

# OUR NATIONAL MAMMAL

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The Land Report  
proudly presents  
an excerpt from  
**Bison: Portrait  
of an Icon.**





**STANDING TALL**

The Bound Bison art installation was created in the spiritually iconic landscape of Montana's Blackfeet Nation in collaboration with a small group of tribal members in 2012.

**DIAMOND 4D RANCH**

Located along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, this bison ranch sustains a tradition that predates man's arrival in the Americas.



**T**he American bison, *Bison bison*, goes by many names. To scientists and park administrators, it is bison. To many Native people, it's buffalo.

To the Lakota, it's *Tatanka*.

Technically the animals are bison, but most Americans know them as buffalo. Place-names like Buffalo, New York; household items like the buffalo nickel; popular bands (Buffalo Springfield); team mascots (see the University of Colorado's Ralphie, team mascot to the Buffaloes); and Western mythology (thanks, Buffalo Bill!) have resulted in buffalo being the dominant name used throughout the country. In Yellowstone Park literature and at scientific conferences, however, it's bison.

Common wisdom indicates that the moniker buffalo was attached to the animals by Easterners and Europeans familiar with Asian water buffalo and African Cape buffalo. But some historians point to early nineteenth-century French trappers; they believe buffalo was an evolution of *boeuf*, the French word for beef. The conundrum was summed up most succinctly by one rancher with a strong scientific background. When he's conducting business, it's bison. When he suggests to his kids they go check on the herd, it's buffalo.

One needn't have picnicked in Yellowstone nor studied Plains Indian culture to have some idea of what a buffalo looks like — despite the fact that most Americans have probably never seen one in the flesh other than at a zoo, and it was only in 2016 that the bison was declared America's National Mammal. The animal has nonetheless pervaded our collective consciousness through film, through

art, and through tropes found in Western literature and design. Its likeness has been widely disseminated since the earliest days of westward expansion and has reached into schools and homes from coast to coast, to lifestyles and regions far removed from their historic range. Despite their exotic nature and their scarcity, the bison as an emblem is American as the eagle.

The prehistoric bison painted on the walls of the caves at Lascaux around 15,000 B.C. ultimately evolved to their more modern-day relatives depicted on North American teepees and in reservation-era ledger art. During the 19th century, as Easterners and Europeans began discovering the wonders of the West, bison were frequent subjects in artwork by George Catlin, in the 1830s, the first white man to depict Plains Indians on their own ground; Titian Ramsay Peale, a scientific illustrator who accompanied an 1819 expedition to the Rocky Mountains; and Karl Ferdinand Wimar, who traveled up the Missouri in the 1850s to document Plains tribes.

The widely influential artist Charlie Russell grew up devouring books about the Wild West. He left home at sixteen to go work on a Montana sheep ranch, but he was a bit late to the party, not arriving in the Rockies until the 1880s. Buffalo Hunt, Russell's first bronze of bison, wasn't sculpted until 1905, but by the time of his death in 1926, he'd produced more than 50 paintings and sculptures featuring buffalo. Frederick Remington was an Easterner and artist of the Hudson River School, but in 1891, when he took his first trip West, he was sketching what were by then merely remnants of the great herds.



#### CLASSIC NEON

The alluring glow of the Bison Bar in Miles City, Montana.

Buffalo were a popular subject for those who chronicled the disappearing West and remained so even after most of the animals were gone. During the heyday of Western style, from the 1920s through the 1950s, bison imagery was employed widely in decor, particularly on ranches owned by Easterners and Europeans and on dude ranches that catered to guests seeking an immersive Western experience. In 1904, Buffalo Bill Cody — famous for killing bison, then later for

introducing them to audiences around the world through his Wild West Shows — opened a log lodge for tourists on the Shoshone River at the eastern edge of Yellowstone National Park. At Pahaska Teepee, which is still open to Yellowstone travelers today, the bison reigns supreme. It's represented in taxidermy mounts, in a decorative buffalo-hunt chandelier by the bar, and in a life-size bison carving by the gift shop. Visitors to Pahaska will often see live bison as well. These animals,

**SACRED SIGN**

Extremely rare, the white bison is revered by Plains Indians.



having wandered out of the park, might be walking down the road or grazing placidly on the lawn.

