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## **Bison Return to the Book Cliffs**

Book Cliffs -- As 14 bison ran for freedom, there were plenty of smiles on the faces of those who watched. After a long absence, bison are roaming on public lands in the Book Cliffs in eastern Utah.

This Aug. 30 reintroduction, plus another 30 bison scheduled for release later this year, are the start of a new free roaming herd in Utah.

The journey for this first group of bison started early on Aug. 26. That's when helicopter pilots working for the Ute Tribe Fish and Game (UTFG) lifted off a ridge in the Hill Creek Extension and began herding bison into a trapping and sorting facility. As the day progressed, many bison, some in small herds and others with their families, were pushed towards the trap. None of them wanted to go, but by the time the day ended, more than 200 of them were standing in the corrals.

"The Hill Creek bison roundup is a yearly event," explained Karen Corts, wildlife biologist working with the UTFG. "We've been doing it for about 10 years now to monitor the health of the herd."

There was a new twist this time, however: the roundup was being watched by a handful of biologists with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR). Some of the bison that were in the pens that night would start a new herd on public lands in the Book Cliffs.

The following day, the UDWR biologists helped the UTFG crews sort through the herd.

"We herd the bison out of the main corrals and into chutes where each animal can be handled individually," Corts said. "We record the age and weight of each animal. Then the state veterinarian looks at its health, takes blood samples and checks for diseases, such as brucellosis. Our herd has remained disease free."

As each animal passed its health inspection, it was given ear tags and released back into the wilds of Hill Creek. All but a few, that is. Nine females and six males, all but one of them yearlings, were selected to take a different journey.

"We offered them a few more [than that]," said Carlos Reed, director of the UTFG. "We feel returning bison to public lands in the Book Cliffs is a good thing. We've been helping the state any way we can."

"We've appreciated the help we've received from the Ute Tribe, and we wish we could have taken more bison. But our management plan called for only 15 bison from the Ute Tribe this year," said Charlie Greenwood, regional wildlife manager for the UDWR.

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“The tribe has been extremely helpful,” Greenwood said. “They have not only provided bison, they also arranged a tour of their lands and shared their knowledge of managing bison in the Book Cliffs with us.”

The 15 bison that were selected by the biologists were given additional disease tests and a different color ear tag. Radio collars were also placed on a few of them. Then they were loaded into trailers and transported to a new set of corrals where they waited in quarantine for 72 hours. Sadly, one of the bison was gored during the trip and didn’t survive.

On the morning of Aug. 30, after the state veterinarian had declared the entire group of 14 bison disease-free, Greenwood gave the go-ahead to load them back into the trailers.

“We’re being extra careful with disease testing,” Greenwood said. “Any bison we reintroduce in the future will also receive extra disease testing, even though they’re coming from a herd that has been testing disease free.”

Eight long hours later, while standing in the cool green hills of the Bogart Canyon area of the Book Cliffs, Greenwood asked Dave Olsen to do the honors and release the first group of bison.

“Dave has worked longer and harder on this than anyone,” Greenwood said. “With those 14 bison, we begin a new story: bison roaming free on public lands in the Book Cliffs.”

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Contact: Ron Stewart, DWR Northeastern Region Conservation Outreach Manager  
(435) 781-9453

**Note:** The Aug. 30 transplant is considered a reintroduction as there is ample evidence that bison was roamed freely in the northeastern corner of Utah, including both the road and roadless areas of the Book Cliffs. Besides the verbal stories that have been handed down, hard evidence includes Native American rock art on canyon walls and bison skulls, several of which have been found in the Book Cliffs. Early explorers, like Father Escalante, also recorded seeing or killing bison as a food source while crossing the Uinta Basin.

**Editor's note:** The following news release explains the history behind getting bison back on the Book Cliffs.

## **Western Icon Returns to the Book Cliffs**

*Bison released Aug. 30*

Book Cliffs -- A bit of Western heritage returned to the Book Cliffs in eastern Utah recently.

On Aug. 30, biologists with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources released 14 bison onto UDWR lands in Bogart Canyon. Roughly 30 more bison are planned for release later this year.

The release was somewhat anticlimactic as biologists and a few family members watched the bison dash over the hill moments after Dave Olsen let them out of the trailers that transported them to the Book Cliffs. Olsen was given the honor after spending 30 years of his 33-year career working toward this day.

"It was a great day," Olsen said. "There were a few times I didn't think it would ever happen. Bison have been returned to one of the few big-open, wild places left in Utah, or anywhere else."

Olsen said the journey to reintroduce bison to the Book Cliffs started 30 years ago when biologists looked around the state to find areas that might be suitable to reintroduce a bison herd to. The list of candidate areas was quite short.

