

### Does mountain bison still roam Yellowstone?

By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyoming

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Bison on the National Elk Refuge graze with the freedom of a wild animal recently as the Tetons stand under a thinning blanket of white.  
*News & Guide Photo / Price Chambers*

A faster, darker, hardier, shier subspecies of bison might still roam the Mirror Plateau in Yellowstone National Park, and park officials need to investigate before human intrusion jeopardizes the herd, a bison expert says.

Bob Jackson — a bison behavior expert, outspoken critic of the National Park Service and former Yellowstone ranger — says mountain bison lived on the high-elevation plateau south of Lamar Valley for thousands of years before the plains bison were reintroduced to the park. Though the two subspecies have likely interbred, he said, the mountain bison likely retained much of their genetic heritage and their “culture,” which has enabled them to survive for thousands of years without leaving the park.

“Mostly it’s a cultural difference that makes these animals unique,” says Jackson, who is a spokesman for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. “This is an animal that doesn’t go outside of Yellowstone because they are so wary.”

The herd numbers roughly 300 animals and spends winters in Pelican Valley, Jackson said. Unlike the plains bison, mountain bison have little tolerance for humans. But, Jackson said, roughly 10 outfitter camps set up in and around the Mirror Plateau could be disturbing the prehistoric herd.

“The herd cannot maintain its identity with the use that’s on the Mirror Plateau,” Jackson said.

He said Yellowstone rangers have called him to express their worries about the animals.

“They say all they hear is just crashing through the woods,” Jackson said, “that’s how scared these buffalo are right now.”

Jackson said Yellowstone biologists need to step up their research on the Mirror Plateau to ensure the mountain bison’s long-term viability. Further, he said wildlife managers need to give the herd access to more backcountry areas.

“What they haven’t done in Yellowstone is looked specifically for [genetic] markers that would show the differences,” Jackson said.

The National Park Service Web site details historical accounts of mountain bison. In 1893, geologist Arnold Hague said: "Even in this elevated region they live for the greater part of the year in the timber ... most unusual, save in midwinter, to find them in open valley or on the treeless mountain slope. They haunt the most inaccessible and out-of-the-way places, living in open glades and pastures, the oases of the dense forest. They wander about in small bands."

But according to Yellowstone spokesman Al Nash, recent reviews of scientific literature, conducted in conjunction with work on the park's winter-use plan, suggest that Yellowstone bison have always ranged outside the park in the winter.

"There was a time when scientists thought there might be two subspecies, the mountain bison and the plains bison," Nash said. "But most scientists really don't see that distinction any more."

Still, Nash said researchers continue to pay attention to the bison on Mirror Plateau.

"We have done some genetic sampling of the bison population here, and more is being conducted," he said. "And we do have some bison from the different herds or smaller groups that are radio collared. We are working to gather data on their movement to see if this small group does indeed interact with other groups, especially during the rut, and to see if these animals move outside the park boundaries."

"We don't think there's a separate mountain bison, but there are ongoing questions about how these groups interact," Nash said.

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