

Ecological Restoration Brief

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Bison at the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge

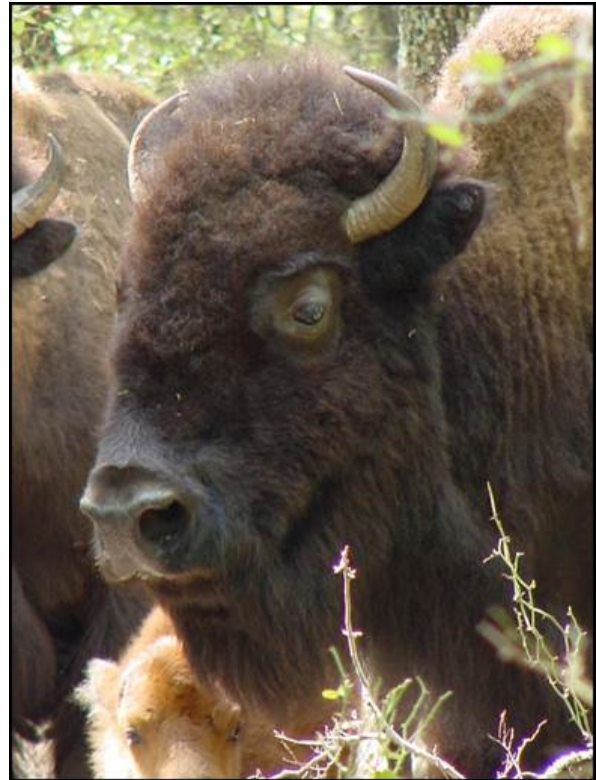
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Bison (*Bison bison*) are an iconic species of North America. They were abundant here through the 1800s when explorers/surveyors estimated the population to be between 30-60 million. After unregulated hunting; bison numbers dwindled to around 325

(www.fws.gov/bisonrange/timeline.htm).

Through the efforts of conservationists, the government and ranchers; bison numbers have recovered to around 30,000 (Defenders of Wildlife). There are few places in the world where you can see a genetically-pure bison herd (untainted by cattle genes). The Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge (FWNC&R) is one such place.

Established in 1964, the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, owned by the City of Fort Worth comprises 3,621 acres of riparian, wetland and upland habitat adjacent to the West Fork of the Trinity River. One of the first priorities for the newly-established refuge was to have a bison herd. In 1973, the FWNC&R received a donation of a bull and two heifers from Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge. Since then, the herd has expanded and now numbers 13.



**Bison (*Bison bison*) at the FWNC&R.
Photo credit: FWNC&R Staff**

The bison herd is managed for three purposes:

- 1) Conservation: The goal is to maintain natural genetic diversity. This is accomplished through genetic testing to determine pure bison genes without cattle DNA. Bison with cattle DNA are sold.

- 2) Exhibit: Having the herd accessible for the public to view provides opportunities for interpretive education.
- 3) Ecological: As much as is possible on a small-scale, the ecological purpose of the herd is to fulfill bison's natural role in the ecosystem.



Bison Handling - Vet Visit. The vet has a bison in the squeeze chute to administer shots, read the implanted chip and take DNA samples. Photo credit: FWNC&R Staff

The herd does not have pasturage across the 3,621 acres. There are 5 pastures totaling over 200 acres. They are rotated through the pastures with a combination of goals including grazing management, public viewing, and water availability. Most pastures are connected through double-gated airlocks.

Managing a bison herd is somewhat different than managing cattle. Although bison are tough animals, they require much sturdier handling equipment. In 1998, the Friends of the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge (FONC) purchased a durable Powder River handling system;* which allows for safe interactions with the herd during sorting and vet procedures. The herd is vaccinated annually for several diseases including brucellosis and has been certified as a Brucellosis Free Herd since 2003. The vet pit-tags the animals and tests their DNA for cattle genes. If cattle genes are detected, the bison are sold to non-conservation buyers.

Annually, over 50,000 people visit the FWNC&R and many of them come specifically to see the bison. This provides a multitude of opportunities for educational programming about bison. If you happen to be in the north Texas area, drop by the Fort Worth Nature Center &

Refuge to visit one of the few places in North America with bison descended from the 19th century herds formerly 30-60 million strong.

*Special thanks to FONC for assuming ownership of the herd; while allowing FWNC&R staff to manage the herd.



Bison (*Bison bison*) at the FWNC&R. Photo credit: FWNC&R Staff.

The Society for Ecological Restoration, Texas Chapter promotes ecological restoration as a means of sustaining the diversity of life on Earth and re-establishing an ecologically healthy relationship between nature and culture.

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