

MPR News | Minnesota Now Bison Festival celebrates release of herd that helps prairie habitat thrive
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NIN MOINI: Every spring, a herd of bison stampede onto prairie land in the St. Croix Valley. Taking place this Saturday, the Bison Festival at the Belwin Conservancy in Afton draws hundreds of people to watch the release of these animals. The herd sticks around for the summer and helps create a healthy habitat. Joining me now to talk about the incoming bison herd is Lynette Anderson, a naturalist with the Belwin Conservancy. Thanks for your time, Lynette.

LYNETTE Thanks for having me. I'm so excited to be here with you.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: We're also excited to have you. I must admit, I don't know a ton about how bison interact with the environment, so I'm really excited to learn about this. So the herd that's arriving on Saturday, how many bison are there, and where are they coming from?

LYNETTE This year, we have a herd of 30 females coming. They're coming from Rice Lake, Wisconsin, which is about two hours east of here.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: Mm-hmm.

LYNETTE Their home ranch is North Star Bison. That's our been our partner for-- this is our 19th year of hosting a herd.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: Wow. Why all women, I wonder? I just-- I'm curious. That's just how it turned out?

LYNETTE Right. It's whatever they have available and what they-- they're a production ranch, so they're looking to have a lot of consumable meat products, and some years we get males, and some years we get females, and this year, we're getting females.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: OK, I understand. So for people unfamiliar with Belwin, can you tell us a little bit about this land that the bison will be on?

LYNETTE Sure. Belwin is a land-based non-profit, which means we really focus on the land. Our main work is habitat restoration, mostly prairie and oak savanna. We protect wild spaces and connect people to nature. And we have lots of ways that we do that. We have programs that we offer like frog walks and bird hikes. We have events like the Bison Festival. And then we have several open spaces for hiking any day of the year, or snowshoeing, or skiing.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: OK. So what about the history of bison in our region? What would you want Minnesotans to know about that?

LYNETTE Great question. History of bison in our region. Well, they've been on the North American continent for thousands and thousands of years.

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: Mm-hmm.

LYNETTE Their range extended way up into Canada, down to Mexico, west to Nevada, and east to Ohio. And they were in Minnesota and Wisconsin. And then, of course, after colonization 200 years ago, they were extirpated out of this area. And now we're bringing them back. And we've had bison at Belwin here since 2008, and we have-- it's a production herd, so it's going to become a consumable meat product eventually, but we use that herd for conservation on our lands.

ANDERSON:

So they're a keystone specie for the prairie, which means if they're there, the habitat can support many other kinds of plants and animals. If they're not there, those plants and animals don't have a chance to be there. So they create wallows by going down on the ground and rolling and compressing the soil, creating places where water can be after a rain event. That provides the important water resource for insects and birds and other animals in the prairie. They enrich the soil with their dung.

And for us, one of the key things that we like about them is that they help us with our seed dispersal. So as they're grazing through the prairie, they're picking up seeds on their fur, and then they lie down and the fur falls off, so it keeps the prairie dynamic and moving, and keeps those plants growing, and everything is just dynamic and moving.

NIN MOINI: Yeah, tell me again about the part where the fur falls off and helps to pollinate the seeds because they are. They're doing more than just munching.

LYNETTE ANDERSON: Correct. They're eating the grasses, and of course, some of that, when they're eating the grasses, they're going to be keeping their head down, and their fur is going to come in contact with the plants. The seeds are going to attach to the fur. And bison, they bed down a fair bit during the day, so when they're lying down, they're going to roll around a little bit. The fur will fall off, the seeds will get into the soil, they'll germinate, and then we'll have new plants coming.

NIN MOINI: That's really cool. There seems to have been more of a recent push to reintroduce bison, as you alluded to. Why is it important to have more bison across the state?

LYNETTE ANDERSON: I think it's important to have more bison across the state because they're historically an important animal for this region. We don't have as much prairie available, of course, but where we do have lands available, like I said, they're a keystone species. So if they're in a prairie, they will help to create this very viable, dynamic, thriving habitat for so many other creatures, like eastern meadowlarks, which are a bird that are in decline, small mammals, hognose snakes, other animals as well.

NIN MOINI: OK. When the release happens, can you describe what that moment is like?

LYNETTE ANDERSON: I like to describe that as a heart-pounding, heart-exploding nanosecond event. So picture the day, beautiful day, people lined up against the fences, and on the tower, there's excitement that's so palpable, you can feel it. And then the big stock truck comes in through the fence, and everybody's looking and waiting, and the truck backs in, and you can hear the pounding of the hooves on the sides, and you can hear the grunts coming out of the sides of the stock truck.

And then we do a countdown. And then at that final moment, we throw open the gates, and the thundering herd comes out. And when bison are agitated, their tails are straight up, and they have flared nostrils, and they come charging out right at the crowd. And everybody's cheering. Some people are crying tears of joy. And the bison look around with their tails up and their nostrils flared, and they take about a nanosecond, and then boom, they just magically and gracefully float off toward the farthest part of the pasture.

NIN MOINI: Lynette, that was beautiful. I felt like I was there for the moment.

LYNETTE Yeah, it's a pretty awesome moment. And I like to think of people leaving the festival so happy, because there's just this magical energy of happiness that permeates everything. And then people will go home, and they'll have a big smile on their face, and they'll go, God, why am I smiling so much? And then they'll go, oh, yeah, that's right, the bison are back, they're back on their home in the prairie.

NIN MOINI: What else is going on at the festival? If people want to come with the family, you mentioned this nanosecond, I'm assuming there's other stuff happening or other programming around it, or maybe snacks.

LYNETTE Yes, we have 5K Fun Run. So the festival actually runs from 10:00 until 2:00. The 5K Fun Run starts at 10:00.
ANDERSON: We'll have three different food trucks with a variety of foods there. We have different artists. We have face painting. There will be multiple musical acts. We have a natural play area for the kids.

One thing that's new this year is one of the art shanty exhibitors is bringing their phonology wheel, and that's going to be there for people to interact with, which is pretty exciting. And then Northstar bison will also be there with samples of their meat, which is really fun. Carpenter Nature Center will be there, and they will have some live animals. They may or may not have an owl or a hawk with them, which is really cool. So it's very festive-- yeah. It's a festive atmosphere.

NIN MOINI: OK. And just lastly, Lynette, if people can't come this weekend, the bison are going to be here all summer. How can people see them if they want?

LYNETTE Well, I would have them go to belwin.org to find directions and time. And then we're located about 20 minutes east of the metro. And they can come any day of the week, sunrise to sunset. We have a viewing platform that's handicapped-accessible, and we have a tower that's about 25 feet high.

And you can see the bison from pretty much anywhere on those two things. There's a couple places in the prairie where they can get down and hide, but for the most part, if you come, you will be able to see them. And if you want to bring binoculars, that would be something to think about because sometimes they're a little farther away, but it's available all summer long through the end of September.

NIN MOINI: That's a great tip. All right, Lynette, thanks so much for stopping by *Minnesota Now* and telling us about all this.

LYNETTE Oh, thank you so much for having me. And come see the bison!

ANDERSON:

NIN MOINI: Take care, Lynette. Lynette Anderson is a naturalist at Belwin Conservancy in Afton.