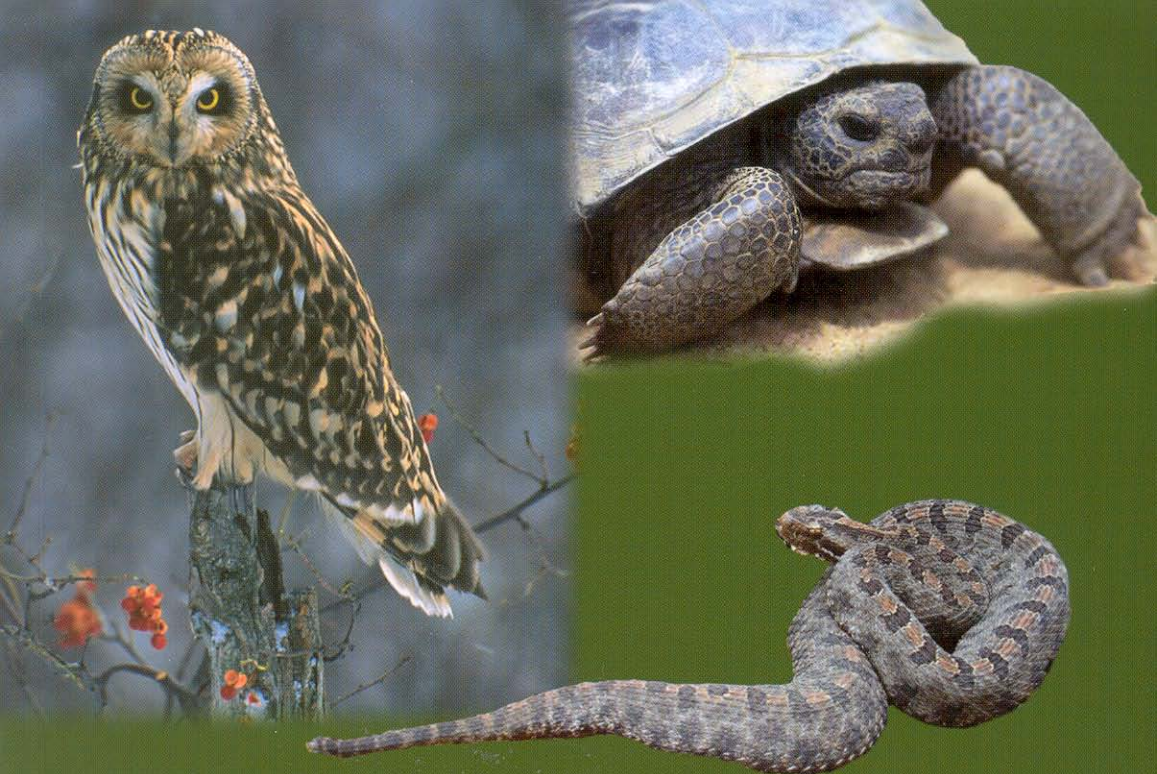




ALABAMA WILDLIFE

VOLUME THREE

**Imperiled Amphibians,
Reptiles, Birds,
and Mammals**

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BISON

Bison bison (Linnaeus)

OTHER NAMES. Buffalo, North American Bison, Plains Bison, Woodland Bison (McHugh 1958, Hall 1981, McDonald 1981, Meagher 1986).

DESCRIPTION. Largest (adult length =210-380 cm [80-150 in.]; weight=310-900 kg [700-2,000 lb.]) native terrestrial mammal in North America. Both massiveness and height of body accentuated by the shoulder hump. Both sexes have short, black horns that curve upward and inward and taper to a circular, relatively sharp tip. Males are larger and more heavily built than females. Pelage long, with coarse guard hairs and a thick, wooly undercoat. Brown-black hair is long and shaggy on forehead, neck, shoulder hump, and forelegs, but short and straight on hindquarters. Hooves are black, legs are short and stout, and tail is short and tufted at tip. Two subspecies recognized, the woodland (*B. b. athabasca*) and plains (*B. b. bison*) bison (Hall 1981, McDonald 1981, Reynolds *et al.* 1982, Meagher 1986, Choate *et al.* 1994).



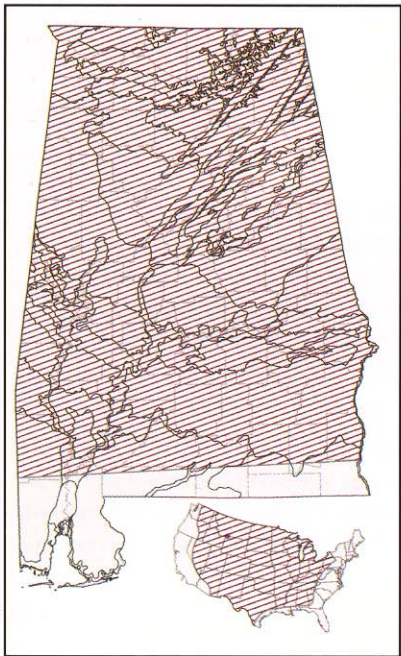
Photo—Troy L. Best

DISTRIBUTION. Once abundant and widespread from Alaska into northern Mexico, about 30 million inhabited North America when Europeans arrived; subsequently commercially hunted for meat and hides to near extinction by the late 1800s. This brush with extinction occurred with the passive blessing of the United States government, which saw the virtual elimination of bison as a way to help subjugate the western tribes of Native Americans. The only remaining completely free-ranging (unfenced) herd in the United States today is in Yellowstone National Park. Even there, they are either forced back into the Park, or systematically shot, when they leave under the premise that they are carriers of brucellosis, a disease potentially contagious to cattle. Also common on some other large national parks, public preserves, and private ranches (McDonald 1981, Reynolds *et al.* 1982, Meagher 1986, Choate *et al.* 1994). In Alabama, the plains bison occurred in all but the most southern part of the state (Choate *et al.* 1994).

HABITAT. A variety of mixed types associated with woodlands and grasslands. Relied on forested areas for shade and escape from insects pests, disturbances, and severe weather, but used open habitats for grazing. Undertook annual migrations, apparently seeking suitable grazing and weather conditions (Choate *et al.* 1994).

LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY. Mostly diurnal, with several grazing periods interspersed with rest and rumination. Breeding season is June-October. Females tend to be seasonally polyestrous, with

a cycle lasting about three weeks. Some females conceive as yearlings, but most breed first at two to four years old. Males reach sexual maturity at two to three years. Gestation is about 285 days, and



results in birth of one calf (rarely twins) weighing 15-25 kilograms (30-60 pounds). Calves usually are reddish tan, becoming the dark-brown color of adults at about four months. Following birth, calves stand in about 10 minutes and first nurse in about 30 minutes; they begin grazing and drinking water in five to seven days, but may nurse for seven to eight months. Usual lifespan is about 12-15 years; some survive for more than 20 years, and a few as long as 40 years. Bison graze throughout the year, primarily on grasses and sedges. Harbor a variety of endoparasites and ectoparasites, and gregarious nature enhances spread of parasites and diseases among animals of all ages (McHugh 1958, Reynolds *et al.* 1982, Meagher 1986, Choate *et al.* 1994).

BASIS FOR STATUS CLASSIFICATION. Probably extirpated from Alabama through overhunting after the arrival of Europeans (Choate *et al.* 1994).

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