

Wood bison make it to Alaska village; April release planned

March 27 2015, by Dan Joling



Two wood bison bulls weighing upward of 2,000 pounds move toward higher ground at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center on Sunday, March 22, 2015, in Portage, Alaska. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game on Sunday moved the first wood bison to a staging area in Shageluk, Alaska, for reintroduction in a few weeks to their native Alaska grazing grounds. Wood bison, which are larger than plains bison native found in Lower 48 states, disappeared from U.S. soil more than a century ago. (AP Photo/Dan Joling)

A hundred wood bison that will be the foundation for the first wild herd

on U.S. soil in more than a century have been safely delivered to a rural Alaska village, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

"They are acclimating very rapidly," said department biologist Cathie Harms. "They are doing very well so far."

They likely will be released from Shageluk into the Innoko Flats in one or two weeks, she said.

Wood [bison](#) are native to Alaska, but disappeared from the state more than a century ago.

They're bigger than plains bison found in Lower 48 states and are North America's largest land animal. Adult [wood bison](#) bulls can weigh more than 2,000 pounds and cows up to 1,200 pounds.

Wood bison from Canada were imported to the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center in 2008 but restoration of the threatened species was delayed. Landowners didn't want their property listed as critical habitat with additional federal oversight. The state and federal governments agreed to consider the Alaska wood bison as "experimental" without the usual Endangered Species Act requirements.

The department with help from corporate and nonprofit sponsors moved 50 cows and 50 juveniles age 2 or less to the village and the task of doing that safely was a challenge.

"When you're transporting a very large, not completely domesticated animal, you always have to worry about injuries," Harms said.

Young animals were especially vulnerable to broken limbs, or if they fell, trampling.



Wood bison cows browse and rest at the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center on Sunday, March 22, 2015, in Portage, Alaska. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game on Sunday trucked the first wood bison to Anchorage for a flight to a staging area in Shageluk, Alaska. They will be released in a few weeks as part of a plan to restore wild wood bison to U.S. soil. (AP Photo/Dan Joling)

To minimize jostling in a cargo plane that had to land on a short, gravel runway, the juveniles were crammed in small groups within special "bison boxes." The cows had individual pens giving them just enough room to stand for the one-hour drive from the conservation center to Anchorage and a one-hour flight to the village.

The first animals left Sunday morning. The landing was delayed when a small airplane carrying department staffers, including Harms, blew a front tire while taxiing on the Shageluk runway. A Lynden Air Cargo

C-130 Hercules carrying the bison circled until villagers put the front wheel of the small plane onto a sled behind a snowmobile and towed it away.

The last flight was Tuesday afternoon, Harms said.

All of the bison moved on their own from the boxes to snow-covered fields in a fenced area outside Shageluk.

"Some of them trotted out," Harms said. "Some of them galloped out. Some of them made it all the way to the opposite end of the pen, as far away from people as they could get. Some of them stopped 15 feet from the box and started eating hay."

The next seven to 14 days will be spent preparing bison for release. The bison will be moved daily from one acres-large pen to another to keep them from settling into one place. A snowmobile dropping tasty alfalfa cubes will lure them into second pen.

On the day of their final release, the snowmobile will lead the bison across the frozen Innoko River to a trail of hay that will lead to fields of sedge, one of their natural foods. Sedge should start appearing when the snow melts and the hay runs out, Harms said.

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