

Big Gains for Yellowstone's Bison Historic Agreement Allows Bison to Roam Outside Yellowstone

Background

Yellowstone's bison have been mired in controversy for nearly two decades. The presence of domestic livestock immediately adjacent to the park — and the consequent governmental concern that bison might mingle with livestock and transmit the disease brucellosis to cattle — has been the primary reason why bison have not been allowed to roam outside of Yellowstone Park borders. While some argue for killing every

bison that leaves the park, others believe bison should be allowed to roam without restriction. We think there are solutions that treat bison like a valued wildlife species while respecting the needs of private landowners and the livestock industry.

The 6,000-acre Royal Teton Ranch (RTR),

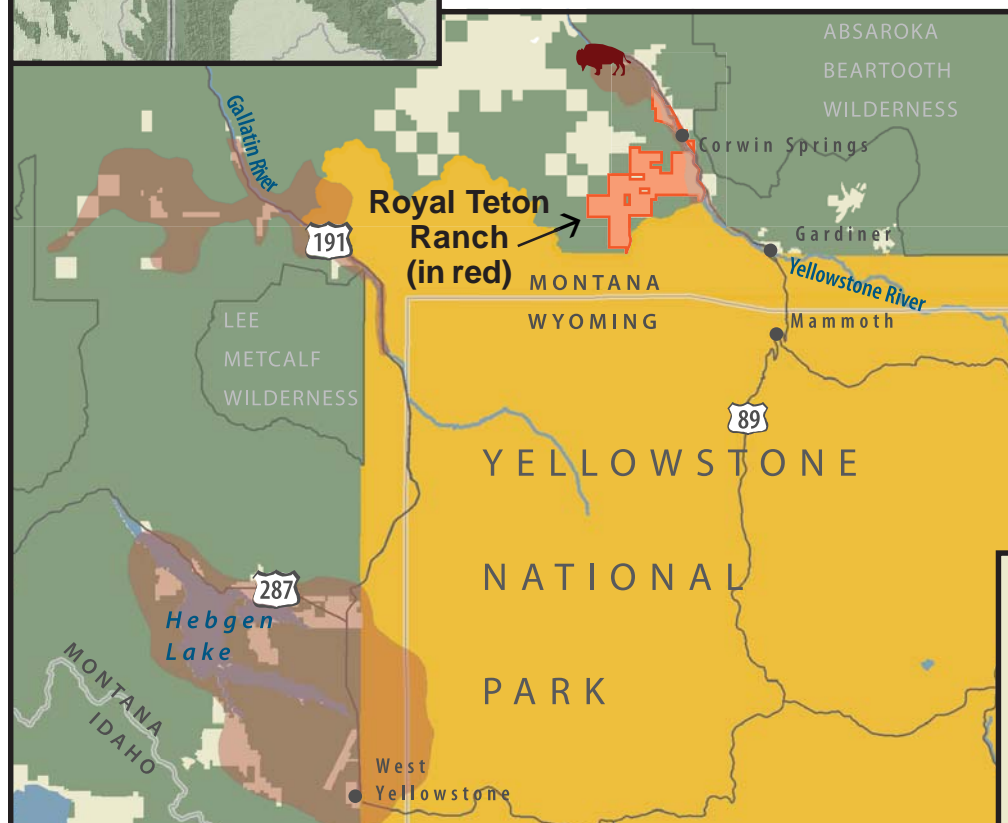
which is owned by the Church Universal and Triumphant, has long been a focal point of the bison controversy. The ranch is located just north of the park along the Yellowstone River, the natural migration path for bison. The RTR lies between Yellowstone Park and public lands on the Gallatin National Forest that have significant winter forage for bison.



Bison © USFWS

Yellowstone is home to the largest continuously wild, genetically pure bison herd in North America. The recovery of bison from the brink of extinction is an incredible wildlife success story. When winter blankets Yellowstone National Park, bison and other wildlife begin their ancient migrations out of the snowy high country to the surrounding valleys, seeking food for survival. While elk, moose, and other wildlife pass freely between Yellowstone and the surrounding area, bison are captured and shipped to slaughter by the thousands or hazed back into Yellowstone's unforgiving high country.

Bison management is guided by the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP), an agreement signed by five agencies in 2000. The IBMP is a risk-management approach aimed at minimizing contact between cattle and bison. To date, the net effect of this plan has been to constrain bison movement to Yellowstone National Park. This winter, more than 1,600 bison were killed this year as they attempted to leave the park in search of lower elevation winter habitat.



Land Ownership & Winter Bison Range

- Public Land Where No Cattle Are Present In Winter
- Private Lands
- Yellowstone National Park
- Historic Winter Migration and Range

Major Breakthrough

Despite the record slaughter, this winter has ended on a positive note—conservation groups and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks negotiated an agreement with the Church Universal and Triumphant to end cattle grazing on the RTR and to create a corridor for bison to migrate along the Yellowstone River to winter range north of the park. This solution assures that separation between bison and livestock will be maintained, alleviating concerns over disease transmission.

This is a major breakthrough for Yellowstone's bison. Although initially only modest numbers of bison will be allowed to utilize the migration corridor (25 the first year, up to 100 the second year) numbers can increase as agencies gain experience managing bison outside the park. This agreement will make nearly 3,000 acres of winter range outside of the park available to bison.

Giving Bison Room to Roam – A Larger Vision



*Bison in Yellowstone National Park
© Tim Stevens*

We believe the key to resolving the bison controversy lies in establishing areas outside of Yellowstone Park where bison — like other wildlife — can migrate at critical times of the year. This approach

requires 1) leasing or retiring a small number of grazing allotments, some on public land, a few on private; 2) working collaboratively with the few remaining small livestock producers on fencing or other approaches that maintain separation between bison and livestock; and 3) amending the IBMP where necessary to allow bison to roam outside the park in locations where mingling with livestock is no longer a significant risk.

This approach addresses the concerns of conservationists as well as the livestock industry. By providing important winter habitat outside the park, it meets the needs of bison and their supporters. By eliminating those cattle grazing areas where the opportunity for bison-cattle interaction is greatest, it serves the industry concern of reducing the risk of disease transmission.

Finally, establishing areas where bison can roam outside the park is a critical step toward managing numbers within Yellowstone Park. Providing habitat outside the park can create increased opportunity for fair-chase hunting that can keep bison in better balance with habitat and forage. This is the same successful approach that's been used in Montana to keep deer and elk populations healthy.

What Does It Cost?

Because the RTR is the only major cattle operation immediately north of the park, this grazing agreement is the linchpin to resolving the bison controversy on the north side of the park. Without it, bison will continue to be killed when they attempt to leave the park.

The total cost for leasing the grazing rights (a 30-year lease) on the Royal Teton Ranch and creating a bison migration corridor through the ranch is \$2.8 million dollars. Conservation groups (including the Greater



Royal Teton Ranch © RMEF

Yellowstone Coalition, National Parks Conservation Association and the National Wildlife Federation) have pledged \$1 million for this retirement. The National Park Service has agreed to contribute \$1.5 million and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has agreed to contribute \$300,000.

We have already received a \$500,000 grant from a generous donor. All donations can be sent to an earmarked trust account for the Royal Teton Ranch Lease Agreement at:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
c/o Sue Daly
1420 East Sixth Avenue
Helena, MT 59620

Donations should be clearly marked "Royal Teton Ranch" to ensure proper routing. Contributions are tax-deductible to the level afforded by state and federal law.

This is a huge step forward for Yellowstone bison and signals a new beginning for their management. ☺

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