



**'Tis folly**

Kiwanians took on berms, trout with two heads, a dump with a leak and snowplows vs. mailboxes, 12B.

**Obituary: 15B**

# VALLEY



**Circling the Square**

Ceci Clover pens homage to several beloved church ladies, 18B.

Wednesday, November 7, 2012



A bison licks its chops while grazing near the Moulton Barn on Mormon Row in Grand Teton National Park.

PRICE CHAMBERS / NEWS&GUIDE FILE PHOTO

## Bison day

Legislation proposes national mammal status for shaggy herbivores.

By Mike Kosmrl

Giant, shaggy and dangerous, bison are the bad boys of the grasslands.

Bulls can weigh up to 2,000 pounds. They injure more visitors to Yellowstone National Park than any other animal.

These hulking creatures represent a time, hundreds of years ago, when American Indians hunted bison for food across the Great Plains. Their hides offered warmth, clothing and shelter, and their bones became tools.

Thanks to the Wildlife Conservation Society, a day for the bison has been set aside.

And if the folks at the conservation society have their way, the mighty bison will soon sit alongside the bald eagle — our national emblem — as

the United States' national mammal.

A celebration for the inaugural National Bison Day, Nov. 1, was held Thursday at the National Museum of Wildlife Art. Attendance was low, but it was the first crack at the event, celebrated in South Dakota, New Mexico, West Virginia and Washington, D.C. A celebration was also scheduled in New York City but was called off because of Hurricane Sandy.

National Bison Day is in line with the National Bison Legacy Act, a bill sponsored by Wyoming Sen. Mike Enzi, said Keith Aune, the Wildlife Conservation Society's senior conservation scientist.

"That designation doesn't come with any authorities, it doesn't cost any money, it doesn't invoke any jurisdictional battles over management of the species," Aune said just before giving a speech Thursday at the National Museum for Wildlife Art. "It's really about a symbolic designation

See **BISON** on 14B



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Malcom Welch feels the coarse hide of a bison — a hide not actually attached to a bison, luckily for Malcom and others nearby — during the National Bison Day event. Folks celebrated the National Bison Legacy Act, a bill sponsored by Wyoming Sen. Mike Enzi.



PRICE CHAMBERS / NEWS&GUIDE PHOTOS

Brothers Bode and Malcom Welch investigate bison parts during Bison Day at the National Museum of Wildlife Art on Thursday.

## BISON

Continued from cover

and then providing a special day each year for us to celebrate the species and why it's important to America.”

Scott Smith, the group's communications manager, introduced Aune, who he described as “the bison guy” to a crowd of about 25.

Aune makes a compelling argument for the bison having some sort of special symbolic status.

The American bison, Latin name *Bison bison*, once roamed across the boreal forest of Canada and Alaska. At peak numbers, estimated at 30 to 60 million, they were found in close to every corner of the Lower 48, Aune said.

Driven by government policy, demand for hides and mass slaughters, the “force of nature” was rapidly removed from the land, eventually winning the population to about 1,200 animals, Aune said.

By 1905, a group of ranchers, conservationists and sportsmen formed the American Bison Society to breathe some life into small herds that re-



Keith Aune, the Wildlife Conservation Society's senior conservation scientist, speaks at the National Museum of Wildlife Art.

mained scattered in pockets around the country.

The species, now numbering 500,000, has been effectively saved and is no longer threatened by extinction.

### Bison basics

**Height at shoulders:** 5.5 to 6.5 feet

**Weight:** Males 1,200 to 2,000 pounds, females 700 to 1,000

**Horns:** Short, black, curved, spread of up to 3 feet

**Behavior:** Good swimmers, fast runners (up to 30 mph), unpredictable. Wallow in dust and mud to fight off insects. In late summer and early fall, the rut begins: Bulls fight for females

**Lifespan:** 15 to 25 years

**Chief predators:** Wolves, grizzly bears

*SOURCE: "Identifying and Finding the Mammals of Jackson Hole," by Darwin Wile*

But today roughly 95 percent of all bison are raised commercially, primarily for their meat, Aune said. Growth of wild herds on public lands petered out in the 1930s, he said.

That's led to the “second recovery of the bison,” what Aune described as an effort to increase the population from a conservation standpoint. That means increasing genetic diversity and bridging gaps in bison-habitable

range, he said.

“They're all over the place — that does tend to cause some confusion in terms of the public,” Aune said. “We have a real problem in the sense that most of our herds are small and on very small landscapes. Our job is not done.”

The Jackson Hole bison herd, numbering about 900, is a good example of the problem with wild bison today, said Darrell Geist, the habitat coordinator for West Yellowstone, Mont.-based Buffalo Field Campaign.

“You have an unfortunate situation where the most important habitat components have been converted to livestock operations — i.e., the feedground operations,” Geist said. “There is a lot of local support for the Teton-Jackson bison herd, but unfortunately cattle genes have been found in that herd.”

National Bison Day and the National Bison Legacy Act don't contain any specific goals for the North American bison population.

For information on the initiative to elect the bison the national mammal, visit [VoteBison.org](http://VoteBison.org).

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