

WARNINGS AND CHALLENGES

Patricia F. Lee—Lee Buffalo Farms

Warnings and challenges are two different things. In the bison world a "*challenge*" is an attempt by one bison to re-order the existing pecking order. The challenge maybe "*buffalo-ing*" another by signals implying action, or, an actual dual or charge may take place. Once a buffalo issues a challenge the other buffalo either yields or will have to fight it out to hold position in the pecking order. There are all sorts of small challenges going on all the time. Yielding "*right of way*" at gates, or at water holes and feed areas, etc. are the small indications of the pecking order. Small challenges are a form of testing before one bison decides to aggressively re-order the pecking order.

Warnings are signals, fairly given, by a dominate bison to an underling in the pecking order to an outsider perceived to be an underling. Warnings are more severe and response to a warning had better be quick! The buffalo giving the warning has *already decided* that they are "*top dog*" and are going to prove it. It is one thing for

you to try to "buffalo" through a challenge and quite another to decide to ignore a warning! You had better be able to counter with equally effective force or you will be sorry. Since a human really can not counter the bison's force it is plain stupidity to ignore their warnings. Discreetly find a way to yield space and all will be forgiven.

In closely working a herd, it is equally advisable for you to have your small challenges all along. This way you "buffalo" them into letting you be dominate. CAUTION! Do not mistake your bison's *trust* in you (ie, letting you get close, or touch their nose) as being anything but a test!!!! In the buffalo world there is 'an invisible bubble of space' around each animal and all other bison that are lower in the pecking order respect this space. Buffalo that are senior in the pecking order deliberately invade this space. It is one of those small challenges that constantly go on. By letting the buffalo invade your space (as you get close to them or touch

their nose), you are admitting "*weakness*" in their language. They will test this for some time and when you are least expecting it they will "*take you*". In their world they are only stepping up in the pecking order, in your world you may be in surgery.

NOTE: There are a few bison who are very domesticated and seem at times to be tame. Just remember this is not the rule. Generally buffalo who seem to be tame are only buffalo who do not see humans as outsiders, but rather have accepted an individual or humans in general as "*buffalo*". They seem tame as long as you read their language and behave within their structure.

The CAUTION here is "*the pecking order*". Sooner or late you will be challenged to see where you are in the pecking order. For this reason, always have an escape plan. Do not be caught out in the middle of a pasture without a truck, tree, etc. Don't put yourself in any situation where they can call your bluff! Their small challenges are subtle and yet they will always be testing you. Understand their concepts, their nature and then use your head and "*buffalo psychology*" on them. Out smart them in their language.

BOTTLE BABIES

Now that you know the rules, let's see what happens in the abnormal situation of a bottle raised buffalo. These babies need all the cuddling, petting and brushing of any baby. Most (not all) bottle bison will thrive on affection and scratching for a while. According to how young you get them and if they "*imprint*" with you (see "*Bringing Up Baby*" Buffalo! Vol. 16, No. 5 & Vol. 17, No. 1), they will seem tame for the first two or three months. You will probably notice that they are more aggressive than beef calves but not bad. However, as they grow and especially if left with the herd, they will start to learn the buffalo language. They also will start testing you in subtle ways. You need to watch for this. While you may now establish your territory and pecking

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SMALL HERD FOR SALE

- 1 —8 year old bull
- 3—7 year old bred cows
- 2—3 year old bulls
- 1—2 year old bull
- 2—2 year old cows
- 1—1 year old bull
- 2—1 year old cow

***This herd has been raised on a
1-wire electric fence. Almost pets.***

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order, the buffalo calf will, out of instinct, *always* test you. It is best to let them go back to being buffalo about 6 to 9 months of age. You may always be able to scratch their back through the fence or near one, but the head and horns grow and they flip that head so quickly they may accidentally catch you if you are not forever watchful.

Bottle feeding a buffalo does have a lasting affect on the bison. By conditioning they become comparatively "*gentler*" than other herd animals. This puts them at a disadvantage in the herd. They will probably always be on the low end of the pecking order just because of being slightly less aggressive. Again this "*gentler*" nature is not to be mistaken as being less dangerous. In fact, the risk you run is not to be as careful. They are less likely to keep their distance from humans. These two facts together make you more likely to be hurt by a so called "*tame*" buffalo. Think of buffalo as excellent chess players, they have a knack for checkmating the King or backing you into a corner.

There is a jealousy within the herd, toward a "*pet*" or favored buffalo. If you constantly favor one animal without regard to *rank* in the pecking order, you put that animal in danger of being excessively picked on by other herd members. As the buffalo have their manner of picking status leaders, they do not look kindly toward you trying to re-order their structure. Just as with children, they will make up for your favoritism by being very mean to a favored buffalo and very much so with a bottle baby. When rewarding the herd or some individual bison, you should try to respect their chosen order and give them attention in that same order. Showing respect for the dominate ones first, then to the others.

A FEW FINAL CAUTIONS

- Bison are born with an instinct to charge. In a fear situation, you can count on this being their action. Even baby bison, will charge out of panic and often break their neck because they do not know how else to react to panic but to charge a wall, gate, or what ever separates them from open space.

Open space is always the direction they will choose. Do not get between them and open space. When they feel trapped, they will try to find a way out.

- Their head is a fighting instrument. Any movement at the head is like pointing a gun in a dual. They will take up the challenge.
- Bison can "*sense*" or "*smell*" fear. If you are afraid of them or if someone else is afraid, it only encourages them to become aggressive. It is part of their wildness. It is best for someone who admits to being afraid, just to stay completely away. I have a cow that just loves to torment some of my visitors. She can always tell just who will be afraid. She will come charging up and skid nearly into the fence just to torment a "*chicken*". Having an electric fence, she will not actually touch the fence but she really likes to put on a big show. This may be the reason that some people on public parks get charged and some do not. Generally the public is "*too uninformed*" to be afraid but the ones who are may be in more danger.
- Do not put yourself at risk. If a challenge comes along or a set up to a potential challenge, try to yield gracefully if time permits. Don't turn your back and run. Walk parallel toward a fence or tree. Talk to them. Sound calm. Younger animals can be buffaloesd by waving, loud talking, and jumping up and down. This does not work on bulls over two or older cows. The best thing is to understand the strength and nature of bison and **NEVER, NEVER** put yourself in a situation to be challenged!!!!

IMITATION AND LEARNED BEHAVIOR

One other form of very important behavior is the "*learned behavior*". This behavior comes from other buffalo as role models or as a result of "*conditioning*". For instance, if you have a buffalo that goes under fences, over them, or through them get rid of it. The rest of the herd will soon be doing the same. This behavior is learned and will be copied by others. Respecting an electric fence is a sample of "*conditioned*" behavior. Even when the fence is off for long periods, the buffalo will leave it alone out of conditioning.

Take charge of raising your buffalo. If a behavior is not one that is tolerable, eliminate the buffalo who have learned this behavior as soon as you can. Once behavior has been learned it would be very hard to ever change it.

NOTE: This is one reason to be careful of buying some one else's older buffalo. They may come with behavior that will cause you problems.

Food or special treats are often used to "*condition*" animals and reward behavior that you want repeated, such as coming to a location or coming when called. Be sure that you always reinforce that behavior and do not try to "*fool*" them or you will find they pay no attention to you. (This subject is really for another chapter.)

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