

I am Feeding Weeds to My Buffalo

First 2011 Bison News Article

It is not really as bad as that sounds. My bison are getting plenty of good hay along with their weeds. And besides, it is not really weeds. You could describe what I am feeding them as baled forbs. I will explain.

Our entire farm is fenced into grazing paddocks. The bison, beef and horse herds are rotated through every acre of the farm. We do not make any hay. Instead, we buy winter hay from a neighboring dairy farmer, named Roger Erickson. Every summer Roger delivers about 250 large round bales for our winter-feeding. Most of the hay that he brings is upland grass. Some of the hay is wet meadow hay or lowland hay. That lowland hay is mostly canary grass with other grasses, forbs and even a little brush in it.

One evening last fall Roger called to ask if I could use a load of lowland bales that got especially weedy. A load for Roger is two big trailers full or 32 bales. Because of the wet summer, he could not make that hay until fall. By then the weeds had grown past the grasses. Roger thought I might be able to use the bales for bedding. I do not really have a use for bedding but I thought the hay would have some value. At worst, I could compost it by letting the bison trample it and then have the hogs turn it over next summer. The price was good. The bales were free and so was delivery. I have great neighbors.

Our bison herd this winter is about 35 animals. A herd bull, a dozen mature cows and young stock.

The bison winter pasture is 20 acres of mixed terrain, half-wooded and half open. The Snake River runs through this pasture.

As an unrelated experiment in winter grazing, I kept them in a 30-acre native grass pasture until mid December. That worked ok. I made grass hay available but the herd got most of their forage from the native grass. There was snow on the ground for water.

Before we brought



them to the winter pasture in December, I set out six round bales in various locations to spread out the manure. Five bales of good grass hay and one bale of weedy hay. The weedy hay is quite weedy, but not moldy. The weedy bales look like a big coil of stems with some forb leaves mixed in. Not much grass is visible.

To my surprise, maybe “to my education” is a better phrase; the animals approached the weed bale all together differently than a bale of hay.

They eat those weed bales right down to the last couple of stems. But they do it differently than eating a meal. They snack on it. They eat is like an appetizer or a condiment or a special treat. There are animals working on the weed bale almost 24 hours a day. I do not know whether they are finding things that are tasty, or high in nutrients or medicinal, but I suspect it may be all three.

Roger’s lowland grows the same forbs as my lowland pasture so they are finding plants that they know. Some of those plants are high in minerals. Nettles for example are high in iron. In fact, most plants with a taproot are said to be high in minerals. Many weeds are high in protein, at least in their juvenile stages. Many of these plants are potentially toxic but toxic often means medicinal in small quantities. In the summer, my animals regularly eat milkweeds and penstemmon. Both contain toxins used in medicines. They also eat wormwood and pungent herbs said to eliminate worms. They browse chokecherries aggressively. The toxin in chokecherries is similar to aspirin.

The bison seem to know how much they can or should eat of these plants we call weeds.

In case you are wondering, I do not overgraze my pastures. The bison always have grass or grass-hay available.

They have loose mineral available at all times also. Dr. Bowron wrote an excellent article on mineral that was in this journal last spring. Since then I switched from using mineral blocks to bagged mineral. They do eat a lot more mineral loose than in the block. In any case, that switch was made months ago and should not be a factor in these weed bales.

I get a newsletter from Utah State University Extension called Behave. www.behave.net These folks do some very interesting work concerning ruminant dietary choices. They claim, and I believe, that herds learn a terrific amount about what to eat and how to take care of their health if given choices and time.

I plan to ask Roger to bale some weedy hay every year. The bison and cattle are eating about one weed bale to seven hay bales. I intend to keep them supplied in winters to come.

See you at the Conference in Hinckley, April 8-10.