

# Buffalo Language & Behavior

—Patricia F. Lee

For those of you who are raising large herds for very commercial reasons and do not interact with the bison, you will probably think I am crazy. This chapter is for those of you who genuinely like your buffalo and find them fascinating to study.

Raising my bison in a semi-domesticated manner gives me a chance to study them. I have noticed buffalo communicate with each other both audibly and in sign language. It is especially important to understand their language as you work with them, because they will interact with you in the beginning as a foreign element. BUT as they grow to recognize you and to trust you, they will begin to interact with you as if YOU were a buffalo. When they accept you as a buffalo, they will give you a status in their peck-

ing order and you had better understand that!

## Bison Sounds

The buffalo "grunt" is the sound most often heard. Careful study will teach you they can sound a "low, casual grunt" (calling their calf), or a "sharp, highly emphasized grunt" which denotes disgust, irritation and warning. A series of "rapid grunts" with increasing emphasis is communication of a problem such as a calf on one side of the fence and cow on the other. When I hear this type of communication, I always go see what the problem is.

The "grunt" is used with various degrees of emphasis and in a combination of one, two, or more grunts in series. This is the basic vocal language

between bison, especially cows and calves.

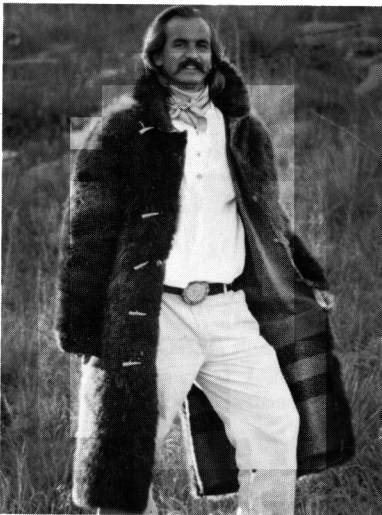
The bison "growl" (from cows) seems to be reserved for outsiders. I have heard it both in my herd and in other herds but the warning has been directed toward outsiders and not toward other buffalo. The "growl" is like the sound of a large dog (mouth shut) with a very low, slow, prolonged growl. Most commonly, I have noticed this sound when a cow has her calf by her side and for some reason someone gets too close. For instance a cow with her calf at the feeder may "growl" if a visitor gets too close to the feeder, even though there is a fence between the visitor and the calf. The warning being that the cow has every intention of defending that territory and don't get any closer. Once I was crawling

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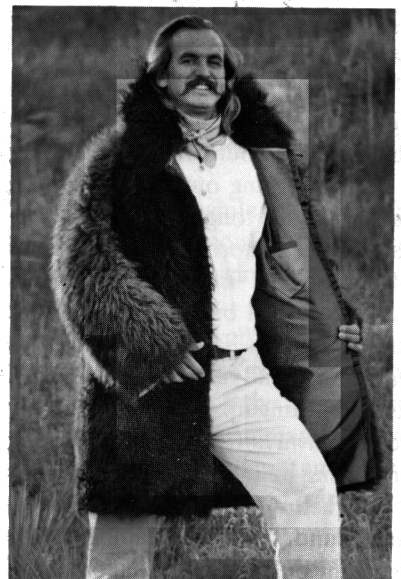
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under a fence, trying to reach a sick cow, in a very cautious manner. The cow (one of my tamer ones) tolerated my getting pretty close and then her "growl" indicated to me that I had come close enough. I respected her wishes.

The BULLS also use a "growl" as a warning. These "growls" are very, very deep and very rumbling. In the buffalo world, warnings are warnings! In fairness to the animal, they are asking you to get away. My dominate bull uses this sound during the rut to let all know he is coming and for all (especially all other bulls) to move out of his way of fight.

The "hiss and spit" has always been followed by an immediate jump-charge. This sound is similar to that of a wild cat. It is more of a panic reaction and is a communication backed up by action! I have only encountered this sound in one situation. A particularly aggressive older cow had just calved (calf was dead) and she was in a small, quarantine pen. The pen was completely enclosed and she could hear and smell but not see who was outside the pen. As I peered under the pen one day, not realizing she had calved prematurely, I was greeted by this "hiss, spit and jump" with 2 horns in my face! I tested this reaction a couple more times that day and the next. Each time I came near the pen, I got the same response. (Note: it was over 3 days before we could get the calf away from her.)

