

Prairie Memoirs

Study Units

[Iowa's Wildlife Resource Base; People and Wildlife](#)

Supplemental Information

See [Iowa's Wildlife Resource Base](#) for information on the historical perspective of wildlife in Iowa, the impact of settlement, and loss of native species.

Bison are the largest mammal with hooves in North America. In the mid-1700s, bison were found in most of what is now the United States, except along the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. They also inhabited northern Mexico and the prairies of Canada. It is estimated they numbered between 50 and 75 million. Some species of bison has occupied this range for at least the last 10,000 years.

Within 150 years bison were driven to near extinction. By 1895, fewer than 1,000 bison were thought to be living in North America. The only wild herd was in Canada. The rest were confined to parks and zoos. The most notable population survived in Yellowstone National Park.

Three Iowans had a role in saving the bison. Buffalo Bill Cody (famed buffalo hunter), John Lacey, and William Hornaday all worked for legislation to protect the remnants of the bison herds and educated the public about the bison's plight.

Teaching Suggestions

Work cooperatively with the drama, history, and social studies teachers or departments to help students research true pioneer and Native American accounts of bison in Iowa. Good places to start searching are the local library and courthouse. Most Iowa counties have printed local histories that include stories about local pioneers and their encounters with Native Americans and wildlife. The courthouse also may have the old surveyors' notes taken as each section of the new territory was mapped. Government surveyors were among the first Caucasians to explore and document the land west of the Mississippi River.

To highlight the historical significance of wildlife, have students investigate towns named for buffalo / bison or other extirpated wildlife (e.g., Buffalo Center, Elkhart, Plover, etc.).

Develop a play depicting the views of bison presented in the memoirs to present to other classes. The play can be done in two acts. The first, using the material as written in the activity. The second, written by students, with all characters seeing the continued existence of the bison herds as necessary for their own survival. Would such a change in views have prevented near extermination of bison? Contact your local [county conservation board \(CCB\)](#), [Iowa Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\) conservation officer](#) (opens as PDF), or nature center for bison artifacts (bones, skulls, hides) or have students manufacture these props.



Have students investigate how the bison was saved from extinction and its present status in the wild. Many Native American tribes are again turning to the bison to provide for their livelihood. Others are raising captive bison for meat and hides.

If possible, arrange a visit to view a herd to observe bison behavior and gain an appreciation for the animal. There may be a private herd nearby, or you can visit [Neil Smith National Wildlife Refuge](#) near Prairie City. After the visit, have students write their own memoir about bison.

Evaluation

See the activity.

Student Materials

None

Teacher Aids

None

Additional Materials

- Caduto, M.J. and J. Bruchac. 1997. *Keepers of the Earth*. Fulcrum, Inc. Golden, CO. (See the story 'Gluscabi and the Game Animals' for a Native American perspective of hunting.)
- Craighead, G.J. 1986. *One Day in the Prairie*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Dinsmore, J.J. 1994. *A Country So Full Of Game*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Goble, P. 1986. *Buffalo Women*. New York: First Aladdin Paperbacks. (retold stories from Native American tribes who followed the buffalo herds on the Great Plains)
- Lee, E. 1998. *Bluestem Horizon A Story of a Tallgrass Prairie*. Norwalk: Soundprints.
- [Prairie Voices: An Iowa Heritage Curriculum](#) (a curriculum published by the State Historical Society of Iowa)
- Warren, A. 2000. *Pioneer Girl: Growing up on the Prairie*. Morrow, William & Co.
- Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Area [Camp Silos](#) (prairie facts sheets, lessons plans, student activities)

