 1941, Will Cave reported that the belief that there had never been bison around Missoula was false based on the stories he had been told by older Indians who had lived in the region, and by the fact that he himself had found a bison skull near the site of the Milwaukee depot (Whealdon, 2001). Cave also reported that in 1870 three buffalo lived in the hills of the Bitterroot Valley, located to the east of Stevensville, in Ravalli County (Whealdon, 2001). Joseph McDonald, who grew up in the Flathead Valley, noted that "my brother Duncan and I were of the opinion that during past ages, buffalo had roamed this part of Montana. Some of the old tales of our Indians support this belief. Years ago, while I was helping Duncan clear stumps and roots off his Ravalli ranch, we uncovered an ancient appearing buffalo head and other bones. Similar evidences have been found in other parts of our region" (Whealdon, 2001, pp. 105).

Analysis of the historic ecological makeup of the habitat of the western portion of Montana does not support the existence of large bison herds like those found to the east of the Rocky Mountains. For example, on the eastern steppes there were 34 species of *Onthophagus,* a genus of dung beetle that historically survived on the manure of bison, and then subsisted on the manure of the cattle that replaced the bison. Historically dung beetles were absent from the western steppes. Upon the introduction of cattle, the native decomposers of the western habitat were unable to rapidly assimilate to the large quantity of manure (Hayes, 1927; Mack and Thompson, 1982). This indicates the probability that the decomposers of the western steppes did not evolve with a substantial presence of large herbivores such as bison (Mack and Thompson, 1982).

Van Vuren (1987) suggests that large populations of bison did not occur west of the Rocky Mountains due to the lower carrying capacity of the western steppes, and the slow recolonization rates following local extinctions. The production of herbaceous vegetation was much lower on the western steppes than in the Great Plains, which greatly reduced the carrying capacity (Van Vuren, 1987). The Great Plains, east of the Rocky Mountains, consisted of nearly continuous suitable grassland bison habitat, which allowed significant connectivity between populations. While suitable habitat did exist west of the Rocky Mountains, it was not contiguous but part of a mosaic of habitats, many of which were not suitable for bison. This caused bison populations to be separated from one another, often by geographic barriers (Van Vuren, 1987). McDonald (1981) observed some indications of inbreeding in small bison populations west of the Rocky Mountains, which supports the theory of population isolation. The lack of connectivity between populations could have caused slow recolonization of regions following a localized extinction event, such as mortality from deep snow or from human predation (Van Vuren, 1987). Turney-High (1937) noted that the Flatheads within the Bitterroot Valley felt that "with the coming of the great hunting animal (the horse) the bison rarely came so far west" and "that the superior mounted hunting methods taxed the local supply too heavily" (pp. 115). While passing through the Upper Gallatin Valley, west of Bozeman, Sacagawea informed Clark that "a fiew years ago Buffalow was very plenty in those plains & Vallies quite as high as the head of Jeffersons river, but fiew of them ever come into those vallys of late years owing to the Shoshones who are fearfull of passing in-to the plains West of the mountains and subsist on what game they can catch in the Mountains . . . (Thwaites, 1904b, pp. 261).

Another potential constraint on the ability of bison to thrive in the habitat west of the Rocky Mountains was the life cycle of the historically dominant plants in the region. The staggered life cycle of the grasses that made up the eastern habitat would have supported the bison's increased nutritional needs during the calving and milk production cycle (Mack and Thompson, 1982). The growth cycle of the dominant grasses west of the Rocky Mountains, which remained in a dormant state during much of the summer, would not support the nutritional needs of lactating female bison (Mack and Thompson, 1982). Though it is possible that the reproductive cycle of bison may shift based on environmental conditions, Van Vuren (1987) noted that breeding and presumably calving occurred up to six weeks earlier in the southern herds than in the northern herds. It is probable that small herds could have inhabited the western steppes, but they would have had to remain near sites of permanent water during the summer (Mack and Thompson, 1982).

