



Over The Edge

Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation Newsletter

Volume XXXIII Number 2
October 2026

P.O. Box 396
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Annual Meeting To be held November 7

Each fall, the Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation board hosts an annual meeting open to members of the non-profit foundation. This fall, the meeting will be held on November 7 at 1 pm at the Vore Site. Board members will be available to guide attendees through the site beginning at 12 pm and after the meeting. The annual meeting serves as a forum to update our members on the previous summer season, the finances of the VBJF, and our outreach efforts. This year, we will honor the memory of Charles Reher. A new exhibit in Chuck's memory is now on display in the excavation building. The exhibit was prepared with help from Chuck's daughter Ann. In addition, officers will be elected for the coming year. The current VBJF board includes Jackie Wyatt (president), Christina Johnston (vice president), Ted Vore (treasurer), Adrienne Keller (secretary), Cliff Knesel, Matt Stefanich, and Lynette Wermager.

Before Wyoming: The West in 1776 – **PBS documentary features Vore Site**

In our last newsletter, we shared that the Vore Site would be one of the archaeological sites featured in the PBS documentary, *Before Wyoming: The West in 1776*. The documentary, directed and produced by Geoff O'Gara, was shown in community screenings in Crook County through support of the Wyoming Humanities Council in July. The documentary can be viewed on the Wyoming PBS YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/wyomingpbs>).



End of Season Gathering

As has become a tradition, staff, board members, and volunteers gathered to celebrate the season with a potluck in late August before staff members, who are mostly teachers and students, headed back to school.

Seated in the front row from left to right are Jennifer Adams (our crew chief) and Delaney Thurston. In the middle, from left to right, are Becky Holt, Tally Hughes, Heidi Johnson, and Diana James. In the back, from left to right, are Tracy Cuffel, Michael York, Josh Crews, Aislinn Riley, and Jordyn Crews. Delancey, Tracy, and Tally were new employees this year. Diana volunteered a day each week this summer. We couldn't have done it without her, and she has agreed to serve on the VBJF board beginning this fall!



Fall Semester Vore Scholars

The VBJF board is once again supporting two student interns who will help with efforts in the University of Wyoming Archaeological Repository to properly store and curate the Vore Collection. This program is funded by donors to the VBJF, including Sundance State Bank.



Aislinn Riley talks to visitors at the Vore Site about the people who likely used the sinkhole to trap bison.

Vore Scholar Aislinn Riley is a junior at the University of Wyoming, majoring in anthropology with a minor in history. Aislinn has a very special connection to the Vore Site. She has worked as an interpreter at the Site for the past three summers and has done a wonderful job. She's also the best at re-fletching darts that visitor throw at our target with an atlatl. Aislinn shared, "I have always loved history, old artifacts, and the stories hidden within the past. I applied for the Vore internship to gain hands-on experience with archaeological materials, especially bones and other faunal remains. I'm excited to learn more, build my skills, and discover what these materials can tell us about the people who came before us!"



Elijah Applegate during an archaeological survey on Pole Mountain in Medicine Bow National Forest.

Vore Scholar Elijah Applegate is an anthropology major with a focus on archaeology. Elijah grew up Lander, Wyoming in an environment that gave him a deep appreciation for both historical and prehistoric artifacts. For his first "artifact of the week post", Elijah stated, "One of my earliest memories is exploring Sinks Canyon near Lander with my dad in search of projectile points. Ever since then, I have been hooked on archaeology. I applied for the Vore Internship to gain more experience with collections management. I also hope that this internship will help me build professional connections within the University of Wyoming Anthropology Department and further develop the skills necessary for my future career in archaeology."



Quilt Raffle

To raise funds for the tipi lighting project, the VBJF board raffled a quilt made by Jami Herndon, daughter of the Vore Buffalo Jump Foundation treasurer Ted Vore. The winner was Catherine Ruffato, pictured here with her daughter Avery.



Archaeology Volunteers

Our annual open house on June 1 was well attended, mostly by visitors from the region. Local archaeologists, organized by board member Cliff Knesel, pitched in to clean the bone bed.

