

A Brief History of the Early Days of Bison Management in RMNP

According to Tabulenas, 1983, the first bison shipment arrived in 1931, and consisted of 4 bulls and 16 cows. These animals were shipped “free of charge by the CPR railway from Wainwright, Saskatchewan (sic).” The first enclosure was 300 acres, but was later expanded to 1000 acres prior to 1940. Shortly after the arrival of the bison herd, other animals for which Riding Mountain was noted were added to the enclosure, including elk and moose. One mule deer and one white-tailed deer were also included by 1933.

In 1937, a bison was found dead of unknown causes, and a necropsy was performed. The diagnosis was tuberculosis. The veterinarian for the Department of Agriculture made some bison management suggestions:

1. The oldest animals in the herd were to be slaughtered immediately (no avenue of infection was apparent, thus it was assumed that TB arrived with the bison, and by keeping only young stock, the disease could be kept at a minimum).
2. The yearly slaughter of all apparently barren cows, or those showing signs of TB.

In 1937, 21 surplus bison, including 8 sterile cows were slaughtered. A caretaker was hired to monitor the health of the herd year-round in 1938. In 1939, 18 animals were killed, and the remaining 57 animals in the herd were believed to be free of bovine TB. Thus ends the story according to Tabulenas.

However, Sheilagh Ogilvie, in “The Park Buffalo,” picks up the thread of the story. “In 1946, T.B. tests of one thousand buffalo in the park (Elk Island) showed negative. Since the display herds in Banff and Riding Mountain Parks were heavily infected, the animals were destroyed and the herds restocked with animals from Elk Island, a procedure that continues to the present day.”

I was unable to track down more information about how or when the eradication of the original herd occurred. I assume, from what Ms. Ogilvie writes, that the original bison herd was killed in 1946 and replaced in that same year. To date (2002) official management records for the bison herd from the mid-1930’s to 1946 have not been found.

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Sources:

Tabulenas, D. T. 1983. A Narrative Human History of Riding Mountain National Park and Area: Prehistory to 1980. Parks Canada Publication. pp.227-228, pp. 266-268.

Ogilvie, Sheilagh C. 1976. The Park Buffalo - The role of Canada’s National Parks in the Preservation of the North American Bison. Parks Canada Publication. p. 70.

