

# Fair-Chase BISON!

## Tracking Bison in the Kaibab

By Chuck Adams

Photographs courtesy of Author

It was exactly noon, and the white-hot Arizona sun was beating down from a colorless desert sky. I mopped my brow and stared at the saucer-sized tracks in front of me. I had been following those tracks for almost four hours as they wandered through dusty thickets of piñon pine, juniper, and knee-deep sage. I figured I was seven or eight miles from my truck.

All three bison bulls were big, evidenced by their huge hoof prints and the fact that they were staying away from larger herds. Old bulls stay in small bachelor groups except during the July and August rut.

Two sets of tracks measured about five inches across—a size only mature bison bulls lay down. The third set dwarfed the other two, with hooves almost six inches wide. The right front hoof was distinctive, too, with both toes flaring weirdly outward at the tips. This was a track I could identify without bending over.

Suddenly, the normally steady breeze swirled and fanned the back of my neck. A few seconds later, three brown mountains of hair rose from the underbrush less than 50 yards ahead and thundered away in a giant explosion of broken limbs and heavily pounding hooves. The bulls had been bedded within bow range, but I had not seen them in time.

I cursed my rotten luck, mopped my face again, and continued to dog the now deep, running tracks. Seven hours later, I had still not caught the bulls. I walked back to my vehicle in the dark, wondering with each weary step if I'd ever get a shot.

The date was April 19, 2000, and the bow hunt was a personal dream come true. After years of wishing for a coveted Kaibab bison tag, I had one in my pocket and several weeks to find a trophy bull. Northern Arizona is one of only two places in the lower 48 states recognized by both Boone and Crockett and Pope and Young as fair chase bison terrain. The other is southern Utah's Henry Mountains, which also harbors wild, free-ranging buffalo.

I had the good fortune to bow hunt the Henry Mountains in 1986 after drawing a coveted bison tag, and I was quickly humbled by the difficulty of that adventure. I shot a nice record-book bull after several days of hard hiking—a bull I found on a corn-cob-rough, 45-degree slope 10,000 feet above sea level. The handful of buffalo I encountered on that trip were all as wild as deer. I decided that some day, somehow, I wanted to bow hunt fair chase bison again.

Most hunters regard bison (also called buffalo) as big, dumb, hairy barn doors with horns. This is not far from the truth on bison ranches I've visited to photograph these animals. Even the big bulls stand, stare, and seldom move away.

But truly wild, unfenced bison act like a whole 'nother species of critter. If you don't believe me, check out page 45 of the current Arizona Big Game Regulations Booklet. In a special box with a big "Attention" at the top, Arizona warns bison-tag lottery applicants how difficult this hunt will be.



**ABOVE:** The author and "Pop" were comfortable in their semi-desert Arizona campsite.

**OPPOSITE:** Although glassing helps orient the Arizona hunter with the countryside, Kaibab bulls seldom show themselves outside piñon-juniper thickets.

The warning applies to gunners as well as archers, and states that the Kaibab area buffalo hunt “is considered to be one of the most difficult in the state.” The booklet goes on to say that Arizona bison “can be difficult to locate. Hunters should plan on spending the entire season hunting . . . and are often required to walk up to eight miles every day over rugged terrain.”

Wild bison have only two notable things in common with their domestic, ranch-raised brothers. First, any big buffalo bull provides 400 to 500 pounds of the best darn meat you’d ever want to eat. Second, mature males can be downright dangerous when crippled, cornered, or surprised at close range.

After dreaming about bison for 14 years and finally receiving my coveted tag in the mail, I called Arizona Game and Fish for details on the area. What they told me did not exactly make my day. A scant 90 to 100 buffalo roam more than 1,000 square miles of thickly overgrown Kaibab Plateau and surrounding slopes. Since these animals are few and far between, and since they hug heavy cover like ticks, the only way to hunt is driving dirt roads in search of fresh buffalo tracks. An official with Arizona Game and Fish told me I should be prepared to drive 150 to 200 miles each day with eyes peeled for tracks. He said I’d

never find a buffalo by glassing or hiking cross-country.

So here I was, eight days into my dream hunt and completely bamboozled by the only buffalo I had seen. I had walked 15 or 20 miles that one day alone, crossed no other buffalo tracks, and left the trail in a huge, roadless wilderness where I was not likely to find those bulls again. Compared to this, hunting Utah’s Henry Mountains was beginning to look like a piece of cake.

On April 20, my dad met me in my remote Arizona camp. Pop is retired, and he decided to drive from California to keep me company and help me pack buffalo meat. Daryl Magnuson, regional biologist and game warden, was the only other person I saw with regularity in this huge, remote region. There were dirt roads everywhere, and I saw a few weekend camps of people hunting for shed mule deer antlers. But the only big game season open at the time was for buffalo, and the animals were scattered over many hundreds of square miles.

