



What is Wild?

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As Montanans we rarely have to define what is wild—we're surrounded by it. Many of us see deer in our backyards and songbirds on our feeders on a daily basis. Within a half hour from most of our homes we have clear, healthy streams, lush forests, and prairies. But when it comes to wildlife—the critters that inhabit these spaces—we're often conflicted as to how wild an animal truly should be. Or as more often is the question, how wild do we want Montana to be?

As Montanans we are the envy of the nation when it comes to wildlife. We've restored nearly every species in Montana that existed when Lewis and Clark ventured up the mighty Mo more than 200 years ago. The only large mammal that hasn't been restored to any of its native prairie habitat in Montana is the bison. In the past 75 years we've brought them all back—deer, antelope, elk, moose, bears and even wolves—but we stopped short from restoring the species that likely outnumbered all of the others combined.

Last month the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks initiated a planning process that would be the crowning achievement of Montana's wildlife restoration legacy. The Department has formally committed to investigate whether there is room in Montana to restore a remnant population of a bison herd that once numbered in the millions and to find a home for this wild, wide-ranging remnant herd in Montana. Last month public meetings were held in all corners of the state to gather information from the public to determine the scope of a statewide bison restoration plan.

From these meetings one fact became abundantly clear: Montana is the only place in the country where talking about restoring wild bison could happen. The northern great plains of Montana and the Missouri River Breaks, including the 1.1-million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge is not only the best place in the state to restore wild bison, but also in North America. In a world where energy development and natural resources are a top priority, landscapes are changing in months, not decades. In Montana we are proud to say our public lands and our public wildlife have always been a top priority.

Millions of people visit our state annually to vacation in a place we are lucky to call home. Visitors are equally stunned and inspired by seeing the once endangered bald eagle now as common as an osprey. In Yellowstone National Park, traffic jams occur daily as tourists gawk at bison grazing unalarmed near the roadway. But how wild are these animals?

Yes, we have plenty of bison in Montana: Yellowstone National Park, The National Bison Range, and dozens of private herds across the state. But their wildness is confined by fences and, in the case of Yellowstone, limited habitat and tough winters push them in great numbers into agricultural and populated areas. Is this the kind of wildness that we've come to accept in Montana? GOOD POINT! Maybe even expand on this ...

In the Missouri Breaks we have an opportunity to start from scratch. Yellowstone bison are bound in an endless controversy of disease and confusing multi-agency management. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) have the ability to develop a program that will celebrate the wildness of this animal and be managed similarly to our state's other big game animals.

We all know that FWP will proceed carefully with any bison restoration efforts. Landowners will be consulted, landscapes will be examined, and a public process will go forward where all concerned will be involved. If bison are brought back to a particular place, problems will be solved, local economies will become more diverse, and the larger public will salute Montana for its achievement. As the landscape of eastern Montana changes, so does the opportunity for valuable wildlife species to be restored with minimal conflict to local agriculture.

Let's not let this opportunity pass us by.

This is Kit Fischer with the National Wildlife Federation ... thanks for listening.