

Where the buffalo roam

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Shaggy calves romp in snow, massive mothers protect them from wind

A drive down Sunny Ridge Road in the Town of Belgium offers a scene that's straight from the western plains of yore: a herd of 100 massive, shaggy-headed buffalo on a snow-covered landscape.

The bison on Al "Junior" Weyker's Lakeview Buffalo Farm love snow and don't mind the cold, their heavy, dense wool coats keeping them warm even in sub-zero temperatures.

Last Friday, when wind chills were in the single digits, 10-month-old calves chased each other and romped in the snow, jumping straight off the ground with all four legs. If they get cold, they huddle closer to their mothers, who weigh more than 1,000 pounds, for protection from the wind.

Weyker isn't as happy with this seemingly endless polar vortex as his animals.

His underground water supply system froze, so he has to fill the tank with a hose every day and break the ice on another tank where a heater is still working.



During one snowstorm, hay blew against a fence and enough snow and ice formed on top that a buffalo walked over the fence into another pasture. Weyker now keeps all snow mounds away from the fence, especially along the road and between neighbors.

"If it's really cold, they will lie on their sides, their metabolism will slow down and they won't eat much," he said. "When it snows, all you see are their eyes."

"The first time I saw one lie flat on its side, I thought it was dead. When a dairy cow does that, it's not good."

On the western plains, Weyker said, buffalo walked into storms so they got out of them sooner. That can't happen on his 195-acre farm, where 30 acres are devoted to the buffalo. Weyker also has 30 Holstein steers and chickens and grows feed for his animals.

Although the bison on Weyker's farm have all been bred on his or other farms, they still have the genes of their ancestors, and Weyker respects them as he would any wild animal.

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“You don’t want to do anything that gives them the impression you’re a threat because you’re not going to win,” he said.

The buffalo are wary of strangers and sensitive to colors. Weyker always wears red, blue or green clothing when he’s with the animals.

“They notice if I wear a different color, especially white or yellow,” he said.

When he wore a white T-shirt to do chores, they reacted immediately, he said.

“They snorted. I couldn’t figure out what set them off until I realized I’m in here with a white shirt,” he said.

Because it is too dangerous to assist a buffalo that is calving, the animals must do that on their own. Although Weyker wanted to intervene at times, he doesn’t dare do it even if it means losing a calf, which rarely happens.

Calves nurse until about two months before their mothers give birth to another calf. The yearlings are separated from the herd and fed a lower protein diet until they mature, which is 24 months for a bull and 28 months for a female. A female can give birth for 20 years, so a good cow is prized for the calves she can produce.

Buffalo that are 3 or younger are prized for most cuts of meat, especially steaks. However, meat from older animals makes the best sausage, Weyker said.

“There is a demand for buffalo meat that is free of antibiotics and hormones and people want to know where it comes from,” Weyker said. “We’ve had our meat tested, and it’s 98% fat-free.”

Two calves that were bottle fed at birth by Weyker and his wife Barb are somewhat tame.

A calf named Dorie was rejected by her mother because she limped, so the Weykers bottle fed her four times a day for three months. Dorie now weighs more than 1,000 pounds.

The second calf named Damian got stuck in the mud shortly after he was born in June. Weyker washed and dried him off, but when he put the bull calf back into the pasture, the mother kept kicking it away from Weyker, and it was apparent the calf was getting weaker.

Weyker went into the pasture with his tractor and scooped the calf into the bucket, holding it high so the mother couldn’t see it.

“It was either bottle feed it like a baby or let it die,” Weyker said. “He’s very affectionate, but that will change when he gets bigger.”

Aside from that, the only problems Weyker has had with his herd is when the animals get out of their fenced areas.

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“You can’t chase buffalo,” Weyker said. “You can only keep them from going where you don’t want them to go.”

Once when the entire herd escaped while Weyker was at the state fair, his neighbors came to the rescue.

“They had eight trucks and blocked them (the animals) from going on the road. I told them to not say anything and just stay in their trucks until the buffalo went home,” Weyker said. “If they had called the sheriff and there had been sirens, they would have started running.”

As Weyker sat in his kitchen, which overlooks a pasture, talking about his favorite animals, the herd suddenly stopped eating, lifted their heads and ran through an open gate to another pasture, kicking up a spray of snow that almost obscured them.

Buffalo can run 35 mph.

Weyker went outside to see what spooked them, but nothing was amiss. No one had come into the yard, and no vehicles had driven past.

“Maybe there was a fox or coyote,” he said. “They don’t like either one. They’ll tolerate a fox, but not a coyote.”

Weyker, a fifth-generation farmer on the dairy farm that was founded in 1848, has learned a lot about bison since he bought six bull calves in 1996 to raise for meat.

For the first five or six years, he bought bull calves, raising them for two years until they were big enough to butcher. Every day, Weyker said, he wondered if it was a smart move.

“One time a heifer was mixed in with the bulls. When it was old enough, it got bred,” Weyker said.

“You can’t have just one cow, so I bought cows from other producers. The last five to six years, I’ve kept selected heifers to improve the herd.”

He has two bulls — No. 94, which weighs one ton, and Bennie, who weighs 1,500 pounds. Bennie knows 94 is boss and gets his pick of the females.

Weyker takes care of the buffalo and delivers meat to wholesale customers. His daughter and son-in-law, Terri and JJ Melichar, sell buffalo meat at a winter farmers market at Mitchell Park Conservatory in Milwaukee and at a summer market in Wauwatosa.

His daughter Jennifer Hoepfner butchers the meat at her shop, Quality Cut Meats in Cascade, and makes buffalo summer sausage, buffalo cranberry summer sausage and buffalo sticks, in addition to preparing steaks, roasts, ground meat and stew meat.

Prices range from \$21.25 per pound for tenderloin to \$7 for back ribs and short ribs.

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More information on the farm, where meat is available and recipes can be found at www.lakeviewbuffalofarm.com.

Image information: DORIE, WHO NOW weighs more than 1,000 pounds, was bottle-fed for four months by Al Weyker and his wife Barb when the calf's mother rejected her. Photos by Sam Arendt