

Humane herd harvesting

Snake River Farm dedicated to nature's way

By Jake Doetkott

BECKER – Tom Barthel has resided on his scenic swath of land along the Snake River area of Becker since 1969 where he and his wife Gail Wilkinson have tended to the land and their livestock.

Snake River Farm is one of 200 Minnesotan bison farms.

“My mother, Joyce, always had an affection for bison. After we got bison, she would drive here from her home in Buffalo just to sit and watch the animals” Barthel said. “**She would often say to me with wonder, ‘Imagine: we have buffalo.’** She just thought that was the grandest thing”

Barthel and his wife, Gail Wilkinson, had always admired bison and had considered raising them upon Barthel’s retirement.

“I told Tom we should wait until he was retired before we raised bison—that was the deal,” Wilkinson said. “One way or another, I gave in a decade before his retirement.”

The Snake River Farm also raises beef, hogs, sheep, chickens, ducks, lambs and horses on their 225 acre farmstead composed of 70 pastures.

Snake River Farm has a fluctuating herd size based on customer demand. Barthel acquires heifers and yearlings.

The farm hosts 20-40 buffalo on average and each one takes three-and-a-half years to be ready for harvest.

“I consider our farm a grass finishing operation,” Barthel said. “I don’t use grain with my beef or bison because it isn’t good for their stomachs.”

Barthel rotates his bison herd through 70 paddocks to replicate a large herd’s natural pattern of movement. The long rest intervals for the land and short, but intense, grazing periods allow pastures to flourish and the herd’s instincts keep them from clearing out a section too quickly.

“Each paddock takes about three days to get picked clean,” Barthel said. “Bison social orders require ample space and that can make it hard to complete a paddock a day.”

The farm’s animals are raised in an open pasture environment with access to native prairies, oak savannahs, wet meadows and lowlands.

A miles-length of the Snake River winds its way through the farm.

Barthel is dedicated to humane practices with his land and animals. He avoids grain feed lots, handling pens and slaughterhouse harvesting methods.

“Our animals grow happy and relaxed and slower compared to grain-fed animals,” Barthel said. “Selling directly to our customers allows us to take a more humane approach.”

The kind-hearted methods employed by Barthel is necessary for bison—as bison cannot be driven due to their dangerous proclivity to turning on their aggressors.

“I let the animals come to me—it’s very ritualistic,” Barthel said. “You have to get your herd acclimated to you and conduct an identical routine with them when leading them to another pasture.”

This practice is important for the herd and for the farmers safety and it conditions the bison for a peaceful in-pasture harvest.

“I don’t bring my herd to slaughterhouses, I harvest in-pasture,” Barthel said. “They will be relaxed and die peacefully if performed in-pasture by the farmer they trust. It’s better for everyone this way.”

Quality Meats of Foley butchers and processes Barthel’s harvest; with the exception of his poultry, which he brings to Nelson-Shine Produce.

Snake River Farm sells its meats directly to customers.

“I’m retired, so I like making things as easy as I can,” Barthel said.

The more personal approach to selling has been a successful practice for Snake River Farm. It sells to about 500 families annually and has 85-90 percent of its customer base return.

“We’ve never had to advertise and I only work with email,” Barthel said. “Doing it this way builds greater trust and lets people know their farmer more personally and they can get to know more about the food they are consuming.”

Barthel and Wilkinson welcome members of the public to their homestead three times a year to experience their farm. There is a playground for children, mustang horses for riding, a museum, and an old schoolhouse for visitors to enjoy.

In addition to the museum and 120 year-old schoolhouse, Barthel and Wilkinson have shared another treasure from their property with the public.

Visitors to Becker may recall the bison skeleton, known as Samuel, and now Samantha.

Barthel assembled the skeleton and it stood in the Becker Community Center’s library for several years in the early 2000s. The skeleton now resides in the National Buffalo Museum in Jamestown, North Dakota.

Through dedication to humane practices and a personal approach to selling their harvests, the Snake River Farm has found success in the Becker area.

Last year, the farm sold 20 turkeys, 12 geese, 70 ducks, six lambs, 20 rabbits, 100 beef cattle, 132 hogs and 18 buffalo.

“We don’t do any advertising,” Barthel said. “We rely on family recommendations and word of mouth. We do have a Facebook page at Snake River Farm Minnesota; not to be confused with Snake River Farms of Idaho.”

Bill_1: Ella Fenske (left), Tom Barthel and Gail Wilkinson pose in the Snake River Farm’s kitchen Dec. 27 in Becker. Barthel and Wilkinson, husband and wife, have tended the land since 1969 where they raise bison and offer educational opportunities to the public.

Bill_2: The Snake River winds its way through the Snake River Farm Dec. 28 in Becker. Roughly one mile’s worth of river occupies the Barthel/Wilkinson land.

Bill_3: The alpha male bill eats hay in the snow Dec. 27 in Becker. Bison have a rigid social order and give one another necessary space while maintaining a herd mentality.

Bill_4: The second floor of Barthel and Wilkinson’s barn houses many relics Dec. 27 in Becker. The couple offer tours to schools and love providing the educational opportunity.

Bill_5: An eagle perch overlooks Snake River Farm’s paddocks Dec. 27 in Becker. Barthel leaves bison carrion out for hawks and bald eagles to feast upon.