

BUFFALO BELIEFS and BEHAVIORS

By: Mary Duvall

Based on research of available literature, plus many visits with those who are currently raising buffalo.

Thinking of joining the ranks of the world's buffalo producers??? Welcome to the club!

You will find that buffalo can be a wholesome form of fun, suitable for family entertainment, as well as a potentially lucrative venture.

The buffalo business is good now, with even brighter prospects for the future. Today's ever-increasing population concerned with healthy eating for a healthy lifestyle find that buffalo is a logical choice. Buffalo meat is a low-calorie, low-cholesterol, nutrition-packed food. All this, and it tastes good, too.

And that's only part of the story. Buffalo by-products are valued by artisans, craftsmen, historians, and people with discriminating good taste.

Sold yet? There's more.

Buffalo tend to be less management intensive than other livestock, as we'll outline in this article.

Whether your motive is pleasure or profit, there are some things to keep in mind before you hang out your shingle as a **BUFFALO PRODUCER**.

BUFFALO ARE SORT OF LIKE CATTLE

If you are a cattle producer seeking to diversify your operation, you may

find that buffalo fit into your present operation quite nicely.

Before you rush right out, though, and buy a herd of buffalo, you had better learn **RULE NUMBER ONE**: Forget half of the stuff you know about cattle. (Which half you want to forget is up to you -- but we will try to help you make the proper determination.)

Then there's **RULE NUMBER TWO**: Despite everything the experts tell you, bear in mind that buffalo tend to be very independent creatures. Not having heard what the experts say, buffalo go right ahead and do pretty much whatever they darned well please.

There will be days when you will want to shoot (fatally) your entire herd...or at least one or two of the "troublemakers." There are other days when you will be infinitely amused at the antics of your buffalo. It would appear as if the second sentiment is the one that prevails, judging by the increasing population of buffalo we've seen over the past several years.

BUT THEY ARE NOT CATTLE

For starters, buffalo are put together differently. Oh, sure, there are lots of obvious things -- but there are plenty of not-so-obvious things, too.

Buffalo have an extra rib. Where cattle have 13 sets of ribs, buffalo have 14. Buffalo heifers generally do not have their first calf until they are three (however, heifers on a high plane of nutrition may calve at two). The animals don't mature until they are six

or seven years old, but will frequently live into their twenties, thirties, and sometimes even into their forties.

A buffalo, given the proper incentive, can jump over a 6-foot fence and not even brush the top. On the other hand, a buffalo with the proper incentive will happily stay put, even behind a fence that wouldn't slow down a myopic milk cow.

During a snow storm, buffalo will walk into the wind and snow, thereby walking out of the storm. Cattle tend to drift with the wind, staying in the storm as long as they possibly can.

NOR DO THEY THINK LIKE CATTLE

Buffalo subscribe to a different philosophy of life than typical beef cattle.

Buffalo don't shine too much to being driven. Moving a herd of buffalo is best accomplished if the herders figure out where the "herdees" want to go, then make sure the way is open for them. The buffalo will be happy and it will save a lot on fence-fixing.

Buffalo like lots of company. They are very social animals, with a strong herd instinct. They tend to stay in cohesive groups, and are happiest when surrounded by friends. One or two buffalo will not be happy and they will not thrive, even under the best of conditions. If there are other animals in the vicinity, they will yearn to join them, even if they are not buffalo.

Buffalo also have a strong homing instinct. They are perfectly capable of negotiating unfamiliar terrain in a quest to return to their own stamping grounds.


A buffalo uses its tail as a barometer of its disposition. If the tail is up and curved slightly, take that as a first warning that all is not well in buffalo land. If the tail is straight up, the warning stage is over and you are facing the "I'm mad too, Eddie!" stage.

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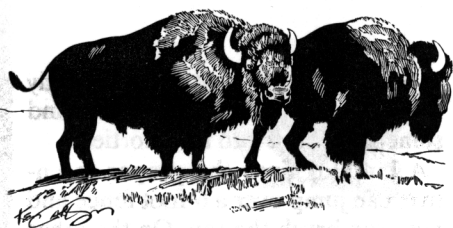
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BUFFALO PASTURE

If you know the carrying capacity of your land for cattle, that is the approximate carrying capacity for buffalo. They eat essentially the same feeds as cattle, with a few peculiarities worth noting.

On pasture, buffalo show a marked preference for grass, avoiding clovers and other legumes. They eat more different kinds of browse, grasses and weeds than cattle. They require less protein in their diet to thrive and generally are more efficient feed converters.

Make sure they have the usual salt and mineral mixes recommended for cattle. Some producers advocate offering buffalo a salt block with a fly treatment incorporated into it.

Buffalo love oats and high quality grass hay. Buffalo seem to have fewer digestive upsets than cattle. Bloat is very rare, and grain overload or founder has never been reported. The saying is: "If they need it, they'll eat it; if they don't, they won't." Just be sure to keep them off your stubble fields. It doesn't digest well and has been known to be fatal.

BRINGING A BUFFALO HOME

If your buffalo feel at home on your place they will not usually need to go on exploration parties around the neighborhood. This is particularly true when the animals have been introduced to your pastures at an early age and when cows have calved out on your ranch or farm.

Older bison can be successfully transplanted but require more effort. If the animals come from another farm and are acquainted with humans, the buffalo will adopt their new home fairly readily, especially if your pasture is good.

The standard recommendation is to keep older animals in a tightly fenced feed yard for one to several weeks until they settle down. Then you can release them into your main pasture. This works especially well if another herd is already established on the place.