Accounts of Early Explorers, Trappers, and Settlers

Early Montana explorers reported sightings of bison throughout much of the state. During their famed expedition to the Pacific coast, Lewis and Clark kept detailed records of their travels throughout Montana. In late April 1805, upon their arrival into what is present-day Roosevelt County, Lewis observed that "the whole face of the country was covered with herds of buffalo, elk, and antelope . . . the buffalo, elk, and antelope are so gentle that we pass near them while feeding . . ." (Brandt, 2002, pp. 132). Lewis and Clark observed bison herds as the party navigated along the Missouri River and explored sections of the Yellowstone, Teton, Marias, Two Medicine, Sun, Milk, Gallatin, Madison, and Jefferson Rivers. On May 3, near the Porcupine River, Lewis noted, "we saw a vast number of buffalo, elk . . ." (Brandt, 2002, pp. 142). Later along the Milk River, on May 8, Lewis commented, "we saw a great number of buffalo, elk . . ." (Brandt, 2002, pp. 151). In the White Cliffs Area in early June, the party shot two bison (Ambrose, 1996, pp. 228).

Statue of Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea. PHOTO CREDIT: J. PEACO; COURTESY NPS

On their approach to the great falls of the Missouri in June, Lewis noted that "the hunters now arrive loaded with excellent buffalo meat and inform me that they had killed three very fat cows about three-quarters of a mile hence" (Brandt, 2002, pp. 168). Shortly after, on June 14, Lewis commented that in the valley between the Sun and Missouri Rivers, "there was a herd of at least a thousand buffalo" (Brandt, 2002, pp. 172). During their portage around the great falls, near Portage Creek, Lewis noted that they saw "a vast number of buffalo feeding in every direction around us in the plains, and others coming down in large herds to water at the

river" (Brandt, 2002, pp. 178). Following the portage the expedition spent time camped near the White Bear Islands, which is close to where the Sun River flows into the Missouri River. There, Lewis commented on the "great number of buffalo in the plains" (Brandt, 2002, pp. 185). The party killed their last bison on the journey west on July 16, about 25 miles above the great falls of the Missouri, well within the foothills of the Rockies, "killed a buffalow on which we Brackfast" (Thwaites, 1904a, pp. 235; Trexler, 1921).

The expedition noticed a lack of bison once they crossed into the Rocky Mountains, though they still observed signs of the animal. On August 2, 1805, near Three Forks, where the Gallatin, Madison, and Jefferson Rivers intersect, Lewis noted, "the bones of buffalo and their excrement of an old date are to be met with in every part of this valley but we have long since lost all hope of meeting with that animal in these mountains" (Brandt, 2002, pp. 208).

Upon their return journey, after the party had separated, far up in the mountains in what is now Beaverhead County, near Ross' Hole, Clark noted, "I observed the appearance of old buffalow roads and some heads on this part of the mountain. Proving that formerly Buff. roved there & also that this the best route, for the Buff. and the Indians always have the best route & here both were joined" (Thwaites, 1904b, pp. 249–50; Trexler, 1921). Clark commented that "we appear to be in the beginning of the buffalow Country. Saw several herds of buffalo Since I arived at this Camp," as the party neared the Livingston area (Thwaites, 1904b, pp. 279; Trexler, 1921). Clark first noted that a buffalo had been killed shortly after crossing Bozeman Pass on his route to the Yellowstone River (Brandt, 2002). As Clark traveled down the Yellowstone River, he observed near the mouth of the Big Horn, some distance west of Billings, "emence herds of Buffalow about our (camp) as it is now running time with those animals" (Thwaites, 1904b, pp. 294; Trexler, 1921). In July 1806 on the Yellowstone River near present-day Billings, Clark noted, "for me to mention or give an estimate of the different species of wild animals on this river particularly Buffalow, Elk, Antelopes and Wolves would be incredible. I shall therefore be silent on the subject further" (Whittlesey and Schullery, 2011, pp. 24).

