

# The Economics and Logistics of "Fair Chase" Bison Hunting

By John William Salevurakis, Ph.D.

This fine bull was taken by William G. Cumard II in Coconino County, Arizona. The bison scores 127 points and was taken in 1997.



**RIGHT:** The author and guide Dave Penner pictured with a Yukon bull. **BACKGROUND:** A winter hunt in Yukon Territory definitely requires that one pack Arctic-worthy clothing, because the temperatures can reach minus 50 degrees!

There are likely hundreds of places in North America where one can simply drive onto a small private property, exit a vehicle and shoot a bison. This unfortunate reality has led to the mistaken belief that this noble quarry is and always has been easy prey. However, the ten hunts to be discussed here are "fair chase" and necessitate varying degrees of effort and luck to accomplish a truly ethical harvest. While some require the drawing of a coveted state-issued license, others necessitate a willingness to purchase expensive outfitter tags and possibly endure adverse physical circumstances.

## ARIZONA

One hunt characterized by such circumstances occurs in the House Rock area of northern Arizona. East of the North Kaibab Plateau, a successful hunt here requires equally substantial portions of effort and luck. The herd exists





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# Find Out More...

**ALASKA** The non-resident hunter must also consider the possible addition of private land trespass fees and the definite addition of legally mandated guide fees to the minimal state license costs of \$650.  
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**ALBERTA** For those unwilling or unable to guide themselves in this rugged and dangerous area, Eric Grinnell of Silvertip Outfitters has successfully offered assistance for a number of years – \$5,000.  
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**ARIZONA** The application deadline for those wishing to hunt bison in Arizona continues to be mid-June every year, and the cost for a bull license remains \$3,755 for non-residents.  
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**BRITISH COLUMBIA** This is a huge advantage for Americans in particular, as these animals, unlike wood bison, are importable to the U.S.  
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**MONTANA** Montana licenses are reasonably priced at \$750 for non-residents.  
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**NORTHWEST TERRITORIES** Costs are \$7,500 plus government licenses with Jerome Knap of Canada North Outfitting.  
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**SOUTH DAKOTA** More information can be found at [www.sdgifp.info/Parks/Regions/Custer/bullhunt.htm](http://www.sdgifp.info/Parks/Regions/Custer/bullhunt.htm)

**UTAH** Non-resident permits cost \$1,513 for a bull or cow.  
[www.wildlife.utah.gov](http://www.wildlife.utah.gov)

**WYOMING** Applications are accepted every January.  
[www.gf.state.wy.us](http://www.gf.state.wy.us)

**YUKON TERRITORY** Tim Mervyn of Mervyn's Yukon Outfitters charges roughly \$9,000 for this hunt (including licenses, permits and government trophy fees).  
[www.yukonsheep.com](http://www.yukonsheep.com)

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The Boone and Crockett Club does not imply endorsement of any guides or outfitters by mention in this article. It is highly recommended that hunters request references and do the proper research before booking a hunt.

due to a failed commercial ranching venture more than a century ago and has been maintained by the state since 1926. Permits must therefore be drawn, and demand historically far outstrips supply. Further, if one lacks access to horses, this hunt is very likely to become a futile chase for North America's largest land mammal. Therefore, an outfitter and an abundance of time are both advisable for resident and non-resident hunters alike. The Arizona Department of Game and Fish explicitly recommends that those drawing these rare licenses dedicate the entire one-month season to the chase. In contrast to the unfortunate image of bison hunting, sportsmen go home empty handed every year from the North Kaibab. Increasing the risk of this is the fact that



**Darin D. Kerr hunted in Utah's Garfield County and took this bull in 2000. It scores 119-4/8 points.**

the herd resides very near and has recently been migrating to within Grand Canyon National Park. There is obviously no hunting allowed there, and if this happens to be the area favored by bison during the season, the hunter is out of luck. Due to this, the bison management strategy of Arizona's Department of Game and Fish has recently changed. On October 19, 2005, due to the increasing and perhaps total migration of the herd to within the Grand Canyon, all those drawing a mule deer license for units 12A and 12B of the Kaibab Plateau could purchase a population management bison license. It speaks to the difficulty of bison hunting that, as of this writing and according to the Arizona Department of Game and Fish, none of these 900 deer license holders have accepted the offer.

