

## A Late Fall Bison Calf



The fall of 2008 was exceptionally long and mellow. The summer of 2008 had been adequate, not abundant for rain but I was happy for what we did get after the previous dry years.

The bison herd was in the prairie a mile south of the farmstead. The grass there was about played out and I planned to move them north to their winter pasture the following Saturday morning. The winter pasture is a 20 acre piece near the farmstead. Leading the bison herd from the south prairie to the winter pasture requires winding them through four pastures and across the township road. I had a few good helpers lined up for Saturday. Moving bison is a chancy affair that requires careful planning and calm execution.

I checked the herd Wednesday at dusk. To my surprise a cow was birthing a calf. This was the end of October, awfully late in the season to start a new life. Normal calving time is from May to July. A calf born this late might survive the winter if it gets a good start with a good mom. It was late enough in the season that it was freezing pretty hard every night. Freezing rain was predicted for this night. Mighty poor conditions for a calf about to hit the ground wet at the beginning of a long Minnesota night.

There wasn't anything I could do for the calf. If I tried to get near, the cow and probably the entire herd would be there to drive me off. If I tried to take the calf the cow would go crazy. They will charge and ram a tractor under those conditions. Even if I could get the calf, I've done it using a tractor as cover; the calf's chances as an orphan were not good.

To make things worse, if I did take the calf away, I might be dealing with a herd of angry bison on the loose before morning. They don't really have to stay in those fences.

I would just have to leave it up to the cow, the calf and nature.

My biggest concern however, was not the calves itself, at least not directly. If the calf died that night in the prairie I would not be able to move the herd home to the winter pasture for weeks.

Bison cannot be driven like cattle or sheep. They will only go where they want to go. The trick is making them want to go where you need to take them.

If that calf died in the night the cow would mope around the carcass for weeks. Removing the carcass would not improve things as she would just keep returning to the spot where she gave birth. Bison cows are intense mothers.

If I tried to move the main herd on Saturday under those conditions I would get them a pasture or two away and then they would decide to turn back and be with the cow. Then I would have a lot of scattered and excited bison to deal with. Unless the calf lived and was strong enough to keep up with the herd by Saturday, the drive was off. Feeding and watering the herd that far from home in winter would be a big problem. Worse yet, it would be hard to keep them confined if a blizzard came up as they would tend to work downwind. Under blizzard conditions I have had herds in the open grind right through fences and not even notice.

Well, it was near dark and there was nothing I could do tonight. On the way home I saw a doe and two grown fawns watching from the shadows of the woods. They were in the same eighty acres where the farmstead is located. I sometimes think I should shoot one or two but then I think if I did I wouldn't see them so often. So I don't.

Gail and I talked about the calf that night. She was concerned too, so before dawn she rode with me to see if the calf had lived. The farm road goes through an alley of pine trees we planted years ago. As we drove through the pines cottontail rabbits scurried around in the headlights of the pick-up. I like eating rabbit and I suppose I could shoot one now and then but I do like seeing them. So I don't.

We drove to the south end of the farm and parked on a hill that overlooked the prairie and waited for light. Gail brought hot coffee. We could see the dark shapes of the bison in the distance but could not make out details. A new bison calf is always light brown, about the same color as prairie grass clumps. We would need to wait for pretty good light.

Soon after we parked, flocks of Sandhill Cranes, geese and ducks began flying from north to south over the pastures. The flocks travel from their night quarters in the Wildlife Refuge that borders the farm on the north to corn fields a couple miles south of the farm. The husky croaking noise of the Sandhills is awesome. Each fall after waterfowl hunting season begins the birds develop a flight path that runs lengthways over our farm. The birds realize that the farm is a safe corridor. I sometimes think about shooting a goose or two but if I did I suppose that would frighten the flocks away. So I don't.

As it gets lighter we can see the cow we are looking for standing off from the herd but on the far side. Can't yet make out the calf. We didn't think to bring binoculars. Binoculars would have helped.

A clear, crisp, beautiful fall morning is opening up. Eventually we both confirm the new calf nursing on the cow. The calf looks strong and frisky. Bison cows produce rich, high energy milk and will nurse every few minutes with a newborn. This calf is doing fine. The bison will make it to winter pasture on schedule.

On the drive home we stop as a flock of wild turkeys cross the farm road. I often think I should harvest a couple, especially since harvesting toms has no effect on next year's population, but you know how that goes.