American Bison: to the Abyss and Back

By Gene Gade

In the fall of 1883, a young politician from New York decided that he needed to shoot a buffalo “while there were still buffalo to be shot”. He took a train west, hired a guide, and set out to find his trophy in the rugged grasslands of what are now North Dakota and eastern Montana, an area that decade or two earlier had supported millions of bison. After a grueling 12-day search, the guide and his client finally found a lone bison bull, and the dude shot it. The wounded bull ran over a ridge, but tracks and blood led to its carcass in an arroyo. The triumphant hunter danced around the trophy whooping with joy. He then removed the bison’s massive head and hide and a small portion of meat before he and the guide rode away. The young hunter was Theodore Roosevelt.



Roosevelt meeting his trophy as immortalized in a painting by John Serrey-Lester entitled Visions in the Rain, acrylic on panel, 2017.

American bison, the scientific name for the animals commonly called buffalo, were already close to the extinction abyss before Roosevelt did his buffalo safari. The population decline had been underway since the so-called “robe trade” increased in the 1840s. As beaver trapping declined, traders encouraged the Plains tribes to barter using tanned buffalo hides as their primary currency. The Indigenous peoples’ desire for metal goods and other manufactured commodities was strong. Native American men increased their hunting, and women assumed the intense labor of tanning additional hides beyond those needed for their families.

Large-scale commercial bison hunting by white marksmen did not soar until after the Civil War. The initial motive was partly commercial. Rapidly growing industries in the eastern United States used leather belts of varying lengths and widths in their machines. Tough buffalo hides were highly valued for the purpose, and the supply seemed inexhaustible. Whole sections of oak forest were cut down in the Ohio River drainage because tannins from their inner bark were used for processing the leather. There was also demand for bison hides to use as sleeping robes, heavy coats, mittens, rugs, and many other items.

The main impetus, however, for destroying the enormous buffalo herds was that the U.S. government wanted to open the primary bison ranges to white settlement. Bison and the Indigenous tribes that depended on them were seen as an impediment to that policy and thus had to be removed. President Ulysses Grant named his former cavalry commander Phil Sheridan to head the post-Civil War army. Sheridan was very explicit that he wanted to quickly subdue the Plains tribes by destroying their “larder” (i.e., the buffalo). He told lawmakers to let hunters kill and sell buffalo without limits until the animals were gone.

The U.S. government subsidized a massive expansion of railroads through the bison range, transporting thousands of settlers to the Plains. Thousands of hide hunters were encouraged by the government to go west to join in the mass slaughter, armed with high-powered rifles and supported by crews of skinners. At times the U.S. Army even gave civilian hide hunters free ammunition, military escorts, and supplies to facilitate the carnage. Some railroads offered “sporting” excursions on which passengers could shoot buffalo from trains. Many of the hides were salvaged, and sometimes the bison tongues were harvested, but millions of carcasses were simply left to rot in the prairie sun. Records of companies that transported and processed the hides document that at least 15 million bison were killed for that commodity. Decades later the Plains were still strewn with countless buffalo bones. Trainloads were gathered and shipped east to be ground into fertilizer.



Bison were slaughtered from trains by hunters for sport as shown in the 1883 wood engraving titled “Slaughtered for a Pastime” published in Frank Leslie’s Popular Monthly (Vol. XV, May 1883, New York).

The magnitude of the slaughter was staggering. Averaged over the 40 years between 1860 and 1900, hunters killed a non-stop average of two to three bison every single minute of every single day. There is documentation that one skilled hunter killed 120 bison in 40 minutes. Sharpshooters routinely killed eight to twelve bison per hour. William “Buffalo Bill” Cody killed an average of 8 to 10 per day for 17 months, mostly to feed railroad construction workers. At its peak, an average of 5,000 buffalo were killed every day during the three years of 1872, 1873, and 1874.



Photos from the late 1800s from the Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Burton Historical Collection (Detroit Public Library) show piles of bison bones.

By the late 1800s, the railroads were built, the tribes were on reservations, ranchers and homesteaders were carving up the prairie. Cattle and sheep dominated the former buffalo ranges. From the Manifest Destiny point of view, the West had been won. Fortunately, however, there was a growing understanding that essential parts of the West could also be lost. Political and scientific entities, both private and public, saw the need for conservation. Awareness and attitudes of the American public were changing with regard to bison and natural resources in general.

Continued on page 4.

Continued from page 3.

For bison, the change in attitude and policy was none too soon. Some scientists believe the population had dipped to about 500 widely scattered bison before recovery efforts began. An 1889 census by William T. Hornaday documented that there were only 1,091 bison left out of at least thirty million that roamed North America before 1860.

