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## Yellowstone bison migrating north in large numbers

# On the move

**HELENA DORE**  
Chronicle Staff Writer

**GARDINER** — Hundreds of bison congregated just inside the edge of Yellowstone National Park's northern border on Thursday afternoon. Not far away, vehicles lined Old Yellowstone Trail road outside of the park, where hunters and their families pulled bison carcass parts on sleds.

Driven in part by strong winter weather, bison have been crossing over the border of Yellowstone National Park into the state of Montana in more abundance this winter than during the previous two seasons, officials report.

Yellowstone bison migrate out of the park's high country toward lower elevations in search of forage each winter. They often cross over its northern and western border into Montana, where state and Tribal hunters have opportunities to harvest them.

While the numbers are still tentative, since harvest reports continue to filter in, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks spokesperson Morgan Jacobsen estimated on Wednesday that hunters have killed approximately 170 Yellowstone bison in total so far this winter season.

Individuals from multiple Tribal nations have harvested the majority of those bison,



PHOTOS BY HELENA DORE/CHRONICLE

**ABOVE:** The Beattie Gulch Trailhead is pictured just north of Yellowstone National Park on Thursday. North of the trailhead, trucks lined Old Yellowstone Trail road and hunters to break down several bison carcasses. **BELOW:** Several bison congregate on a section of private land in the Gardiner Basin, just north of Yellowstone National Park.

and they include hunters from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Nez Perce Tribe, Blackfoot Nation, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Jacobsen estimated, based on a running tally that is subject to revision, that by Tuesday afternoon, just under 140 bison had been harvested through treaty hunts. On Thursday, groups gathered around at least five additional carcasses north of the Beattie Gulch

Trailhead.

Montana's bison hunting season opened on Nov. 15, and it's set to close on Feb. 15. As of Tuesday afternoon, state hunters had killed 18 bison north of the park near Gardiner, Jacobsen said. They'd taken 14 bison west of the park near West Yellowstone.

Weather plays a role in the timing and extent of the annual bison migration out of Yellowstone, but it's hard to pin down a single ingredient, according to Jacobsen. This winter, more bison are exiting

the park to the north, and fewer are exiting it to the west, he said.

Licensed hunters can shoot bison that migrate out of Yellowstone each winter, but due to a 2000 agreement between state, federal and Tribal authorities, some of the animals get trapped at the Stephens Creek Capture Facility, which lies along the park's northern border.

Bison that enter the trap are sometimes consigned to slaughter, and when that happens, the meat and hides are distributed to Tribes. Other animals can be enrolled in the Bison Conservation Transfer Program, assuming they initially test negative for the disease brucellosis.

Yellowstone National Park spokesperson Linda Veress wrote in an email on Thursday afternoon that trapping operations began on Jan. 6 this year, and so far, around 82 bison have been captured to determine their eligibility for the transfer program.

Of those animals, none had been consigned to slaughter, according to Veress. Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Cam Sholly has said at past meetings that park officials are trying to move away from using slaughter as a method to control the bison population.





# Bison/

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"We will work closely with all partners and stakeholders as operations continue," Veress wrote in the email.

Bison that go through the transfer program get tested for brucellosis repeatedly, and those that continue to test negative can be transferred to a quarantine facility at the Fort Peck Reservation. After some additional testing, the Inter Tribal Buffalo Council coordinates the transfer of the animals to Tribal nations around the country.

Federal, state and Tribal partners manage Yellowstone bison under a 2000 agreement called the Interagency Bison Management Plan. Their goal is to maintain a healthy population of bison in the park while reducing the risk of brucellosis spillover from bison to livestock.

Because of strict federal regulations around the bacterial disease, which causes cattle to abort or produce weak offspring, Yellowstone bison aren't tolerated much in the state of Montana beyond some specific zones.

A relatively high percentage of the

park's bison have been exposed to brucellosis. However, there has never been a recorded case of the disease being transmitted from bison to cattle in the wild, largely because of robust efforts to separate the two species at the border of the park.

Elk have transmitted brucellosis to livestock outside of Yellowstone more than a dozen times.

Since bison reproduce quickly, managers cull some animals from the park's population each winter to keep numbers steady in the park. In addition to trapping and slaughtering some animals and transporting others to Tribal lands, hunters play a role in keeping their numbers consistent.

Buffalo Field Campaign, a nonprofit organization that opposes the slaughter of Yellowstone bison, whose volunteers track the herds' movements across the landscape, wrote in an update on Wednesday that members have seen several hundred bison migrate into Montana this winter.

The group wrote that this year's particularly strong migration is likely "due to

the combined effects of historic flooding last year," which was "followed by snows and cold that are typical for Yellowstone at this time of the year."

Nineteen Yellowstone bison have also been killed on Montana highways this year, according to Buffalo Field Campaign's reports. During one incident on Dec. 28, a semitruck hit and killed 13 bison on U.S. Highway 191, a few miles north of West Yellowstone.

At their interagency meeting in late November, state, federal and Tribal partners did not agree to set a target for bison management operations this winter. National Park Service officials indicated that they would prioritize hunting as a culling mechanism. They added that they would passively trap bison as opportunities arose.

Chris Geremia, Yellowstone's lead bison biologist, said at November's interagency meeting that the park's bison population was hovering at around 6,000 animals — the highest number officials have recorded to date.

Helena Dore can be reached at 406-582-2628 or [hdore@dailychronicle.com](mailto:hdore@dailychronicle.com).

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