

# Transporting Buffalo

Larry Butterfield, Sr.—Butterfield Buffalo Ranch Reprinted from "Buffalo Producer's Guide to Management & Marketing"

Most losses sustained by buffalo producers when transporting bison could be prevented if one refrains from overcrowding and from careless and abusive handling during transport. Bison will hook or gore one another if they have enough room to do so.

I feel buffalo are easy to load and haul if you have the right equipment for doing it. You need a good alleyway to run them down and a good metal stock trailer or truck to run them into.

The size and age of the buffalo is the determining factor for the strength of the trailer or truck you will need to transport them. From my experience, the carry capacity for bison is 23/28 as compared to 25/30 cattle.

As long as the stock trailer has a top on it, calves under one-year old can be hauled in most any stock trailer. Some think it is best to have a trailer that is completely enclosed. I don't think this is necessary or should be done. Buffalo are just like anything else - they need to be able to see where they are going and what is around them.

Trucking companies can transport bison if they are loaded right. You should question the companies procedures and make sure they know what they are doing if you want your bison to arrive at their final destination alive.

As a rule, buffalo are more nervous and have a lot more hair than other livestock. Thus they get overheated easily and need as much air as possible. Most trailers and trucks have slots down the sides for ventilation, a good point to consider. Do not cover these slots or openings.

Calves should not be crowded too much or they may trample one to death. Regardless of age or size, if one ever goes down in the trailer or truck, the rest keep him from getting back up and just trample it to death. This action does not mean that they hate one another, they just do it out of excitement or nervousness.

Cows or bulls, age one year to three years, are usually the easiest to haul. If we are transporting them very far - one hundred miles or more - I always try to leave enough room in each compartment to put another bison of the same size in. I like to haul pretty tight, especially older bulls—one or two to a compartment. Our trailers are 24 feet with 3 compartments and 16 feet with two compartments. When we talk compartments, we are meaning about an 8 foot space.

## Cows or Bulls - Four & Older

I try to haul four-year olds and older cows or bulls a little tighter to prevent them from horning one another. Those without horns can still bunt and do stomach damage or make another cow lose her calf if pregnant.


I feel big bulls need to be hauled side by side or moderately tight. If you don't, I'll guarantee you they will fight for room if not for anything else. It is really best to haul the old bulls in a compartment by themselves once again depending on the size of the compartment and the bull. I do not suggest more than two to a compartment.

One thing for sure, you will need to split the buffalo up according to age and size, regardless of what you are doing, and by all means, when you are hauling them. Cows have been known to kill their own calf, not out of hatred, but out of excitement or nervousness. Do not haul big bulls with either sex of calves. They will kill them or try their best to do so.

In trailering buffalo, you need to use a normal ventilated trailer or truck with a solid metal top. A fiberglass top might last for a while, but if the animals are adults with horns, they will probably break it to pieces in a short time. A tarp or canvas that their horns could tear or that would

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flop making the bison more nervous is not a good idea either.

One might think dehorning buffalo would prevent injury and/or damage to your equipment. I have seen a dehorned cow hit another dehorned cow hard enough to break her stomach lining. I prefer the horned buffalo, over the dehorned buffalo as they are at their natural self. As far as working them with their horns, if they're worked the way they should be and have plenty of room to get around, I don't feel that you'll have any more injuries on buffalo with horns as buffalo without horns. Besides they sure look more like buffalo.

Once again the best advice for trailering and handling your buffalo is the proper equipment, patience, and reaction time.

## Summary

**Type of Trailer:** Covered top is a *must*. A little ventilation *ok*, but not enough for the horns to get caught in. Inside of the trailer needs to be smooth. Stock trailers are normally the type used. Horse trailers may be okay for small calves. The back of a pickup truck, even enclosed, is hard to load all but a newborn in. Try not to use them.

**Trailer Size:** 16 foot with 2 compartments or 24 foot with 3 compartments (be sure to rig a pull rope to pull the compartments shut once the buffalo are in, fasten secure-

ly!!!) Gooseneck trailers are better for long hauls. They are easier on the driver and safer.

