

Snake River Farm raises rolling herd of buffalo

This article appeared in the Benton County, MN, Newspaper in early January, 2019.

The photos were taken by Reporter Jake Doetkott.

Paddocks mimic peaceful prairie for Becker bison

BECKER – Tom Barthel has resided on his scenic swath of land along the Snake River in Becker since 1969. He and his wife Gail Wilkinson raise beef, hogs, sheep, chickens, ducks and horses on the 225-acre Snake River Farm, composed of 70 paddocks.

The farmstead is also one of 200 Minnesota bison farms. “My mother, Joyce, always had an affection for bison,” Barthel said. “After we got bison, she would drive from her home in Buffalo just to sit and watch the animals. She would often say to me with wonder, ‘Imagine: we have buffalo.’ She just thought that was the grandest thing.” Barthel and Wilkinson had always admired bison and had considered raising the animals following retirement. However, the endeavor was pursued earlier than thought. “One way or another, I gave in a decade before his retirement,” Wilkinson said. Snake River Farm has a fluctuating bison herd size based on customer demand. Barthel acquires heifers and yearlings and hosts 20-40 buffalo on average. Each one takes 3.5 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 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 have access to native prairies, oak savannahs, wet meadows and lowlands. One mile of the Snake River winds its way through the quaint property. “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 are 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.” The 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, processes Barthel’s harvest with the exception of his poultry, which he brings to Nelson-Shine Produce near Aitken.

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 personal approach to selling has been a successful practice for the couple. Snake River Farm 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. They can get to know more about the food they are consuming.”

Barthel and Wilkinson welcome customers to their homestead three times a year to experience their farm. There is a playground for children, mustang horses for riding, a museum and a 120-year-old schoolhouse.

In addition to the museum and 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, N.D. Through dedication to humane practices and a personal approach to selling their harvests, Snake River Farm has found success in the Becker area. Last year, the farm sold 132 hogs, 100 beef, 70 ducks, 20 turkeys, 20 rabbits, 18 buffalo, 12 geese and six lambs. “We rely on family recommendations and word of mouth,” Barthel said.

The article is not 100% accurate or complete but Jake, the reporter did a much better than average job.

Tom

PHOTOS BY JAKE DOETKOTT

Ella Fenske (left), Tom Barthel and Gail Wilkinson are pictured in the kitchen at their farmstead, Snake River Farm, in Becker Dec. 27. The couple has tended the land since 1969 where they raise bison and offer educational opportunities to the public.





The alpha male bull 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.