## UTAH

Bison from Utah are eligible for entry in the

B&C Records Program in two locations: Antelope Island and the Henry Mountains. The terrain of Henry Mountains also ensures a very difficult hunt. As in Arizona, this is also a "once in a lifetime" permit, and non-residents should again seriously consider hiring an outfitter or bringing more than a few friends along. My taxidermist shot a cow in this area a number of years ago and has harrowing tales of recovering his moderately sized animal. Being a native of Utah, I often see the Henry Mountains while traveling, and it amazes me how they can appear so innocuous in the distance. Be assured, however, that these mountains are anything but hospitable! Utah offers an early season and late season hunt during which one can harvest "either sex" as well as a later "cow only" opportunity. Obviously, an early November hunt offers the best chance for a huge bull and this is the toughest permit to draw. In 2004, the non-resident odds of drawing this tag were just over 0.3%. That's right, only one in 304 non-resident applicants drew the license and the odds were similar for residents. What's more, if one hasn't been applying for years, accumulating "preference points," the odds become even more discouraging. However, the "cow only" hunt offers more palatable non-resident odds with one in 22 applicants succeeding. Once drawn, hunters are then required to attend an orientation course scheduled by the Utah Division of Wildlife

Resources. While the main purpose of this class is to ensure that hunters can differentiate cows from bulls, I am told that one of the first statements made by the instructor is, "Some of you are not going to shoot anything on this hunt." Be prepared for a real adventure in Utah and remember that the deadline for applications is late January.

## ALASKA

Alaska also promises adventure by sustaining bison populations in the Delta Junction, the Farewell, and the Copper River areas. While wood bison were the last native subspecies to occur here naturally, it is the plains variety that is hunted today. In 1928, 23 bison were transplanted to the Delta Junction area from the National Bison Range in Montana with the first regulated hunting taking place in 1951. As with those wishing to hunt the Utah or Arizona herds, one must apply for a permit awarded by the Alaska Department of Game and Fish. Last year saw 6,428 sportsmen apply for only 45 available bull permits in the Delta Junction area. This means that one's odds of drawing

were only 0.7 percent. The chances were only slightly better at 0.9 percent for the 45 available Delta Junction cow permits. In the same year, another 60 "either sex" permits were available in the Farewell and Copper River areas at drawing odds of 3.2 percent. Unfortunately, these latter areas are characterized by the Alaska Department of Game and Fish as offering "extremely limited" public land. When contemplating a bison hunt here, the non-resident hunter must also consider the possible addition of private land trespass fees and the definite addition of legally mandated guide fees to the minimal state license costs of \$650.

### MONTANA

Montana also allows a bison hunt and it is surrounded by controversy. A total of 50 permits were issued last year for animals migrating outside of Yellowstone National Park, and very vocal concerns were immediately raised by anti-hunters. Since some of these animals are somewhat acclimated to people, the worry was that the sporting element may be lacking in any Montana hunt. Fortunately for all concerned, there are no fences surrounding these animals, so the hunt is "fair chase," and with hunting pressure, it seems likely the herd will become increasingly wary over time. Sixteen of the 50 permits provided were automatically

allocated to Montana's Native American tribes, leaving 34 for the general drawing. Further, 10 of these remaining permits were automatically awarded to those who drew tags the previous year and witnessed their hunt cancelled due to political pressure. This means that a total of 6,177 individuals applied for 24 licenses to pursue bison over 460,000 acres of land. Assuming a similar number of applicants this year, and all 34 permits being awarded to these applicants, the odds of drawing a permit in Montana will be roughly 0.5 percent. These odds are, of course, not surprising since Montana licenses are reasonably priced at \$750 for non-residents.

Incidentally, B&C also accepts free-ranging bison from remote areas of the Crow Reservation, as well.

### WYOMING

Bison hunting in Wyoming also takes place for animals roaming outside Yellowstone. While the numbers change from year to year, Wyoming generally makes available 25 bull and 50 cow licenses, with 20 percent of the total being allocated to non-residents. This means that roughly five bull tags are made available to non-residents at a cost of \$2,101 each. According to the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish, 419 individuals applied for these licenses last season.

