

CORPS OF DISCOVERY FOOD SOURCES

Western Montana Bison Distribution

Submitted by Bob Henderson

That millions of buffalo once roamed the North American plains before Euro-Americans arrived on the scene in the 1500s is well-known. Less well-known is that buffalo were also present in the intermountain valleys of western Montana and Idaho. When the Lewis and Clark Expedition first pushed its way up the Missouri River in 1804, its members were astounded at the huge herds they encountered. But, no more buffalo were seen, after crossing the Continental Divide in August 1805, as the Corps headed on west searching for the Pacific Ocean. It would be a year later in summer 1806, after leaving Travelers Rest and going east in two separate parties, when the men again found bison, east of the Continental Divide. It had been roughly a year since they had seen, hunted and eaten bison. These observations and the writings of members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition convinced many Americans that buffalo were absent from the mountain valleys and grassy ridges west of the Continental Divide. To the contrary, considerable evidence has since been developed showing that bison were indeed residents of the western Montana and Idaho Valleys, before and after Lewis and Clark passed through.



Since Lewis and Clark, a number of diarists, historians, ecologists, archaeologists, and anthropologists have also tackled this question. Here are some of the most relevant:

- Accompanying a hunting party of Salish in 1842, Father Nicolas Point recorded that they “set out and before the sun sank they had taken one hundred and fifty buffalo” south of Missoula.
- Anthropologist Turney-High in 1937 reported older Flatheads remembered “bison did come in small numbers as far west as the Bitterroot Valley. A small but adequate supply could be taken on the low benches around Missoula. These were mere stalked, often in disguise, or ambushed.” Explaining why bison were in low numbers west of the Divide by the 1800s, they felt that “with the coming of the great hunting animal (the horse) bison rarely came so far west” and “that the superior mounted hunting methods taxed the local supply to heavily...”
- Dr. Suckley with the Stevens Expedition in 1877 reported that “For a number of years past, none (bison) has been seen west of the mountains, but singular to relate, a buffalo bull was killed at the mouth of the Pend D’Oreille River on the day I passed it. The Indians were in great joy at this, supposing the Buffalo were coming back to them.”
- Will Cave in 1941 recalled that in 1870 three buffalo lived in the hills east of Stevensville.

In prehistoric times, these inter-mountain valleys historically supported bison in relatively low densities for long periods of time, but with the introduction of horses in the early 1700s bison hunting was so effective that numbers had sharply declined by the Corps’ arrival in 1805. As the Captains speculated, herds of bison reentered these valleys from time to time, sometimes for several years, until, when found, were hunted down again. Oral history suggests this could have occurred repeatedly, until the last of them disappeared 1870-80.

For more on the history of bison, explore the resources in this bibliography:

Adams, S. and A. Dood. 2011. Background Information for Issues of Concern for Montana: Plains Bison Ecology, Management and Conservation. MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks. <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/bison/plainsEcology.html>

Bailey, James. 2016. Historic distribution and abundance of bison in the Rocky Mountains of the United States. *Intermountain Journal of Sciences* 22(1-3), pp 36-53. <https://arc.lib.montana.edu/ojs/index.php/IJS/article/viewFile/658/508>

Cannon, Kenneth P., 1997. *The Analysis of a Late Holocene Bison Skull from Fawn Creek, Lemhi County, Idaho, and Its Implications for Understanding the History and Ecology of Bison in the Intermountain West*. The Department of Agriculture, United States Forest Service. Salmon-Challis National Forest Salmon, Idaho. <http://www.npshistory.com/publications/bison-skull-fawn-creek.pdf>