It was good to have Pop in camp. I had decided to hold out for a huge bison bull. If I didn’t find one, I’d go home empty handed. After all, I had already taken a real nice fair chase buffalo in 1986. I knew from my research that several giant Kaibab bison had been shot by

gun hunters in years gone by. Well-known bow hunter and PSE bow manufacturer Pete Shepley took the long-standing Pope and Young World’s Record in 1991, a monstrous Henry Mountains bison with a score of 115-6/8. I figured I had an off chance to beat that record.

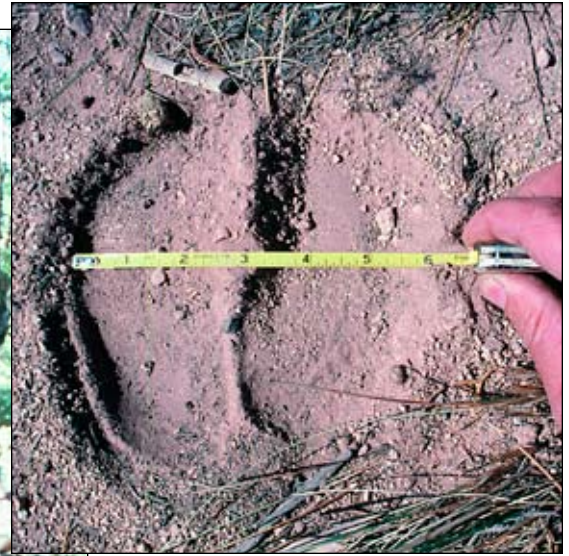
My strategy was simple. I would drive roads and check waterholes for the biggest darn bison track I could find. The bigger the hoof print, the bigger the bull. From there, it would be a matter of tracking, tracking, and then tracking some more until I got a look at the beast.

Based on game warden Daryl Magnuson’s recommendation, I concentrated my search in a huge, steeply sloping area along the flanks of the Kaibab Plateau. The ground rose sharply from 6,000 feet to peaks and rims nearly 9,000 feet above sea level. Magnuson said larger, wiser bulls favored this rough and heavily timbered locale.

Pop and I drove roads from daylight until dark for three days without finding so much as one fresh buffalo track. Wind sifts the dry desert dirt here almost constantly, turning crisp, clean-edged tracks into shapeless dips within hours. We found a few old tracks, but nothing new until the morning of April 24th.

Boxy, cow-like prints crossed a red dirt road some six miles from where I had last





**LEFT:** The author's April 2000 Arizona bison was a whopper, with an official P&Y score of 118 points – a new P&Y World's Record and a solid Boone and Crockett entry.  
**INSET:** The tracks of a large bison measure five inches or more across.

tracked buffalo. As I opened the pickup door, my neck hairs prickled with anticipation. There on the ground below was a huge and very fresh bison track with weirdly flaring toes! This was the same group of three I had followed for 11 hours on April 19.

As I trotted along the trail, Pop drove my truck to a crossroad several miles ahead. This way, I would not have to walk so far out of the woods.

The trio of bison meandered across soft, rust-colored dirt, stopping here and there to chew grass and roll to ward off biting flies. Their tracks were sharp and free of bug trails or debris. I guessed I was less than one hour behind.

Abruptly, the tracks stopped, milled, and then veered 90 degrees. I was suddenly looking at churned, running tracks with flared toes and dewclaw marks deeply cratered behind. Puzzled, I knelt for a closer look.

When I looked up again, I nearly jumped out of my skin! Less than 100 yards ahead, a big white tent and two 4WD trucks showed clearly through the trees. I had stumbled on a camp of shed deer

antler hunters . . . and so had the buffalo not long before.

I already knew that frightened bison run for miles. I trudged to my rendezvous point with Pop, and we headed back to camp for some lunch and a midday snooze. There was no way I could catch those bulls before dark.

The bison is a giant, big-boned target. Arizona game officials estimate a mature bull's live weight at 1600 to 1800 pounds. That's a good bit larger than a big bull moose. For this reason, I chose special heavy duty archery gear to hunt buffalo.

With careful tuning, my 82-pound Reflex Caribou compound bow shot custom-made 665-grain Easton Super Slam 2419's to perfection. I tipped these aluminum shafts with a two-blade version of my patented Super Slam broadhead. I knew from past experience in Africa and North America that this head's two-edge Spear Point, stout 15-grain blades, and 7178 aircraft aluminum ferrule would drive deep . . . even if I hit a buffalo rib dead-center. The combo generated 70 foot-pounds of kinetic energy, more than enough to do the buffalo job just right.

