

BISON AREN'T BUICKS, AND OTHER MYTHS



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Don't believe everything you hear about the West. While some Western myths are mere entertainment, others can kill you. Like thinking a four-wheel-drive vehicle provides traction on ice.

Recently, some dangerously incorrect statements gained serious media attention during the first hunt in 15 years for bison leaving Yellowstone Park. Calling the hunt a slaughter, protesters said buffalo are so docile that killing one is like shooting a Buick or - as one hunter said - "like shooting a cow." Those statements are worth just what they cost you.

Lying in a snowdrift at 30 below zero, I once watched lead balls bounce off a buffalo's hide. Hunters poured more powder, stuffed more bullets into their muzzle-loading rifles until one wounded a bull, but it didn't fall. The other bull we'd bought to shoot that day grew agitated, snorting and pawing while we crouched in the snow. I could have used a few smooth-tongued activists between me and those bulls, or, after we survived the hunt, helping us butcher as our hands froze to our knives.

Maybe you've seen photos of a lone bison bull resting on a hillside. Looks gentle, right? That's because experienced photographers know it's risky to get close to the critters if they're awake.

National park warnings blare "Buffalo are dangerous. Stay in your cars" because buffalo kill or gore visitors and demolish vehicles. The grouches of the bovine world, bison are so easily annoyed, so unpredictable, that even a buffalo rancher never turns his back on one. Bottle-fed buffalo raised entirely in captivity have killed their owners; so have dairy cattle. Sometimes they snort or bellow in warning, but don't count on it.

I once saw a bull toss his head like a high school girl flipping her hair. The bison next to him took a few steps and fell, disemboweled by that casual motion. A bison bull may weigh a ton - like a modest passenger car - but can spin and leap like a ballet dancer. From a standing position, a bison, like a deer, can jump a fence. They can run 35 miles an hour, faster than most horses and all joggers. Unless you can jump 12 feet straight up and come down doing a four-minute mile, stay well away.

After all, bison evolved with the saber-toothed tiger and the dire wolf, both extinct. Their wild instincts are still strong, and their weapons - horns and hooves - are sharp. On the ranch where we hunted, a wounded bull and his herd mates had destroyed two pickups in minutes.

Yellowstone rangers once found a female grizzly dead in the middle of mauled grass and patches of bison hair. Half the bloody bruin's ribs were broken, and its belly punctured by two holes: Killed by a young buffalo, they concluded.

Cattle, the bison's wild cousins, aren't docile, either; they evolved under the same challenging conditions as bison. Beef cattle are not domesticated. Most never see a barn, are never restrained by humans, and rarely enter corrals. They birth without human contact, and raise their young while roaming the grasslands, wild as antelope. Twice a year, they may be corralled when calves are branded and weaned, but those experiences don't make them like people.

Like bison, cattle came with built-in weapons, horns and hooves, and regularly used them against predators and people. To reduce the danger, ranchers began dehorning, or raising polled (hornless) animals.

Both bison and cattle are usually calm because they have little to fear except from their human handlers, who have brains enough to leave them alone. Now that public opinion has repopulated the West with serious predators - grizzlies, wolves and cougars - maybe the ruminants will get back in touch with their wilder side. Bison may learn to distrust guys with rifles, and charge even sooner.

Cattle are always wary of strangers. Folks on foot, whether on public or private land, should keep a safe distance from any bovine. Maybe ranchers should bring back horned cattle. Not only could they defend themselves against natural predators, they might discourage trespassing humans as well.



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