



Photo by Gord Vaadeland

# Bison Times

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## Management Plan is Finalized

After 2 years of meetings, presentations, discussions and tours, the Sturgeon River Plains Bison Management Plan is complete. Parks Canada and Ministry of Environment, both legislatively responsible for management of the bison on federal and provincial land, signed the management plan

signifying approval of the plan. This final step in the planning process opens the door to begin developing short and long-term action plans to accomplish the goals outlined in the management plan. The completion of the management plan will also aid in groups, such as the Bison

Stewards, to apply for funding from a wide range of groups. Secure funding is critical to the long-term conservation efforts as well as conflict resolution.

Electronic copies of the management plan will be available on [www.bisonstewards.ca](http://www.bisonstewards.ca).

## Field Technician Update

By: Becky Gillespie

This year's monitoring efforts started earlier than in previous years as the bison ventured out of the Prince Albert National Park onto private land sooner than expected. Approximately 20km<sup>2</sup> of cultivated land has been monitored regularly since July of 2012 and the efforts continued until the majority of the bison herd moved back into the Park where they will



Photo by Allan Casey



Bison Stewards' Critter Cam

live over the winter. Scouting cameras were set up at heavy use crossings along the Sturgeon River to monitor where the animals were crossing, how often and what time of year they are using particular areas to cross. Some cross-

ings are used up to 4 times a day by large groups which can be a serious hindrance to landowners. Other crossings may only be used once every few weeks. The bison have created an intricate and seemingly strategic trail network through the forest and the farmland. These trails, along with herd sightings, are being recorded and mapped to help gain a better understanding of how the bison are moving month to month. Understand their movement patterns may help develop a plan to influence the direction of their movement and ease the strain on ranchers and farmers during critical times

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## Prescribed Burning: Reconnecting Fire and Bison on the West Side

In 2012, Prince Albert National Park brought fire back to the West Side.

Prior to settlement, fire was an integral part of the aspen parkland ecosystem. Fire was nature's way of cleaning house on fescue grasslands; peeling back the dense thatch and preventing aspen encroachment, to allow fresh growth and native grass and sedge



species to thrive.

When the area was settled, fire was removed from the landscape as it posed a threat to people's animals, property and livelihood. For more than 60 years, aspen trees have been unchecked by fire and have closed-up meadows, reducing what was available for grazing for the local wildlife. Exotic grass species and weeds have crept in and choked out native grasses.

All the adverse changes that fire removal has meant in this precious eco-system, are coming to an end. In the spring of 2012, a controlled burn took place on Amyot Meadow.

Within hours, the bison were seen wandering the charred

meadow, perhaps awakening a long forgotten memory.



In late September 2012, another controlled burn, on the north half of Long Meadow took place. The rising smoke could be seen for several kilometres. The bison were not nearly as quick to enter the new burnt area, but the hope is they will spend more time on Long Meadow in the spring, when lots of lush regrowth is expected.



The Bison Stewards look forward to seeing more smoke on the horizon as the effort to reclaim fescue grasslands continues.



# Fall Field Technician Update—con't



Photo by Allan Casey

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of the year. When a group of bison are seen, herd demographics including location, size, age and gender are recorded. In most cases, food is influencing their movement so vegetation sampling is conducted to determine what and how much they are eating.

On private land where non native grass species are dominant, Timothy (*Phleum pretense*),

and alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) are most commonly grazed. Although most sedges (*Carex* spp.) are the preferred food source and native to the eco-region, only small amounts are available for forage in low-lying areas. The Bison Stewards' field technician also works with the resource conservation team from Prince Albert National Park and the Université Laval research team in sharing data, monitoring movement of collared cows, and collecting biological samples of harvested bison for DNA testing. In 2012 the largest number of bison sighted in one day was approximately 190. This is the same for last year as well, and after an aerial survey at the beginning of 2012 counted 177 animals, it may be assumed that there are approximately 200 bison left in the

Sturgeon River herd. Once field work is completed, which wraps up the scientific data collection, surveys will be conducted to gather infor-



Photo by Allan Casey

**"...it may be assumed there are approximately 200 bison left in the Sturgeon River herd."**

mation for the social aspect, which is equally, if not more, important. After all it is us, the people, that make the management decisions and bring about change. Conducting surveys is critical to connecting with the people who are impacted the most by the bison, to find out what their tolerance levels are and what can be done to mitigate or prevent the damage cause by the bison movement. Annual reports of the data collection will be made available on the **Sturgeon River Plains Bison Stewards' website** ([www.bisonstewards.ca](http://www.bisonstewards.ca)) in the near future.

## Bison Reintroductions

The last 12 months have seen lots of chatter about reintroducing bison to the landscape. Here are a few highlights and things to look forward to.

January 2012—Announcement that Banff National Park will consult with the public about returning plains bison to the Park. Visit [www.bisonbelong.ca](http://www.bisonbelong.ca) for more information

March 2012—Bison from Elk Island National Park were released onto the American Prairie Reserve in Montana after spending 2 months in quarantine.



June 2012—Wisent, the European cousin of American bison, released in Northern Spain

December 2012—Wisent will be reintroduced in German wild.

January 2013—Alaskan officials are beginning to explore bringing wood bison into the Yukon River area.

March 2013—30 more wood bison were transferred from Elk Island to Lensky Stolby Nature Park in Russia



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**The Sturgeon River plains bison are found in and around the Prince Albert National Park, Saskatchewan.**

**This is the only free-ranging plains bison population in their historic range in Canada!**

**Because they are free-ranging, the bison are not contained within the boundaries of the Prince Albert National Park.**

**The *Bison Times* was created as a forum to discuss and raise public awareness of the issues associated with the management of the Sturgeon River plains bison.**

***Co-existing with the Sturgeon River plains bison herd***

## SRPBS Out and About



SRPBS Executive Director Gord attended the Canadian Model Forest Network Annual General Meeting near Deer Lake Newfoundland in September 2012. The SRPBS is partnered with the Prince Albert Model Forest which

is a member of the Canadian Model Forest Network. These key partnerships bring organizations together that are concerned about the long-term sustainability



of forest communities.

After spending 5 months in Canada, SRPBS said farewell to Volker Schmid from Germay's Rottenburg University. Volker spent many long days in the field sampling vegetation and monitoring the bison while enjoying life in rural Saskatch-

ewan. Volker recently gave a presentation in Germany about his amazing Canadian experiences. Much like the North American bison, Europe's largest mammal, the Wisent neared extinction and is only now being reintroduced into what's left of the wilds of Europe, including Germany. Volker says "From my opinion, it is a privilege to have the opportunity to maintain that sort of wildlife (bison). From the perspective of a small, crowded country, like Germany, it is a symbol of space and freedom you can't get everywhere in the world."

Watch for Volker's return to the Wild West Side in the summer of 2013.