



Bob Jackson of Promise City stands in one of his pasture-turned-to-prairie fields with some of the 300-plus bison he has been raising since 1982. Photo by Michael Schaffer/Daily Iowegian

Promise City man looks to nature to raise his bison

'I always figured nature's way is always the most efficient.' Bob Jackson, owner of Tall Grass Bison in Promise City

By Michael Schaffer - Managing editor Daily Iowegian

CENTERVILLE — Tall Grass Bison in Promise City is living up to the community's motto, "One of a Kind."

Just drive one-half mile northwest of this small Wayne County community located on Highway 2 to find rolling southern Iowa fields restored to native prairie where large bison herds have been grazing since 1982.

Bob Jackson, of Promise City, the owner of Tall Grass Bison, remembers how the bison herds in Yellowstone National Park lived, while he was a backcountry ranger there, and decided to try to duplicate that in southern Iowa.

"And that's how we raise our buffalo. Kind of like the original herd animals, with the natural social family herd order, an evolutionary development that minimizes stress, the precursor of pathogens, illness and tough meat," Jackson said. "This makes all the difference in the world."

Jackson, who has a fish and wildlife biology degree from Iowa State University, said he never treats the bison with hormones or antibiotics. The bison free-range and graze on native prairie grasses on his 1,000-acre farm. In the winter, he brings in hay but otherwise no other food sources are used.

While driving through one of his pastures two weeks ago, Jackson pointed to a group of bison gathered together according to sex.

"Like that group right there, there's like one cow in it I think, but those are all bulls. Those are like bull groups," Jackson said. "The males will stay together."

Jackson said indigenous people group the same way, where males, females, extended families and children tend to stay together.

Jackson said the social family herd order applies to other herd animals besides buffalo, like cattle, pigs and sheep. But modern agriculture has severed the evolutionary family order in livestock, which had helped to ensure the species survival.

"Through all this time, eons of survival and development as a species, you take that away from them and all those roles diminish and they're not there so they're a lot more anxious," Jackson said. "And that's what everybody does. Because no one thinks of them that they needed all these roles. Otherwise they wouldn't have survived as a species."

Take away the roles and now the animals are under chronic stress, which affects PH levels in the meat and tenderness, Jackson said. But take away the stress and anxiety and you get a better, fresher tasting meat. And it doesn't matter if you have beef cattle or if you have buffalo, he said.

Jackson and his partner Susan travel Iowa giving presentations on bison social family herd order. And he works with the Leopold Grazing Initiative in Ames and the Iowa Prairie Grazing Conference.

"And heck, we just love to be able to tell them what it is," Jackson said. "It's hard for people to fathom it. That they can actually incorporate it."

Jackson said change is not easy, especially in southern Iowa where cow-calf producers dominate the landscape. And yet he has met cattle producers near Pella who have expressed an interest in raising buffalo. He said cow-calf producers can follow his lead and become more efficient.

"Everybody looks at very short-term efficiency in our herds. You know, like if a cow doesn't have a calf, then they want to get rid of her," Jackson said. "But if you have social herds, then that cow that's without a calf, it babysits all of the other cow's calfs. So then therefore, the whole herd is in better health. So the efficiency is in the infrastructure that these animals have."

Jackson grew up in northern Iowa, an area more suited for row crops. Jackson was familiar with Promise City because his younger brother would frequently hunt near the area.

"It's a lot better country," Jackson said. "I like it a lot better as far as raising buffalo."

Tall Grass Bison is the largest bison producer in Iowa that follows the social family herd order, Jackson said. Last year his business did \$110,000 in meat sales and it expects to do \$180,000 this year, he said.

Jackson said they practice humane slaughter in the field, which eliminates unnecessary transportation stress. He selects animals that are on the outside of a herd for harvest.

Tall Grass Bison sells 21-day aged front and hindquarters and hanging halves. Call (641) 874-5794 or e-mail tgibison@iowatelecom.net for more information.

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