

Kids' Corner

Visitors Crowd To National Bison Range

MOIESE, Mont. — Out here, where the buffalo roam and the deer and the pronghorn antelope play, there is a dilemma that reflects in microcosm a similar problem affecting Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Glacier parks and other better-known pieces of the national heritage.

The dilemma is this: How do you make such places, supported by taxpayer dollars, open and accessible to the public without attracting so many people that the whole point of the enterprise is lost?

Moiese is home to the National Bison Range, one of the oldest components in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's chain of wildlife refuges and one of the key elements in the successful early-century battle to save the American bison from extinction.

Park Relatively Small

Compared with the big national parks, the National Bison Range is tiny, as is the number of visitors who come here in a year, compared with, say, the 2.6 million who annually visit Yosemite.

Yet, in 1983, when the number of visitors to the 18,541 acres of grasslands, low-rolling mountains, and gently flowing streams reached a record 132,000, range manager Jon Malcolm feared that a further increase could cause grave problems.

In 1984, the number of visitors dropped by 24 percent, to 106,000, and Malcolm noted in his annual report that this was "optimum in terms of providing visitors with a quality experience." Partly because of unseasonably cold temperatures and early, heavy snow, the number dropped to 96,000 in 1985.

Visits in 1986 are up, however — 10 percent higher in May and June over the same months in 1985, a big

32 percent jump in July — and Malcolm is worried. "It's kind of hard to tell people, well, don't come because we've got enough the way it is," he says. "But that is one of our concerns."

A 1985 census on the range counted a balanced population of elk, white-tailed and mule deer, bighorn sheep, pronghorn antelope, and mountain goats. There also were coyotes, who did their part to keep down the population of deer, antelope, and sheep.

But the animal that is the range's reason for being is thriving. There were 332 bison, with 90 calves, and a mortality rate of just 1 percent. The range annually auctions off what is known as excess; last year, 66 bison were sold, for display elsewhere or for their hides or meat.

Where 60 Million Roamed

The current status of the bison — the creature's true name, though most authorities use buffalo interchangeably — is a far cry from the animal's peak in the mid-19th century, when an estimated 60 million of them roamed North America.

But it is also a far cry from the bison's plight a few decades later. Many forces brought about the bison's decline: the suppression of Plains Indians who had lived in balance with the animal, hunting only what they needed for food and clothing; massive buffalo hunts that accompanied the settlement of the West; the rise of trophy hunting; the desire of settlers to eliminate buffalo so they could plant crops.

When late-century scientists set out on expeditions to collect specimens before it was too late, they could hardly find any. By 1900, there were only 39 wild bison in the United States, a small herd in Yellowstone. Alarmed, the

scientists and their supporters formed the American Bison Society.

They found an ally in President Theodore Roosevelt, who in 1905 designated a 61,500-acre tract in Oklahoma as a game preserve. It was stocked with 15 bison shipped, ironically, from New York's Bronx Zoo.

The conservationists then moved to have the government establish a second refuge. The Bison Society persuaded Congress to buy land in Montana from the Indians, and raised \$10,560 from the public to buy 34 bison from a privately owned Montana herd. The animals, the first stock of the National Bison Range, arrived in October 1909.

What visitors to the range find today is a situation vastly different from natural conditions. The other big-game animals were introduced over the years, beginning with white-tailed deer and elk. Heavy fencing surrounds the entire range, preventing the wildlife from roaming over farms and ranches. Some areas are fenced off to prevent overgrazing or to keep herds apart for their own good.

Management Essential

"The populations we have here are probably as intensively managed as you'll find on any refuge," Malcolm says. "These animals, if they're not managed, can have a severe impact on the habitat, so on an area this size, it's necessary to manage and manipulate them. Just the fact that we have big-game-type fence around the perimeter is not natural to begin with."

There are, however, few concessions to humans. There is an information center with exhibits about the range and the history and biology of the bison, and a few animals are kept in display



At home on the National Bison Range, a buffalo bull displays wariness befitting a species that barely avoided extinction. Only 39 wild bison could be counted in the entire United States in 1900, compared with 60 million a few decades earlier. Congress set up the 18,000-acre Montana refuge in 1909.

pastures nearby.

"We find that a lot of people, all they want to do is stop by and see a buffalo or two and they're satisfied," Malcolm says. "By providing for those people, that's one thing that limits the use on the longer tour."

The "longer tour" is a 19-mile

self-guided excursion over a dusty, unpaved road that winds up and around Red Sleep Mountain. It can easily take two hours, but visitors are rewarded with a view of much of the range's wildlife. It is a daunting trip. Far fewer than half the visitors embark upon it.

COLOR THIS!

1. BLACK	6. PINK
2. LT. GREY	7. GREEN
3. YELLOW	8. LT.BROWN
4. BLUE	9. LT.BLUE
5. BROWN	10. LT.GREEN

MALAYAN TAPIR: THIS ANIMAL IS RELATED TO THE HORSE AND RHINOCEROS EVEN THOUGH IT LOOKS LIKE A PIG. THEY LIVE NEAR WATER, AND LOVE TO SWIM. THE TAPIR STANDS 3 TO 3½ FT. HIGH AT THE SHOULDERS. NATIVES HUNT THEM FOR FOOD AND FOR THEIR THICK HIDES.