If you have some concerns about how buffalo might react to their new home, or if your animals come from a wild herd, you would be well advised to keep the entire lot in a secure area for a couple of weeks. After this, younger animals can be released to the main pasture.

Some recommend that mature cows remain in a secure area until they have a calf. (If you think you want to adopt this practice, be sure that your cows have plenty of room to avoid unnecessary jostling and jolting, which tends to be unhealthy for those in the family way.) Younger cows with their calves can be released into the main pasture, but the older cows should be kept back for a longer period, until after the younger herd has fairly well established itself.

It is not advisable to release mature bulls into an area they did not grow up in, unless, of course, you enhance the surroundings with willing female companionship. You would be far ahead of the game to use younger bulls for your first breeding program.

FENCES

Buffalo tend to be easier on fences than cattle. If your buffalo like where they're at, a sound five-wire fence will be enough to keep them there. If your buffalo are unhappy where they're at, or if they come under extreme harassment, you're going to need something more substantial.

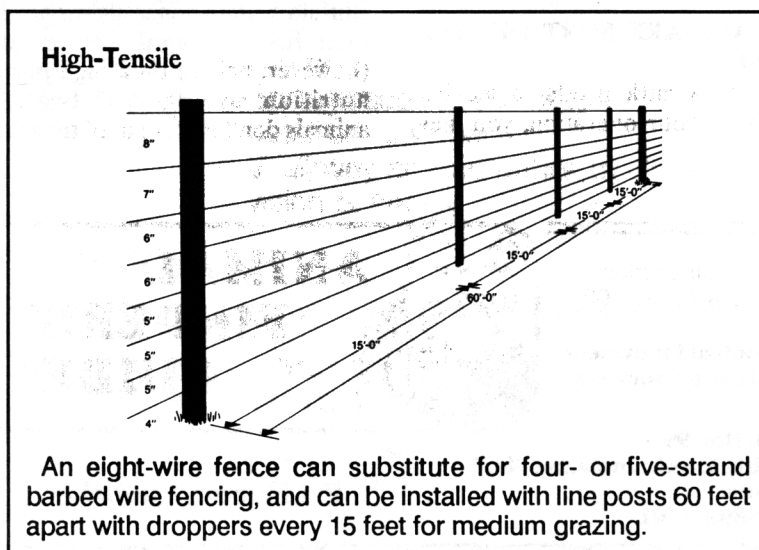
Many recommend that fences be at least eyeball high. If you are upgrading an existing cattle fence, you can generally get by with running an extra strand of wire across the top, to bring the top wire up to about five feet off the ground. Another recommendation is to run a strand of electric wire in front of your existing fence.

Those starting from scratch often opt for the high tensile system known as "New Zealand" fencing. High tensile is less expensive and easier to maintain than barbed wire -- which is good, because the barbs do not deter buffalo. High tensile is easily adapted to the extra height you need and is also designed for electrifying, which can be very effective with buffalo.

HEALTH

As a rule, buffalo are hardy animals and seem to resist many of the illnesses that plague cattle. However, they do need to be protected against some diseases and pests.

The most common concern is for internal parasites. This is particularly true on operations with limited pas-



PRIMER, continued

ture or during extended periods of confinement. Caution also needs to be exercised in areas of heavy rainfall and fast grass growth. Develop a worming program for your buffalo, and, where possible, rotate your pastures. This is not only good range management but also helps break a parasite cycle that may exist.

Buffalo are susceptible to the clostridial diseases, so many producers protect with a 7-way vaccine.

Calfhood vaccination against brucellosis has become very common in recent years. The reduced dose vaccination approved by USDA several years ago makes vaccination relatively safe -- and since many states require this, it is prudent to maintain a vaccinated herd if you intend to sell live animals. (Never Bangs vaccinate your bulls. It causes sterility and is never required by law.)

RULES AND REGULATIONS

You need to do your homework before you plan on bringing a buffalo home. Regulations vary from state to state as to health certificates needed for bringing an animal into the state. Your best avenue of information is your state veterinarian. Many state veterinarians also have access to a nationwide computer network which enables them to check the regulations in other states.

AVERAGE YIELD OF BUFFALO CARCASSES

The following figures give a breakdown on the carcass weights and dress-out weights of different cuts of meat for buffalo. These are based on 10 head, grass fed, of mixed cows and two-year-olds:

Live weight	827 pounds
Hanging weight	423.5 pounds
Sirloin tip roast	14.3 pounds
Rounds	52.5 pounds
Top butt	11.8 pounds
Prime rib	16.3 pounds
New York	11.2 pounds
Tenderloin	6.8 pounds
Trim	209 pounds (95% lean)

NOTE: Corn fed bulls can dress as high as 65% from live to rail.

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In addition, you should plan on how you intend to market the produce from your buffalo.

If you intend to sell the meat for commercial purposes, find out what sort of inspection your potential market requires. Although buffalo meat inspection is a voluntary thing, you may find you have more market opportunities if your meat passes USDA inspection.

If you intend to market live animals, make sure you have the necessary health inspection and certification required for movement of live animals. Again, check with your state veterinarian for complete details on what is required in your state.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The National Buffalo Association has more information available on the whys and wherefores of raising buffalo. Please feel free to contact us for additional help. Another good way of securing information about this fascinating industry is to talk with people in your area who are currently raising buffalo. You will get to meet some interesting, new people, and they will know what does and does not work in your particular region.

(Membership information for the National Buffalo Association can be found inside the back cover.)