The bright spot in these gloomy odds, for those freshly interested in bison hunting, is that there is no preference-point system for this species in Wyoming. Another important reason to consider this destination is the drawing odds for cows. Last year, 12 non-residents applied, and there were 10 licenses available to them. Unfortunately, the success rate for those actually hunting cows (32 percent) was much lower than for those pursuing bulls (100 percent). This is because the bulls are much more likely to leave the park, while cows have a tendency to remain in legally unhuntable areas. Wyoming also requires an orientation course so hunters can be sure of the difference. The season technically runs from the first of September through the end of November, but practically begins once weather has started pushing animals from Yellowstone.

### SOUTH DAKOTA

Custer State Park in South Dakota is another area worthy of consideration for potential bison hunters, and the odds of drawing a license are much higher than elsewhere. This is due partially to the fact that Custer offers a much easier hunt than the first five described. While free roaming, there is an abundance of bison in the park, and any hunter will see animals daily. The main dif-

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# From the B&C Big Game Records Program

Essentially, bison exist as wild, free-ranging herds in their original setting in very few places. Accordingly, only trophies from Alaska and Canada are fully eligible for consideration for possible awards as well as publication in the records books. Since 1977, hunter-taken trophies from the lower 48 states are acceptable only for the records books, not for consideration of the usual place awards, and only if they were taken in a state that recognizes bison as wild and free-ranging and which requires a hunting license and/or big-game tag for hunting bison.

The following table demonstrates the hot spots for records-book bison over the past ten years.

RANK	STATE/ PROVINCE	# OF ENTRIES
1	South Dakota	41
2	Utah	15
3	Wyoming	13
4	British Columbia	11
5	Alaska	4
5	Arizona	4
5	Yukon Territory	4
8	Montana	2



**ABOVE:** Max G. Bauer, Jr. is pictured with his son Chad on a 2001 hunt in Custer County, South Dakota. The bull Max harvested scores 118-4/8 points. **RIGHT:** Terry L. Fretz traveled to Yukon Territory in 2000 to hunt bison. He took his bull, which scores 116-6/8 points, near Sekulmun Lake.

faculty is finding that really big bull! There are plenty of bison to be seen here, but in a week of camping in the French Creek area, I saw only one really old and battered bull that made my trigger finger itch. Unfortunately, at \$4,000, the license for anyone wishing to pursue such a brute is notably more expensive than elsewhere in America. While the price seems excessive, particularly in relation to the fees in Alaska, Montana, or Utah, the Custer license includes a guide (though no food or lodging) for the three days of your hunt. The higher cost of this license also means that far fewer people apply for them. In fact, Custer's recently retired herd manager once informed me that no applicant had ever been unsuccessful more than two consecutive years in trying to draw a bull tag there. For those older sportsmen concerned about the logistics of field handling a bison, it is important to know that the park staff at Custer will undertake all the animal recovery and skinning duties. The consequence of this, however, is that while there is certainly rough country here, you will not experience a true wilderness hunt. The hospitable park employees have access to heavy equipment and will only allow a bison to be harvested where it may be recovered in this way. Given the trophy quality I witnessed in South Dakota, however, I think this destination is a wonderful option for hunters.

## CANADA

In contrast to the above options, certain areas in Canada offer bison hunters higher odds of success at only marginally higher costs. Since most hunters desire a true wilderness experience, making Utah's or Arizona's hunts the most attractive in the lower 48, they will also then be most likely to hire an outfitter. As non-resident licenses in the U.S. are so difficult to acquire and sometimes approaching

\$4,000, the possible addition of outfitter costs in the Henry Mountains or North Kaibab start to make Canadian hunting seem economical. This means that Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, British Columbia, or Alberta should be the focus of those looking for their first truly wild bison. I can personally assure you that the pain of repeatedly failing to draw a license in Utah, Arizona, or Alaska is made very tolerable when combined with memories of a fabulous hunt north of the U.S. border.