"We identified the Book Cliffs as a possible site. But we knew it would take a lot of work to make it happen," Olsen said. "At the time, we had some concerns about the habitat in the area. And there were a few ranches and other interests in the area that wouldn't fit in well with a free-roaming bison herd."

### **Book Cliffs Conservation Initiative**

"Everything changed when a couple of ranchers in the Book Cliffs approached us and the BLM as potential buyers for their ranches," Olsen said. "We recognized an enormous opportunity had just dropped into our laps. But we also knew we didn't have the resources to take advantage of it.

"We decided to invite representatives from numerous sportsman's and conservation groups to tour the area. Our excitement and vision was immediately shared by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and The Nature Conservancy. Before ending the tour, the Book Cliffs Conservation Initiative (BCCI) was formed. As word got out, other individuals and organizations also joined."

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The BCCI worked only with willing sellers. Three of the four ranches in the northern Book Cliffs were for sale. The BCCI organizations were able to buy two of them. Later a third ranch, with properties in the roadless area and the south slope of the Book Cliffs, was also added.

“After acquiring the ranches, restoring habitat was our first concern,” Olsen said. “Working with the two remaining ranchers, we (BCCI partnership) were able to shuffle cattle around and spread them out over a much larger area. Even though the Book Cliffs then suffered from the first of a series of devastating droughts, one of the ranchers reported that his cattle were actually growing at a faster rate.

“We also started working on a long series of habitat enhancements on thousands of acres of state, federal and private lands. We used a variety of techniques, including prescribed burns, plantings, aerial seeding, selective spraying, ‘lop and scatter’ (selective cutting of pinyon-juniper trees), guzzler construction, plus a few other techniques designed to improve the area’s vegetation and water sources. We needed to make sure there was enough quality forage for both wildlife and livestock.”

While Olsen didn’t talk about another element of the reintroduction effort, the social and political aspect, that effort likely took more time than the hard work of restoring the habitat took.

“It’s been a long road, but it all came together today,” Olsen said, as he watched the first 14 bison make a mad dash for freedom. Bison, icons symbolizing the Wild West, have been returned to public lands in the Book Cliffs.

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Contact: Ron Stewart, DWR Northeastern Region Conservation Outreach Manager  
(435) 781-9453

## See Bright Red Kokanee Salmon

*Celebrate wildlife in the Strawberry Valley Sept. 19 and 20*

Strawberry Reservoir -- Fluorescent red kokanee salmon have started to swim up several tributaries to Strawberry Reservoir. The salmon's journey is part of their annual spawning run.

You can see the salmon, and possibly other wildlife, at the annual Strawberry Valley Wildlife Festival.

The festival will be held Sept. 19 and 20 at the U.S. Forest Service visitor center at Strawberry Reservoir. The visitor center is along US-40, about 20 miles southeast of Heber City.

The Friends of Strawberry Valley host the festival every September amid the beauty and changing colors of the Strawberry Valley

You can see some salmon in the Strawberry River adjacent to the visitor center, but most of the fish will be congregated in the fish trap and egg-taking facility behind the visitor center. Biologists with the Division of Wildlife Resources will be available to show off the salmon and talk with you about the peculiar life cycle of the fish.

### **Strawberry Wildlife Festival**

Festival activities will run from noon to 6 p.m. on Sept. 19, and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sept. 20. Activities will include a chance to hook and land a 'virtual' fish on a fishing simulator; look at animal tracks; see exotic animals (Sept. 20 only, from 1 - 3 p.m.); see several live birds; watch the Utah Highway Patrol demonstrate ZONAR, and watch boating and ATV safety demonstrations.

Several other booths and displays will also be available. Smokey Bear will also be on hand.

Two additional presentations will be given on Sept. 20. Shirlyn Peatross from Duchesne County Search & Rescue will give a presentation at 11 a.m. on "Outdoor Survival." Angler Dan Potts will give a presentation on "Fishing Success and Technology" at 3:30 p.m. Both of the presentations will be held in the visitor center.

### **More information**

For more information, call the Uinta National Forest at (435) 654-0470 or Scott Root with the DWR at (801) 491-5656.

The festival is sponsored by the DWR; the U.S. Forest Service/Uinta National Forest; the Strawberry Anglers Association; Wasatch County; American Land & Leisure; the Utah Snowmobile Association; the National Wild Turkey Federation; the Salt Lake County Fish & Game Association; and many other organizations.

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Contact: Scott Root, DWR Central Region Conservation Outreach Manager (801) 491-5656 or (801) 491-5678