Two miles west of Lincoln, along the Blackfoot River west of the Continental Divide, Lewis wrote, "saw some sight of buffaloe early this morning in the valley where we encamped last evening from which it appears that the buffaloe do sometimes penetrate these mountains a few miles. We saw no buffaloe this evening. But much old appearance of dung, tracks &c" (Moulton, 1993, pp. 96). Lewis began to observe more bison soon after crossing the Continental Divide by way of Lewis and Clark Pass near Missoula (Danz, 1997; Brandt, 2002). During their descent from the pass they encountered signs of bison all around them, but it was not until the following day when the party crossed the Dearborn River that a bison was killed and Lewis wrote, "we feasted on the buffalo" (Ambrose, 1996, pp. 381). Soon after, while traveling down the Sun River the party proceeded along, as Lewis noted, "a level beautiful and extensive high plain covered with immense herds of buffalo . . . I sincerely believe that there were not less than 10 thousand buffalo within a circle of two miles" (Ambrose, 1996, pp. 381).

Following the Lewis and Clark Expedition, fur trappers traversing the region's rivers and streams in search of fur-bearing animals recorded accounts of bison. Alexander Ross was a fur trapper who led the Snake Country Expedition in 1824. During the expedition Ross spend almost a month trying to cross the mountains near Ross' Hole, which is now the town of Sula in Ravalli County. During that time some of his party traveled to the Big Hole Basin on snowshoes to hunt bison. Upon their return five days later, on March 28, Ross noted that "the buffalo hunters came back today, buffalo in plenty; thirty killed, six of the men brought over 140 pounds of dried meat but becoming snow blind could not secure the meat left behind" (Elliott, 1913, pp. 376; Koch, 1940).

Peter Skene Ogden was a trapper for the Hudson's Bay Company. In February 1825, his party crossed from the east side of the Continental Divide over Lemhi Pass, which is now a political boundary separating Montana and Idaho, and "encamped in a fine spot" where hundreds of buffalo were seen. Ogden noted that "as far as the eye can reach the plains appear to be covered with them (Cline, 1974, pp. 54). On the following day Ogden commented on his party's bison hunting, "many [buffalo] were killed this day not less than 30 . . . the temptation of running buffalo is too great for them to resist" (Cline, 1974, pp. 54).

Osborne Russell was a fur trapper who kept journals during his travels throughout Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. Russell encountered numerous bison throughout much of the region. In September 1835, as he traveled along the Ruby River, Russell noted that "the Valley opened wider as we descended and large numbers of Buffaloe were scattered over the plains and among the hills" (Haines, 1955, pp. 33). Shortly after, upon entering the Centennial Valley, near Lakeview, just north of the Montana-Wyoming border, Russell noted that "this Valley as a Mountaineer would say was full of Buffaloe when we entered it and large numbers of which were killed by our hunters" (Haines, 1955, pp. 34).

About a year later, in September 1836, near Livingston, Russell observed that "the country lying on this stream (25 Yard River, now called Shields River) is mostly comprised of high rolling ridges thickly clothed with grass and herbage and crowded with immense bands of Buffaloe intermingled with bands of antelope" (Haines, 1955, pp. 47). On the Yellowstone River, just east of where it meets the Stillwater River, in mid-October 1836, Russell recorded that "the small streams being frozen trapping was suspended and all collected to winter quarters where were Thousand of fat buffalo feeding in the plains and we had nothing to do but slay and eat" (Haines, 1955, pp. 50). Soon after, on Beauvais Creek in Big Horn County, Russell commented that "this section of country is very uneven and broken but abounds with Buffaloe Elk Deer and Bear" (Haines, 1955, pp. 50–51). Later Russell noted that they "made havoc among the Buffaloe" for entertainment while encamped near where the Yellowstone and the Shields River intersect (Haines, 1955, pp. 56). The following year, in April, south of the Yellowstone River on the Clarks Fork, Russell noted that "the whole country here was filled with Buffaloe driven this way by the Crow Village" (Haines, 1955, pp. 55).

