

A weathered wooden post stands in the foreground, with several strands of barbed wire wrapped around it. To the right, a chain-link fence is visible. The background is a vast, green grassy field with several bison grazing in the distance under a clear sky.

Bad raps, misinformation, negative
press and cattlemen rumors....
bison have a reputation for being
uncontainable. Can we bust this
myth, once and for all?

TIM FRASIER

Where the Buffalo ~~DON'T~~ Roam

Among many undeserved infamies of bison is the myth that they cannot be contained. This is simply inaccurate and all too often stated as a matter of fact, which very quickly becomes misinformation and dogmatic truth. As a matter of provable fact and with the benefit of four basic needs, bison are extremely easy to contain on any property incident-free.

The four bison-basics are food, family, water and common sense. The fourth basic, common sense, is a human element and bison-basic that can be regionally deficient. I have been diagnosing, documenting and attempting to treat such deficiencies for the last 15 years and can tell you without hesitation, that when astray bison occur, deficiencies of the fourth bison-basic is most likely “the rest of the story.”

One theory that fits very nicely with the myth that bison are not containable is the migratory behavior assumption. This would work well, were it not for the observations of conservation pioneers and ranchers like Charles Goodnight who observed and documented that the migratory behavior ceased after the Southern Herd was reduced to a shadow of its former self. Could it be that with the reduced herd size three bison basics became plentiful and left the fourth bison basic to make sense of it all? Out of 618 bison farms reported in Texas by the USDA Census, there have been virtually no astray bison. When it has occurred, it made the news, while farm animals of every kind went astray, everyday, as a matter of rural normality.



BISON DON'T REQUIRE HIGH FENCES or other elaborate 'fortifications.' As long as the animals' basic needs are met, a four-foot field fence with two to three strands of barbed wire on top for a total height of 5 ft. 3-in. to 5-ft, 6-in. tall is usually recommended.

Another common cause for astray bison, and the most prevalent among fence damage occurrences in bison models, is non-bison damage to fences. This would include drunk drivers and vehicular damage, washouts and fallen trees. Additionally, in the North, snowdrifts can be the cause of astray bison, as well as astray pigs, chickens, cattle, etc. So it seems on closer examination that fences which are no longer there, cause the few bison escapes that actually occur, but because they are not Longhorns, Herefords or Brangus, they make the news and are indicted for fence damage and escape.

It's very common for folks to assume that bison leap tall buildings with a single bound, and behave as a destructive and uncontrollable force of nature. They can possess those qualities and behaviors, but don't when their basic needs are met.

My original career choice was cattle. I have seen cattle do more jumping, attacking and perform more uncontrollable force-of-nature behaviors than bison. Plus, cattle have demonstrated a greater tendency to go astray and damage fences.

Let's look at a fence like a buffalo might, literally! Can I see it? Does it look like a barrier? Can I crawl through it? Can I crawl under it? Can I step or hop over it? And finally, representing all four basic-bison needs, why would I?

The answer to the last question is the most important part of bison fencing and the reason for a strict protocol when introducing bison to a new property. That protocol includes a control pasture or small one- to two-acre trap pasture for the purpose of getting the newly recruited bison home and accustomed to ranch operations. The trap pasture most often features additional precautions like field fence/net wire and possibly additional stays.

If you are planning on receiving more than 100

head of bison at once, you should consider multiple control pastures or additional acreage within one, but limited to 10 acres. Time allowed for bison introduction to a new property should never be less than 14 days. It may need to exceed 14 days depending on their response to ranch operations and general attitude.

The general attitude you should observe in the bison before release is behaving contently as opposed to 'on edge' or pacing the fence. It is within this 'getting-home' or introduction phase that you can get them coming to feed as a routine. This will be an invaluable tool when gathering your bison or dealing with astray situations, should it ever happen. Occasional feedings, as a protocol, will also contribute to a lack of interest by the bison to the other side of the fence.