Appropriately, Indigenous tribal members helped save the species from extinction. In 1873, a group of Blackfeet tribesmen led by Samuel Walking Coyote discovered a few orphaned buffalo calves in Montana. The hunters raised the calves and bred them. In 1884, the Blackfeet sold 10 bison to a couple of ranchers, Michel Pablo and Charles Allard. A little over a decade later the Pablo-Allard herd had expanded to almost 800 animals. The herd was offered for sale to the U.S. government, but the proposal was declined. In 1907, the Canadian government purchased 400 of the bison and released them in Elk Island National Park near Edmonton. A few years later, Canada transferred most of them to its Buffalo National Park, but between 40 and 70 bison escaped and proliferated. Elk Island National Park maintains a viable herd and has provided pure-bred, disease-free bison to parks and wildlife refuges around the world, including Yellowstone and several other sites in the U.S.

As a result of his 1883 hunt, Theodore Roosevelt came to love the West and its hardy lifestyle. He bought a ranch in the Little Missouri River badlands of North Dakota, and for the next several years, divided his time between the ranch and New York state. Made tangible by personal experience with the buffalo hunt and his conversations and correspondence with other leaders in the America's nascent conservation movement, Roosevelt came to an awareness that bison and many other wildlife species were in catastrophic decline. As his perspective and political power increased Roosevelt became progressively more involved in the movement to conserve wildlife and other resources. His personal transformation from wanton exploiter to resource steward was parallel to that of many North Americans at the end of 1800s.



Bison crossing the Little Missouri River in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Photograph by Chuck Haney for National Geographic.

The early conservation leaders included a Yale-trained naturalist, George Bird Grinnell. Young Grinnell served as a scientist on several exploratory ventures including Custer's 1874 Black Hills Expedition, a geological survey of Yellowstone, and another on the coast of Alaska. Grinnell wrote many articles and essays about bison and lobbied for congressional support for bison. The prolific Grinnell wrote two of the most important historical and ethnographic books about the Cheyenne tribe and contributed to the literature related to the Blackfeet and Pawnees. In his spare time Grinnell organized The National Audubon Society and the New York Zoological Society.

Grinnell, Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and others formed the Boone and Crockett Club to protect large wild animals from unregulated market hunting. In 1894, Grinnell and others persuaded congress to pass the

National Park Protection Act, mainly to stop poaching of bison and other large wild animals in Yellowstone. Although poaching continued, reducing Yellowstone's pure-bred bison population from about 200 in 1894 to 23 in 1902, this herd eventually rebounded and now numbers around 5,000 animals. At the end of his presidency, Roosevelt teamed with Gifford Pinchot to create what became the U.S. National Forest system and designated 18 National Monuments using his powers under the 1906 Antiquities Act. The first of the National Monuments was Devils Tower.

Scientists believe that bison entered North America from Siberia about 135,000 years ago. They spread over most of the continent and had multiplied to many millions before humans found their way into North America sometime between 20,000 and 13,000 years ago. Several ancestral species of bison went extinct over the millennia. The post-ice age evolutionary trend was toward animals of smaller stature, but the surviving species of modern bison proved to be resilient and adaptable to an amazing range of conditions.



This photo of the Custer State park herd during the fall roundup gives an idea of what early peoples must have seen when the vast bison herds roamed the Great Plains. Photo by Summer Ballentine for The Associated Press, 2023.

The attempt to save and rebuild the bison species from near extinction was a success. There are currently around 500,000 buffalo in North America. At least 30,000 live on public lands in the U.S. and Canada. Nine U.S. and six Canadian National Parks have buffalo herds. There are herds on Bureau of Land Management land and in U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuges. Numerous states maintain herds, including Custer State Park in the Black Hills. Sixty-five herds are distributed on tribal lands across 22 states in the U.S., and dozens of Canada's First Nations manage cultural or conservation herds. The vast majority of bison reside on privately owned ranch land and are managed as livestock for meat, leather, and other products.

Bison have been driven to and then pulled back from the abyss of extinction. However, scientists now wonder if, during the desperate scramble to save the species, did we inadvertently, and maybe irreversibly, alter the bison genome? By breeding populations from disparate regions, which are possibly subspecies, and by breeding with domestic cattle have we shuffled the genetic deck such that there are no real pure-bred Plains Bison left? Several new, state-of-the-art genetic studies have recently sought to answer such questions. The next article in this series will deal with those findings.