

# Bush Bison

Leo Pettipas

Manitoba Archaeological Society



Rock painting on the Canadian Shield in the middle of the Boreal Forest.  
AFTER S. DEWDNEY INDIAN ROCK ART, SASKATCHEWAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, 1963

If you'd wanted "a home where the buffalo roam" in the early days, the chances are pretty good that you'd have been looking somewhere other than Pukatawagan, or Thompson, or York Landing. As grazers and herd animals, bison, aka buffalo, are much more partial to open, grassy spaces than the closed, heavily-wooded forests and muskegs of the northern bush country. On his map titled "The Range of the Buffalo in North America," bison expert Frank G. Roe indicates the Saskatchewan River, the western shore of Lake Winnipeg, the Winnipeg River, and Lake of the Woods as the northern and eastern limits of the species in Manitoba. When it comes to big game on the Canadian Shield, moose and woodland caribou are the animals we think of first (they don't call it the "Spruce-Moose biome" for nothing). And yet there are signs of bison in places where you'd least expect them.

In some rare cases, the evidence takes the form of actual skeletal remains. Several decades ago, a skull and other bones of a bison were discovered in a peat bog southeast of Kenora, Ontario. The site is 150 kilometers distant from the aspen parkland, the nearest type of habitat that was favoured by the bison. It was learned via the radiocarbon dating method that the bones were about 4,800 years old and were the remains of a species that is now extinct. The site lies within an area that is currently conifer-hardwood forest, but botanical studies revealed that the environment 4,800 years ago was an open, mixed woodland. Obviously, buffalo pasture extended a bit further east than is the case today. The discovery provided evidence that, under the right conditions, bison were capable of living on the Canadian Shield.

The Kenora district, while on the Shield, isn't exactly what I'd call "the North." But back in the early 1970s, an archaeological crew was excavating an ancient campsite at the north end of Southern Indian Lake in northern Manitoba. Among the things that they found were five teeth of a young bison and several leg bone fragments nearby that may have come from the same

animal. The bone was found to be 3,500 years old via the radiocarbon technique. By that time, the closed boreal forest was well established within that region and beyond, so either butchered bison parts were being traded into the area from far away, or else local people were making long-distance hunting expeditions to the south or west. Either way, it's not clear to me why they would have transported the bones all that distance – dried meat or pemmican, perhaps, but why the bones? Perhaps the habitat in the area was more open and bison-friendly than we might have otherwise thought, and the kill was actually made locally. Whatever the circumstances, the discovery of bison remains that far north in Manitoba is most unusual.

In the June/July 2006 issue of *Route North Roots* magazine, archaeologist Tim Jones published an article about Aboriginal paintings (pictographs) that appear on exposed rock faces across northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and in northwestern Ontario. These works include representations of buffalo. In some cases, the paintings accurately portray the bison anatomy, and the animal species is easily recognized. Others are somewhat stylized and abstract, but they are nonetheless identifiable as bison by the depicted sets of horns and the distinctly humped backs.

The example I have chosen to illustrate here is an obvious portrayal of a buffalo (although that tail it has is quite unlike anything you'd see on a real bison!). Note the curved/wavy lines running from the animal to the human figure on the left: what's happening, apparently, is a transfer of healing powers from the buffalo spirit to a medicine man. The painting may commemorate a vision or dream in which this communication took place. Also interesting is the fact that this painting is situated up on the Shield and in the centre of Saskatchewan's boreal forest, well removed from the normal range of prairie bison or even that of the so-called "wood buffalo" of the Lake Athabasca-Great Slave Lake area. The accurate portrayal of the bison in this painting shows that the artist had first-hand familiarity with the species, even though it was unlikely to have been native to the locality wherein the pictograph is located.

In addition to bones and rock paintings, we also find bison place names far into the bush. Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan, originally called Lac des Boeufs by French-speaking fur traders, is a good example. Though not on the Shield, Buffalo Narrows is situated well within the modern boreal forest. Perhaps in the early days the area included open patches of prairie and the wood bison, presently confined to northern Alberta and the adjacent Northwest Territories, were more widespread than they are now.

~Originally published in *Route North Roots* magazine, October/November 2006. ~