The bull has a little different "spitting" sound. This sound is exactly like the sound you would make when trying to spit something out of your mouth that is on your tongue. This "spit" actually comes more from their nose (blowing) and is a sharp, abrupt sound. My lead bull uses this sound during the rut when his close rival is near and instead of a "growl" he "spits". Action backing up this warning is only seconds away. It is communicating very strong irritation.

The "bellow" is certainly a spine tingling sound. This loud calling by the dominant bull to other challengers is audible for long distances. It is a sound to be heard and can not be described.

To my knowledge, only the bulls bellow. I have never heard a cow sound anything to even resemble this. My research indicated that the bellow is more frequently encountered in the "the wild" and is a challenge to other bulls for herd and territory. The bellow will be accompanied with a lot of pawing. The bull will also rub his head vigorously on the ground, bushes and other objects. He will "wet" the area to leave his scent and mark the areas as his. Another challenger will bellow back and a major fight will follow. This is a rutting season and pre-rut activity as the bulls gather their heads together.

In a farm environment where bulls grow up together and newly introduced bulls are only young bulls, it is rare to even hear a bellow. Many producers have never heard this sound. In a farm setting, the bulls challenge each other in small ways all along and when fighting does occur, one bull usually quickly gets the other in the front shoulder, temporarily


laming it and that finishes the fight for a while.

The first time I heard a buffalo bellow was when my only two year old bull, ALEXANDER THE GREAT, just into puberty, first saw my John Deer tractor. Thinking he had met the Jolly Green Giant of all Buffalo land, he let out a BELLOW and then several more. He proceeded to dance around the tractor and then to make head crunching charges at the tractor. Of course, I dutifully needed to let him know that beating a green buffalo would take more than that. I revved up the motor and extended the front loader some and swung around toward him still moving the front loader up and down in a head waving motion. Off he went in defeat. I have never had a tractor charged since. (Alex being the role model for all of the other bulls and not charging a tractor has thus taught the other bulls to ignore tractors.)

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## SIGN LANGUAGE

Sign language is also used either alone or in combination with their sounds.

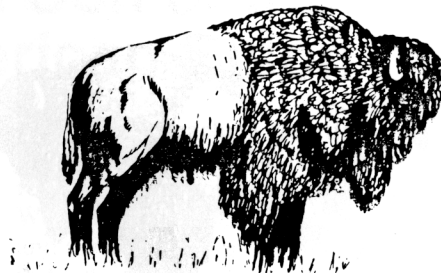
"Eye Contact" - a direct glaring is a sign of sizing up the "pecking order" and may lead to a challenge.

"Head Waving" is another signal. This is a "space and pecking order" challenge. Head waving is used as communication between bison and bison or between a buffalo and an outsider (human, dog, cat, etc.). The meaning is either MOVE or your "head waving" had better be more forceful than theirs. I use my arms in a waving motion when I wish to signal to them to move or in retort to their head waving. Young bulls will often use this near an older bull. It is a testing and the "head-waver" is checking the pecking order. Since this is a test, don't wave at your bison unless you are sure you rank higher on the pecking order. I may use this waving technique on most of my herd but I definitely don't stand near any of the older bulls or near my two old lead cows. Some of your bison you can "BUFFALO",

others will challenge your challenge and are you going to win? If in doubt, don't challenge because once you are defeated you will have trouble with your whole herd.

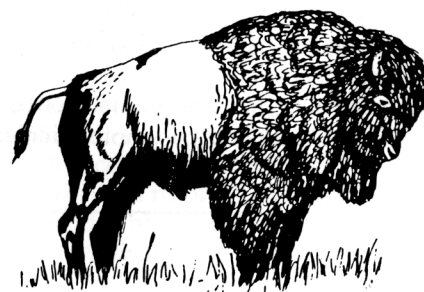
The head and face are fighting instruments and any action directed toward the face is like aiming a gun. Definitely don't slap at the face of a buffalo or hit them over the head with a stick or post. This is a direct challenge and even if they are small and yield at the time, they will remember this insult and will sooner or later get you.