During naturalist John James Audubon's journey along the Missouri River to Fort Union in 1843, he kept a journal filled with observations of bison and their behaviors. While at Fort Union some of Audubon's traveling companions went on a bison hunt in the

surrounding region. "I observed, as we approached the Buffaloes, that they stood grazing with their heads erect, lashing their sides with their tails; as soon as they discovered what we were at, with the quickness of thought they wheeled, and with the most surprising speed, for an animal apparently so clumsy and awkward, flew before us (Audubon, 1900, pp. 62). Following the harvest of a bison, the hunter noted, "I think that I never saw an eye so ferocious in expression as that of the wounded Buffalo; rolling wildly in its socket, inflamed as the eye was, it has the might frightful appearance that can be imaged; and in fact, the picture presented by the Buffalo as a whole is quite beyond my powers of description" (Audubon, 1900, pp. 62–63).

Bison skull. Photo Credit: J. Schmidt; Courtesy of NPS

As interest in the western territories grew, the U.S. government and eastern institutes funded more exploration of the West. Thaddeus Culbertson, a naturalist on an expedition funded by the Smithsonian Institution, noted in June 1850 that "a large band of buffalo cows with their calves were crossing just above the mouth of the Porcupine (now the Poplar River, near Poplar, in northeastern Montana) . . . The buffalo have been seen in great bands for several days past; last evening probably five hundred were in sigh(t) at one time on the river banks" (Montana Historical Society, 1976, pp. 21).

Isaac Stevens, who would later become Washington's first territorial governor, journeyed west from 1853 to 1855 to survey a route for a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. As he moved through northeastern Montana, Stevens (1859) noted, in August 1853, that "the Three Buttes, or the Sweet Grass hills, some sixty miles to the northward of us, is a favorite resort of the Blackfeet, who say the Providence created these hills for the tribe to ascend and look out for buffalo" (pp. 81). In reference to the Little Rocky and Bears Paw Mountains, Stevens (1859) noted that "this region, from the Bear's Paw to the north of Milk river between the Missouri and the Milk, is an exceedingly fine grazing country. It is well watered by the streams flowing into it, Milk River and the Missouri. The buffalo is found here in very large numbers, as well as on the Milk River itself" (pp. 213). Stevens sent men in his expedition to explore outlying regions. Stevens (1859) recorded in September 1853 that Lieutenant Mullan reported that within a level plateau between the Girdle and Judith Mountains he had "traversed by the numerous branches of Judith River and (found that region) covered with excellent and high grass. Innumerable herds of buffalo were feeding near the mountains . . ." (pp. 104). In December of the same year, Stevens (1859) reported that Lieutenant Mullan was exploring west of the Divide and commented on the large amount of bison skulls near Market Lake, which is across the Montana border in Idaho. On Mullan's return, as he passed near the three forks of the Madison, Jefferson, and Gallatin Rivers, he noted that "the wooded mountains now gave place to low ranges of rolling prairie hills that lost themselves in the swelling prairies

that constitute the great plains of the Missouri and Yellowstone, upon which graze countless herds of buffalo" (pp. 148–49).

In 1859, Brevet Brigadier General W. F. Raynolds was dispatched to further explore the Yellowstone River. In July, in the valley of the second fork of the Little Missouri, near the drainage of the Powder River, Raynolds (1868) noted that "we are now in the buffalo region, and small herds are to be seen in all directions" (pp. 33). Though he commented on how barren the valley along the Powder River was, he also noted, "animal life has not entirely forsaken it, however . . . scattered bands of buffalo have been seen roaming among the barren hills in the distance, as if in search of food" (Raynolds, 1868, pp. 35). He felt that the bison used this barren landscape due to pressure from Native American hunters. Raynolds, (1868) postulated that "the presence of these animals in such large numbers in this barren region is explained by the fact that this valley is a species of neutral ground between the Sioux and the Crows and other bands nearer the mountains, or, more correctly speaking, the common war ground visited only by war parties, who never disturb the game, as they would thereby give notice to their enemies of their presence. For this reason the buffalo remain here undisturbed and indeed would seem to make the valley a place of refuge" (pp. 38). Later the same year, during his exploration of the Big Horn Valley, within sight of the mouth of the Little Big Horn River Raynolds (1868) noted that "about 11 o'clock a herd of buffalo was discovered and Bridger's skill with the rifle soon added two cows to our larder" (pp. 54).

