

Title, “How Many Bison Can You Haul in a Sixteen-Foot Stock Trailer?”

I know an answer to that question. Here is how I know.

I sell grass-finished animals by the quarter. I have a small herd of ten cows but I have been selling around eighteen animals each year. Grass-fed only.

Every fall I buy additional young animals at our Legends of the Fall auction. Enough to keep my customers supplied and maybe grow my herd a little.

This year I bought twelve animals. All females and all from Dale Rengstorf’s herd. I like Dale’s bison. They are excellent grass-fed animals. Dale’s animals are calm and they mind my fences well.

At the start of the auction, it was announced that animals not picked up on Saturday would be held over to Monday. Monday was not a good alternative. I needed to haul all these animals home Saturday.

Even though the twelve bison I purchased were mostly young animals, twelve seemed like a lot to haul in one load. In previous years, I have tried making two trips Saturday afternoon and it is awfully hard to do. I get home with the second load home well after dark.

I paid for my bison and pulled into the loading line, still not sure what to do. I have a sixteen-foot stock trailer pulled by a 1999 Ford F150.

Dan Meyer was close by. I asked him if I could haul all twelve in one load. He was sure I could. That made me feel better for about 30 seconds. But then, I thought to myself, “Is Dan really the best person to ask?” Don’t get me wrong, I know Dan is a very competent guy and I know he is an expert on handling bison. Even so, he might not be the ideal source for advice in a situation like this. I could think of many strong adjectives to use in describing Dan but “risk avoider” would not be on the list.

I backed up to the loading chute. I asked the dock crew if we could get twelve animals on my trailer. They were pretty sure we could. But then again, what would you expect? These guys are nothing if not Gung-Ho. I asked about the trailer divider and the crew said I would need to leave the divider open. That was not so good. I mentioned to one of the loading hands that with the divider open the animals could shift from front to back and move around too much. He said, “Don’t worry about that. With twelve of them in there, they’ll be pretty tight.”

So all of a sudden, “pretty tight” was a positive feature?

On the first try the loading crew drove the herd down the alley and into my trailer hard but the last animal balked at running into the pile of animals ahead of it. Eleven out of twelve is no good. In a second, possibly two seconds, the entire herd was out of the trailer and back into the barn.

Nothing to do but try again.

On the third try, the loading crew ran all twelve bison in hard enough that I could get the rear door slammed and latched. I said something about them being in there mighty tight. The loader nearest to me pointed out that at the moment there was an empty foot or two in the rear of the trailer. That was in fact so, but the front half of the trailer was stacked two high. It was not clear to me just how much open floor space there would be when they got themselves unstacked.

I did not feel good about it, but like so many situations in life, once this far, there was no turning back. Snake River

Farm is 50 miles from Albany. I figured the best thing I could do now was to head for home.

As I was putting extra chains on my trailer doors, Harold Schroeder backed his trailer into the next loading chute. Harold farms in Sherburne County only a few miles from me. He was there to load up three fine bulls he had purchased.

As I pulled away from the dock, Dave Beckstrand walked out of the office shaking his head. He pointed out that my chains were dragging and my rear pick-up tires looked flat. I shortened the safety chains.

Dave, ever the optimist, said that if the animals unstacked in the front they would take weight off my pick-up. The tires already had over 50 pounds in them. I decided to add more before leaving Albany. It couldn't hurt.

Dave asked if I needed any other help. I said, "Well, watch for me on the road." He said he was going my way and he would be on the lookout for me along the freeway.

There was some comfort in that.

I drove to the gas station in Albany and pulled up for air. Bud, Wally and Ruth Koeppen from Broken Wagon Bison were there filling up for their trip home to Indiana. Bud walked over as I put air in my tires and instantly assessed my situation. He related a couple of hauling anecdotes that had been particularly thrilling for him. Those tales were not what I wanted to hear just then. In parting, Bud threw out the "Well at least you don't have far to go." line. Somehow, that did not make me feel any better either.

I filled the tires to about eighty pounds and pulled onto the freeway headed for home. As I started to build a little speed I passed a sign that read "Maximum 70, Minimum 40". That was reassuring. I figured I could beat 40 and reach a legal speed. I brought the load up to 51 MPH and held it there. Now, I don't know what the ideal speed is in such a setting but with twelve bison in a bumper hitch trailer, pulled by a lightweight F150 with 215,000 miles on it, 51 MPH seemed plenty fast.

We were on the road and things were working fine.

I was only a few miles from Albany when the Indiana rig passed. With my peripheral vision I could see the Koeppens waving as they zipped by. I returned a quick, short wave but never took my eyes off the road. I needed to keep both hands on the wheel and my eyes straight ahead in order to stay in my lane. I do not know how they found the space back there but those twelve bison stampeded from side to side and end-to-end of that trailer the entire ride home.

A couple more pick-up and trailer combinations passed. Then I recognized Harold's pick-up approaching. His route home was the same as mine until the last few miles. Harold let up on the accelerator and never got any closer than 1/8 mile. For a second it occurred to me that Harold might be one of those guys who enjoys the possibility of seeing a real bad wreck. Then I realized he was staying behind just in case I needed help. Harold is a good neighbor. He gave me a lot of information when I started out in bison. He sold me some of my first animals.

I made it home.

I backed the trailer to the only holding pen I have. It is 20 feet wide, 40 feet long and eight feet high. It gets used when I bring home new bison or wild mustangs. Those two species have some things in common. The bison unloaded in seconds and all were well. One had a little bit of a limp but nothing serious. No blood, no broken bones.

The animals settled down quickly with hay and water. The next morning none of them had so much as a limp.

Apparently packing them tight can be a good technique.

If you try this yourself, I strongly recommend a bigger pick-up truck.

Thanks to all who worked so hard to put the auction together.

See you all at the Annual Meeting, April 8-10, 2011, at Hinckley Grand Casino, hosted by Beckstrands and Lanes.

Tom Barthel, Director at Large and Secretary.