"Snorting and Pawing" the ground are also warnings. They usually communicate "action will follow". These warnings are used when the buffalo has sized up the situation and has decided he/she is dominate and is going to soon prove it. Be careful when you are in their pen not to be kicking vigorously at something on the ground. Buffalo react to that in their frame of reference. It is ground pawing and is a challenge to a buffalo. While it may startle most of the buffalo in to running, it may cause a cow with calf to challenge you by jumping at you. It will usually highly irritate the herd bull.



Tail position in undisturbed bull.

Of course there are the "tail signals". The posture of a bison may indicate to the informed observer a great deal about what the animal is doing and what it will do next. Generally, the visitor will see the bison in what are called the loafing postures. These include lying on the belly with legs tucked under or alongside, and the head sometimes resting on the ground; or occasionally lying flat on the side with legs and head outstretched. The eyes



Tail showing mild excitement.

are partially or completely closed at times. Bison may also loaf with their eyes closed while standing with the head drooping down. In all these positions, the tail may be in motion to flick away insects.

If disturbed while in the loafing postures, the bison's posture may change to show varying degrees of excitement or alarm. For instance, if another buffalo walks by, a resting animal may just raise its head and look in the direction of the disturbance. The approach of a human, however, may cause the animal to stand up (if it has been lying down) and stare intently at the intruder.

Increased excitement is shown by a slight elevation of the tail. As the

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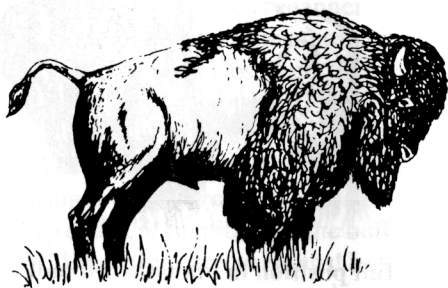
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#### Tail showing defecation posture.

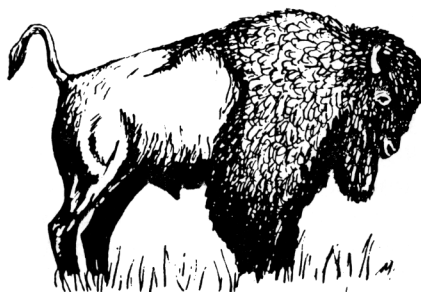
animal becomes more nervous, the tail is arched and defecation generally occurs. If a bison raises its tail to a vertical position and starts walking toward the observer, it is waving a flag of challenge.

The intruding person caught in such a situation should immediately look for an avenue of escape. Generally, however, the animal will turn and run away rather than come toward the person. The raised tail may also indicate when combat is about to occur between two bulls in the breeding season.

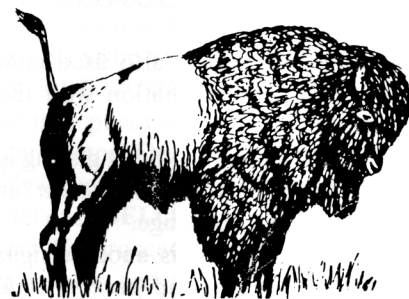
Bucking, like a bronco in a rodeo (a sort of "crow hop"), is another indica-

tion of excitement. This activity generally takes place at play, but may occur when animals are startled into flights. Even old bulls have been observed bucking and cavorting in cool winter months. Such cavorting may or may not be accompanied by arching of the back.

Tail signals are noticed by the whole herd. The whole herd can be grazing and all of sudden one buffalo "on watch" smells, hears, or sees something. That buffalo "sets a point" with a tail signal and the whole herd comes to immediate attention, starts slowly to form a tight formation and sounds the alarm in exactly the same "tail point".



#### Tail showing great excitement.



#### Tail showing combative posture — WATCH OUT!!!

While the bulls may use tail signals toward another bull and cows with calves may occasionally use a tail signal toward another cow, the tail signals are most frequently the signal to "group up" and act in formation against an outside threat. You will notice that there are always one or two buffalo "on watch" for the herd. If something needs to be investigated, usually a lead cow will go off to check it out. Their sight is better than history reports and their hearing and sense of smell are very keen.

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