Perimeter fences for bison should be constructed for reliable containment, which is an axiom that applies to cattle as well. There are many fence constructions that work very well, but a four-foot field fence with two to three strands of barbed wire on top for a total height of 5 ft. 3-in. to 5-ft, 6-in. tall is usually recommended. As a consultant, I know that if a bison operation has this type of fence and there are containment problems, there is probably more to the story. At six feet, there will be even less cause for concern (which is a disclaimer statement, and something I do not feel is necessary with adequate bison management in place).

Another option for fence construction that works well is normal barbed wire construction with five to seven wires, and 5-ft. 3-in. to 5 ft. 5-in high. All other considerations for good reliable cattle fence construction apply such as good braces, three-inch wood or steel posts every 30 to 50 feet, good quality wire and no gaps left underneath the fence big enough to allow escape. Basically, if it will hold



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Brangus, Salers, Braford or Longhorns, it will hold bison that are managed correctly.

In many situations it is more feasible to add materials to an existing unreliable fence, than to tear it out and build new. A preferred choice for additional material to existing fence is field fence/net-wire with the addition of more strands of barbed wire on top. This is also a preferred new construction at a height of 5 ft. 3 in. to 5 ft. 6 in. You can also just add wire, posts and stays until the old fence line is reliable and tight.

High fence, or game fence, is widely used in Texas for ranch models that focus on deer and game species. This is more than adequate for holding bison at eight feet and, if your ranch model is based on game fence, then a six-foot fence will be more than adequate for your bison. The game fence does not work well for areas in which the bison will be under handling pressure. The game fence is not visible enough and though it will hold them, bison may jump into it and be caused unnecessary injury and stress. Wire fences of any kind are never recommended in areas where handling pressure occurs.

Electric wire, or hot-wire, can be an affective tool for certain situations with bison but should never be relied on for containment by itself. When hot-wire is used, barbed wire should be used in order to penetrate the hair coat and deliver a deterring shock. Smooth wire will work if the bison touch it with their nose or shorthaired areas, but overall it is not as effective.

Most accounts from bison managers about electric bison fencing agree that bison learn quickly and retain a very healthy respect for wire of any kind, once they have been shocked by a hot-wire. For that reason, some bison managers use electric wire as a training aid during the introduction period while in the control pasture. However, most bison managers do not recommend electric wire for more than an addition to a well built and reliable fence.

Internal or cross fences can be built with less attention to containment. Rotating pastures can minimize exposure to internal parasites in bison and maximize forage production and forage crop health. The internal cross fences need only be built-up if there is unauthorized rotation occurring. You will be amazed

at just how little fence will contain bison internally.

Problems arise with internal cross fencing when you separate family group members from one another. The behavioral 'pull of the herd' will cause the separated subordinates to exhaust every possible option for returning to the herd. If your ranch operations cause this dynamic to exist, it might be viable by separating the groups by whole pastures. The distance across a whole pasture, as opposed to across the wire, seems to suppress behaviors associated with separation anxiety.

Water gaps and geography will hold cattle differently than bison. In the case of water gaps,

keep in mind that bison are intelligent and curious. They may find opportunity to mess with things that cattle don't notice. For this reason, the construction of water gaps will be the same, but the precautions may differ. Something left swinging for cattle and held in place by gravity should be fastened with something that breaks for debris and enough water pressure for bison ranches.

Geographic barriers that hold cattle may or may not hold bison. The perspective to apply here is the fact that the bison are in their natural home and quite able and willing to handily negotiate anything in it. Water may stop cattle, not bison. Rugged and steep grades may represent containment barriers to cattle, but not bison. If bison are caused to do any and all things possible with cloven hooves, they can and

will, if they have to.

At the end of the day, bison fencing and containment is very easy. However, there are a few things that should be taken seriously. Food, family, water and the fact that they are a wild animal are top considerations. But bison are the most amenable to containment and management among all the wild species. Contained and propagated as livestock or wildlife makes no difference to the buffalo. For them it's all about their basic needs, including that fourth bison-basic need from us, common sense.



Tim Frasier is bison consultant who has been 'helping buffalo with people' since 1995. He operates Texas Buffalo Exchange and Frasier Bison in Gainesville, Texas.

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