## YUKON TERRITORY

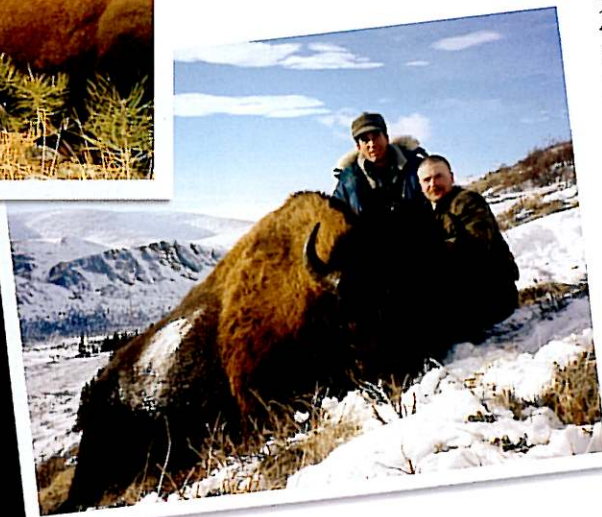
In Yukon Territory, northwest of Whitehorse, there exists a free-roaming herd of wood bison that was established in 1986. A winter hunt for this rare subspecies, importable to Europe but not the U.S. for various legislative reasons, definitely requires that one pack Arctic-worthy clothing, because the temperatures can reach minus 50 degrees! It's a truly challenging hunt, and the absolutely fabulous outfitter gets an allocation of licenses every year. To highlight the value of this opportunity, consider that there exist more than 11,000 white rhinoceros in the world, and fewer than 6,000 pure and free roaming wood bison in well-managed public herds. Tim Mervyn of Mervyn's Yukon Outfitters charges roughly \$9,000 for this hunt (including licenses, permits and government trophy fees). Having hunted with him twice, I can assure you that it is worth every cent.

## NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

The Mackenzie Bison Sanctuary in Northwest Territories houses the only other hunttable herd of pure wood bison. The animals reside on the northwest banks of the Great Slave Lake above the Mackenzie River, and the hunter is again assured a true wilderness experience. Hunting here was first permitted in 1987-88 when 20 bull permits were issued. This number has increased as the herd swelled to about 2,000 animals. Having never hunted this area due to scheduling conflicts in the past, I can only say that the outfitter, Jerome Knap, is very professional and well known. Honestly, if the governing body allowed hunting in this area during January rather than December, I wouldn't waste any time in booking this trip, which costs \$7,500 plus government licenses.

## BRITISH COLUMBIA

A stunning 1,500-square-mile area of northern British Columbia, northwest of Fort St. John, also houses



a huntable bison herd. What differentiates this opportunity from others is that this is the only place in North America where one can simply buy an outfitter-provided license to pursue free roaming plains bison. This is a huge advantage for Americans in particular, as these animals, unlike wood bison, are importable to the U.S. Sikanni River Outfitters claims success rates of 90 percent or better on bison for costs similar to those incurred by anyone hunting the Yukon or Northwest Territories.

### ALBERTA

The final "fair chase" option for North American bison is reserved for only the most adventurous. Alberta houses hybrid plains/wood bison that may be imported to America and are legal quarry when roaming beyond the boundaries of Wood Buffalo National Park. These animals are infected with brucellosis and tuberculosis, so in the interest of maintaining other nearby herds as "disease free," the provincial government established "bison free zones" around the park in 1987. Amazingly, there is no draw, guide or even license required to hunt this area when any bison is discovered in "the zones," which were expanded again in 1990. It is important to note that these bison are

not eligible for entry in the B&C Records Program because they are not classified as big game animals, no hunting licenses are issued, and they can be hunted year-round. Happily, the circumstances of this hunt also provide sportsmen direct knowledge that they are contributing to the survival of the species by preventing the spread of disease to other nearby bison. For those unwilling or unable to guide themselves in this rugged and dangerous area, Eric Grinnell of Silvertip Outfitters has successfully offered assistance for a number of years.

After reviewing these 10 bison destinations, hunters should remember that these adventures are not only rare, expensive, and challenging, but also possibly dangerous. Particularly in the "north country," one must be prepared for deep snow and temperatures that can be deadly. Just as some areas are not suited to all hunters, not every weapon is suited to bison. Though the guides in Canada generally view rifles in the .338-class as an appropriate minimum, I simply recommend the largest weapon that one can fire accurately. Bison, it is important to recall, are wild animals, and it is wise to keep in mind the story of a trapper being killed by a wounded bull in Northwest



**Pink Mountain is the top trophy-producing area in British Columbia. Tom Foss took this bull, which scores 121-4/8 points, in that area during the 2003 season.**

Territories just a few years ago. I used a .416 Remington on my first Yukon hunt, and the big bull took two rounds into the vitals and a third to the spine before finally going down. Perhaps I am overly cautious, but my upcoming Yukon adventure will see me carrying an 8-bore muzzleloader. This may be unnecessary, but I like to keep in mind that I am hunting the largest land mammal in North America... on his terms! ■

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