Some might wonder how anyone can track animals across miles of difficult terrain . . . even when those animals have hooves as big as teacup saucers. Fortunately, the slopes of the Kaibab Plateau consist mainly of soft dirt interspersed with ribbons of limestone rock. Most hillsides are too dry for large expanses of grass, so tracking conditions are reasonably good. Rocky or grassy spots can be tough, but you simply circle ahead with hopes of relocating tracks on the other side.

April 27, 2000, is a day I'll never forget. Pop and I left camp before daylight, bound for three waterholes where Warden Daryl Magnuson had told us bison sometimes drink. The first two tanks showed no animal tracks at all.

The sun was just chinning above distant peaks when we stopped to check the third waterhole. My heart leaped to my throat. There, as sharp as a track could possibly be, was the weird-toed hoof print of the bull I'd followed twice before. He and his two smaller pals had been at the waterhole during the night, rolled in the mud, hooked the earth with their horns, and dribbled water from their big, fuzzy snouts.

All three tracks left the water on a beeline for the distant plateau rim. During the next two hours, I followed the buffalo across soft dirt. Most of the time, I could move at a trot. Then things got difficult.

The hoof prints entered heavy pinion-juniper scrub, hit a 1/4-mile-wide band of rock, and simply disappeared.

More than one hour later, on hands and knees, I found the tracks again. All three buffalo had veered to the right, skirting a deep and ugly canyon bounded by cliffs. I eased along the suddenly skimpy trail, and breathed a sigh of relief when the bison reached soft dirt again.

Behind and far below, I could see my pickup truck twinkling in the midday sun. I knew Pop would wait all day . . . and all night if necessary. We've hunted together since I was knee-high to a pup, and we make a great team.

What followed was a game-tracking ordeal. The bulls entered a region of broken rock and hard dirt, leaving the edge of a hoof print here and a slight toe-scuff there. By 3 p.m., I figured I was eight air miles from Pop and 1,000 feet higher up.

At 6 p.m., I completely lost the trail. The bulls entered a huge old burn, one of the few places I'd seen with a heavy carpet of grass. Try as I might, I could not find another track. I circled, enlarging the loops until I was almost half-a-mile from the last visible hoof print. The whole darn place was knee-deep grass choked with juniper brush. No visible dirt at all.

Near sundown, I gave up looking for tracks. The burn stretched uphill at least another mile, and seemed to be the best buffalo feed around. I sneaked ahead on a hope and a prayer, eyes peeled for grazing or bedded bulls. I had a hunch the animals had gone this way.

Ten minutes later, I peeked beyond a bush . . . and saw the biggest, hairiest beast I have ever encountered in North America!

The bison was feeding 30 yards away, head toward me and almost completely screened by brush. I could see his hairy hump, and I could hear his teeth tearing grass. Fifty yards to the left, a second and much smaller-bodied bull appeared between two trees. The third buffalo was undoubtedly nearby.

I decided the one in front of me had to be the big boy with the deformed 6-inch hoof. The other two bulls left smaller tracks, and were probably about the same size.

Light was beginning to fade. The monstrous buffalo moved my way one leisurely step at a time, still feeding and still shielded by brush. Then he turned broadside, took two magic steps, and stopped with his chest completely in the clear. His lower head was blocked by a

bush, but I could see incredibly massive, heavily battered horns jutting above his shaggy brow!

I drew and dumped the string as my 30-yard pin touched the animal's heart. The heavy aluminum projectile flickered and thumped home like a fist against a boxer's gut. The buffalo lunged ahead, staggered, and vanished in heavy brush. I knew I had my bull.

Never mind the long walk back to Pop. Never mind our blood-trailing chore with lanterns in the middle of the night. And never mind the butchering and meat-packing ordeal that took the rest of that night and most of the following day. I was able to drive within 400 yards of my bull, and we finally grunted the last chunk

of delicious meat into the pickup bed with wobbling legs and weary arms.

My Arizona fair chase trophy was one of the biggest bison game warden Daryl Magnuson had ever seen. The massive horns of the bull had a final score of 118-0/8, making the bison a new Pope and Young World's Record. My buffalo is also listed with Boone and Crockett Club, beating the current minimum by exactly three inches. I consider it one of my finest bow hunting trophies.

If you think buffalo are stupid, easily hunted beasts, you've never chased them across Arizona's rugged Kaibab Plateau. For pure archery challenge in one of North America's most difficult places, these animals rank near the top of my personal fair chase list! ■

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