

# THE PASSING OF THE BUFFALO

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**T**HE AMERICAN BUFFALO (*Bison bison*) is the largest, most distinctive, and at one time, the most important of all American big game. Each animal weighs from 1,800 to 2,200 pounds at maturity. Its principal food was the short grass covering the western plains.

The buffalo formerly ranged over one-third of North America. The total area inhabited by the buffalo in the beginning of the 17th century was about 3,000,000 square miles, extending from the Gulf of Mexico to Great Slave Lake and from the western portions of the Atlantic States to Oregon. However, their principal range was the great prairie country between the Mississippi river and the Rocky Mountains. The total number of buffalo at the time of their discovery is conservatively estimated at 60,000,000, when their whole range was stocked as fully as food supply would allow. The various herds, each numbering up to 4,000,000 head migrated from 300 to 400 miles northward in spring and as far southward again during autumn. They covered vast areas in search of food, inhabiting chiefly the Great Interior Plains of North America. The bands moved in the form of a large oval. It requires from 10 to 30 or more acres of range per year to support each buffalo.

So vast was their number that at times they would completely obscure the prairie as far as the eye could see. A herd taking all day to pass would be at least 20 miles long and perhaps 25 miles across. When so massed buffalo run frequently 25 head to the acre.

Buffalo displayed well developed herd habits. Thus when one animal started for water they all followed

one another. The result was a system of trails radiating from permanent water to feeding grounds. Moulting or the losing of their winter hair takes place in the spring when large patches of skin are left bare. Flies and mosquitoes are attracted to these patches. In order to escape these insects, the buffalo covers himself with a thick coating of mud by rolling in low, wet places or finding none, will excavate a depression in the prairie sod with his front feet. Eventually water will collect in these hollows forming the well known "buffalo-wallows". These are still in evidence on the plains and occasionally are used similarly by range cattle.

As civilization moved westward, with the building of the transcontinental railroads and settlements, the balance of nature became upset. The buffalo could not withstand the onslaught of the white man with his firearms. Consequently these hide hunters rapidly caused the almost complete annihilation of the buffalo from the plains. A census taken in 1890 showed that about 635 buffalo were all that remained in the wild state. In North America today, there are approximately only 17,000 head of buffalo in National Parks, preserves and other protected areas. Under natural conditions they were timid, inoffensive and even dull. Their lack of intelligence has hastened their destruction.

The passing of the buffalo has spelled disaster to the Plains Indians. The buffalo was not only the main source of food for the Indians who frequently migrated with the herds, but also provided them with hides for clothing and tepees, sinews for thread and horns for buttons, spoons and other useful articles and ornaments. Predatory animals, chiefly wolves, also depended upon the buffalo for food.

The early explorers described the buffalo bands with superlative expressions such as: "Thundering herds," "Countless herds," "Incredible numbers" and "Teeming myriads." These are now only empty expressions of a once great and noble beast, the monarch of the plains.