**Common carrier cattle trucks:** Double deck can be used for small calves. Single deck can be use for adults.

**Don't mix ages & sizes!!!** Use compartments to separate the animals and put the heavier ones toward the front.

**NOTE:** Check the shape the trailer is in. Be sure the crash gates, as well as all other metal areas are solid and not rusted. Rusted metal can be kicked through and really tear up the animal's legs—that is if they stayed in.

**Sorting:** Sorting ages and sizes *before* loading is necessary if you are going to load them sorted; otherwise, you will have to have an additional "run-a-round" to let some in and others go around again.

**Cows with Calves:** It is best to separate cows with calves. Put cows together and calves together. Newborns should not even be transported with calves several months old.

**Pregnant Cows:** It is best to not transport pregnant cows within the last two months. They may lose the calf. However, if you must, then transport only one (or possibly two) to a compartment.

**NOTE:** Save yourself some losses by planning your shopping trips. Buy in the fall after calving is over. Buy calves one trip, then adults another, etc. Don't buy mixed ages if you can't safely truck them back home.

**Loading:** It is best to have a loadout area with a spring gate operated by a lever so you can load only one or two at

a time, stopping the others until you get the first compartment of the truck closed. Then load some more. Have someone up on the pulley to close the front compartment as soon as the first batch runs up there!!!

Padlocks and chains to keep gates secure are good. Always keep some twine, rope, and bailing wire. It comes in handy at the oddest times. Some producers like to carry firearms in case there is an emergency: animals get out or have to be destroyed.

**Ventilation:** Some ventilation is *okay* but not so much that a buffalo can get horns, hooves, or a nose caught. Too much ventilation might also leave the sides too weak to hold the bison. Be sure the trailer construction is strong. You need heavy duty equipment for adult bison.

**Winter Hauling:** Unless bison are coming from Florida or some summer climate, they are generally well-dressed for winter travel. It is best on the bison to just keep traveling.

**Summer Hauling:** This is the time ventilation is more important. If it is ex-

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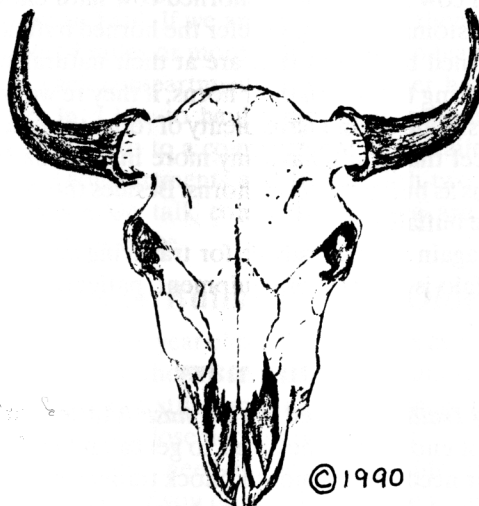
tremely hot, you may want to haul at night. I have kept a hose in the truck and hosed them down on very long trips in 100+ degrees.

**Water & Feed:** This depends on the length of the trip and the feed program they are used to. Their rumen has a great storage capacity and if fed the night before, they can go a day without feed. They should be watered well before traveling. If the trip is long, plan to drive straight through to get there as soon as possible.

**Unloading:** This is better done in the daytime so the buffalo can see what is out there and you can watch them. If unloading at night, be sure it is a secure area that you are letting them into; try to have lights in that area; back up tight to the unloading gate; open the trailer and let them come out at their own pace.

**New Arrivals;** It is always good to keep the new arrivals up in a corral for a day or more if you have facilities. This way you can take a good look to be sure no one is injured, get them used to feed, and worm them if they need it. New animals really should be retested before going into your

herd. A period of quarantine is a good practice. Of course, you can always just pull the truck out into the field and open the gate. You will soon know if your fences are any good. They will take off running and check the entire perimeter of their area (unless this is a huge ranch).



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