As a motif buffalo are just as popular today, appearing not only in fine art but employed on everything from fine woodwork to decorative metalwork on gates, chandeliers, stair rails, and fireplace screens; these can be mass manufactured and sold in western Walmarts or custom hand-crafted by master artisans for multimillion-dollar mountain homes. Linens, toys, pottery, and children's pajamas decorated with buffalo hold timeless appeal. Bison appear frequently in contemporary art as well, in traditional historic paintings of the old school, in pop works found on Santa Fe's famed Canyon Road, and in Native American art.

Terrance Guardipee studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. His



More than an icon, wild free-roaming American Bison are our family elders who teach by example — if only we will listen.

Give generously. It's OK to take — just not too much. Always leave a place better than you find it. Care about each other. Stay agile. Don't complain.



— YVON CHOUINARD  
FOUNDER, PATAGONIA

works can be found in homes and museums around the world, including the Smithsonian. Guardipee creates art as an expression of his Blackfeet heritage and as a way of staying connected to his culture. His meticulously composed award-winning works depict tribal leaders, sacred ceremonies, and historic events, including the 1870 Marias Massacre on the Bear River in Northern Montana, during which his great-great-grandfather Chief Heavy Runner was killed. Guardipee's art references ancient ways of life, and his use of antique documents such as maps, ledger paper, and receipts speaks to the period when his people, having been forced onto reservations, made art using whatever materials were at hand. But he brings an immediacy to his work through bold use of color and a dynamic, contemporary style.

The buffalo is integral to his personal story and often appears in his work, he explains.



**CHIEF MOUNTAIN**

Bison graze beneath this Precambrian monolith on the Blackfeet Reservation.

“The buffalo was everything to my tribe: food, shelter, clothing. Almost our whole world revolved around it. To me it has greater meaning. If you believe in our old-time belief systems, a significant dream will come to you. I had a powerful dream about buffalo in 1996 and that’s what set me on my path to do art for real. My whole story revolves around the buffalo being very powerful for me, because it gave me the courage to go out and do what I’m doing.”

When he’s creating an artwork featuring buffalo, he says, “I’m honoring the animal that has sustained my tribe and family for thousands of years. That is what makes me who I am as an artist. I honor my ancestors as truthfully as I can. Hopefully they see me doing it and look favorably on me.”

The most ubiquitous representation of the animal can sometimes still be found jangling in the pockets of Americans today. The iconic buffalo nickel, designed by sculptor James Earle Fraser (and modeled upon a resident of either the Bronx Zoo or Central Park Menagerie, depending on whether the artist’s memory of an animal called Black Diamond was accurate), was minted from 1913 to 1938. Some still randomly circulate today, and whole rolls of nickels can be procured on ebay for about 40 dollars, where they’re sought by collectors, or might be purchased for decorative use. The design was put back in production in 2001 for a minting of 500,000 commemorative silver dollars; the coins sold out immediately and the project, spearheaded by Colorado senator Ben

Nighthorse Campbell, raised \$5 million toward the construction of the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian. In 1912, when Fraser was casting about for appropriate subject matter, there were as few as 2,000 bison left in existence. Even so, he later recalled in a 1947 radio interview, “When I was asked to do a nickel I felt I wanted to do something totally American — a coin that could not be mistaken for any other country’s coin. It occurred to me that the buffalo, as part of our western background, was 100 percent American.”

That’s a remarkable statement — and an apt illustration of the bison’s dogged perseverance — when one considers its history. Originally the bison was, quite literally, the national mammal. It thrived throughout the continent, from sea to sea, and from Mexico to Canada, numbering in the tens of millions, its herds so vast that nineteenth-century reports described them as taking two days to pass by. Bison are thought to be descended from European steppe bison, the ones with seven-foot horn spans seen on European cave art; it’s surmised that they crossed the Bering Land Bridge, eventually reaching what is now Alberta, Canada, after a corridor opened up between ice ages. By the time westward expansion began decimating the herds in the second half of the nineteenth century, bison had evolved to an approximation of what we see in the parks and on ranches today: dark brown 2,000-pound animals (the females average 1,100 pounds), with a horn span of three feet from tip to tip. 🐃

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