Two year old taken, Tongue River, M.T., Photograph by L.A Huffman; From the Collection of Gene and Bev Allen

Another group that relied on the bison to support their communities and economy were the Métis, a cultural group made up of the descendents of Native American and European traders. The Métis hunted bison along the Milk River. In 1868, Turtle Mountain Métis Baptiste Gardipee moved his family to a hunting camp near Dodson, in north-central Montana. There his son Eli Gardipee noted that "the camp was in the midst of the buffalo herds and they hunted and worked hard during the day . . ." (Foster, 2006). The bison herds soon declined along the Milk River, and many of the Métis began to follow the bison to the Judith Basin in central Montana (Foster, 2006). A group of Métis settled in present-day Lewistown. Upon arriving in the area, one of the members of the group, Ben Kline, noted that the men were able to locate the bison herds and "killed lots of them" (Foster, 2006). Later Ben Kline and a hunting party traveled south of the Snowy Mountains to the "Gap in the West," most likely present-day Judith Gap, where Kline noted that they killed so many bison that it took "a whole week to dress and dry the meat" (Foster, 2006).

The discovery of gold brought an influx of settlers to Montana. Many of these groups traveled in wagon trains along the famous Bozeman Trail. The pioneers often recorded their sightings of bison in journals. While camped along the Little Big Horn River in 1866, William K. Thomas and Perry A. Burgess both commented on wanton hunting practices that occurred on the trail. Thomas wrote, "we saw hundreds of Buffalo to day and I believe some ten to fifteen killed. It is a shame to be so fatal and to kill off the poor Indians heard (herd) so we are camped in the little horn (Little Big Horn River) to night" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 543). Burgess observed that "Buffalo very numerous. Some of the men killed them and left them lay without even cutting off a piece of flesh. I think that they should not kill any more game than they want to eat" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 566).

Soon after crossing the Little Big Horn, the Bozeman Trail crossed through a countryside that was abundant with bison in the 1860s. In August 1866, Davis Willson commented while traveling by Pass Creek and Lodge Grass Creek that "wild game becoming more & more abundant. The hills ahead are perfectly cover with buffalo . . . (Upon startling a herd) it was a grand sight to see them running over the prairie, snorting at every step & leaping over the bluffs and ravines as they passed" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 607). Shortly after crossing the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone, Willson remarked, "main chain of the Rocky mountains in the distance. Buffalo ahead" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 612).

Many wagon trains crossed the Big Horn River at the Spotted Rabbit Crossing, 8 miles north of the opening of the Big Horn Canyon, about 30 miles from Hardin. There John T. Smith noted in 1864 that "we reached the Big Horn on the 4th of July, which the boys celebrated by killing over a hundred buffalo" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 204). About 28 miles west of the Big Horn River ferry, near what is known as Devil's Gap, during August 1868, Abraham Polk Flory recorded that "started our journey again traveled 10 miles to small creek (Beauvais Creek, near Devil's Gap) & campt . . . Buffalo by the thousands has a big stampede in night" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 327). The journal of Samuel Finley Blythe from 1866 noted that, in August, near Joliet, "buffalo, deer, and antelope are quite numerous. We saw two large herds of buffalo to-day" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 642).

The above reports, observations, oral history, and archeological findings are but a small representation of the rich and diverse history of human and bison interactions throughout Montana. While most early settlers and explorers of the region noted a wide variety of species in their journals and memoirs, it was the herds of bison that seemed to have made a lasting impression and garnered the most attention. Punke (2007) notes that "for emigrants traveling west, sighting the first buffalo marked a signature moment in their voyage—true arrival on the frontier" (pp. 48).