

# The Elk & Bison Prairie Story

As you enter the Elk & Bison Prairie, you open a door to the past as it may have appeared to the Shawnee Tribe and frontier wilderness explorers. Vast herds of bison and elk blanketed this land, creating broad paths as they migrated. Today, we still travel many of those same paths, most notably along Interstate 24. Native Americans used this area as hunting grounds, periodically setting fires to draw big game.

Early European travelers called the area “barrens” because the land was mostly devoid of trees. Settlement changed this delicate balance. Soon humans hunted bison and elk nearly out of existence. Native Americans were forced to move. Absence of fire and grazing allowed oak and hickory trees to take over, crowding out the prairie grasses.

In the mid-1970s, biologists at Land Between the Lakes noticed small patches of native prairie grasses inside what is now the Elk & Bison Prairie. Setting



carefully orchestrated “controlled burns” over a period of years, the prairie grasses flourished. Biologists then added other elements that made up the original prairie: elk, bison, and additional warm-season grasses. It took less than a generation for the prairie to disappear; it will take many years to bring it back.

The Elk & Bison Prairie began as a public/private cooperative project and opened in 1996.

Due to urban and farmland growth, the prairie habitat is becoming endangered along with the wildlife it supports. Please join us in appreciating this glimpse of a rare landscape.

## Elk & Bison Prairie Rules

**Warning!** Wild animals are dangerous and unpredictable! Due to safety concerns for both our visitors and large animals in the prairie, **all vehicles must be enclosed.**

1. Do not approach any animal or allow them to approach you. Bison and elk will charge.
2. Keep your vehicle on the roadway at all times or at one of three designated interpretive exhibit areas.
3. Remain in your vehicle when large animals are within 200 feet. If bison block the road, please be patient.
4. When it's safe to leave your vehicle, always stay on the roadway within 10 feet of your vehicle. At interpretive stops, stay in the graveled areas only.
5. Walking and hiking is prohibited in the prairie.
6. No motorcycle, bicycle, or horseback riding allowed in the prairie.
7. Do not feed or harass any wildlife.
8. Pack it in, pack it out— please do not litter.
9. Keep all pets secured inside your vehicle.
10. Respect the Resource: Leave shed antlers, plants and other artifacts in the prairie; removing them is illegal.

## Purchase your Entry Pass

Purchase one-time entry at the cash/credit machine at the prairie entrance. You may also purchase a single-use entry pass that can be retained as a souvenir after your visit, or you may purchase multiple passes at a discounted rate.

## USDA Forest Service

### Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area

#### General Information:

1.800.525.7077 or 270.924.2000

#### Website:

[www.landbetweenthe lakes.us](http://www.landbetweenthe lakes.us)

#### EMERGENCY or reporting:

911 or 1.877.861.2457

#### Volunteer with the Bugle Corps at the Elk & Bison Prairie:

Email: [volunteer@friendsofbl.org](mailto:volunteer@friendsofbl.org)

# Elk & Bison Prairie Fact Sheet

## LAND BETWEEN THE LAKES National Recreation Area

KENTUCKY | TENNESSEE



## Open Daily Dawn to Dusk

The Elk & Bison Prairie offers a native grassland habitat that was once common in Kentucky more than a century ago. Elk and bison roam free within this 650-acre enclosure. Visitors explore the wonders of the tallgrass prairie through traveling in their enclosed vehicle via a 3.5-mile paved loop road. Numerous other wildlife species and a stunning array of native plants also thrive here.



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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# Elk & Bison Prairie Wildlife

## LAND BETWEEN THE LAKES *National Recreation Area*

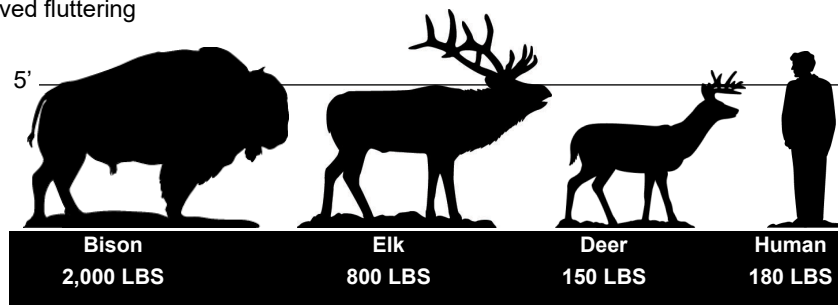
**American Bison:** The largest land animal in North America, the American Bison, serves as the official national mammal of the United States. By 1880, these magnificent animals had practically disappeared from herds of 60-70 million at their peak. Thanks to public and private restoration efforts, over 200,000 bison now roam North America.

Despite their size, bison are deceptively quick and agile. They can gallop as fast as 35 miles per hour. They herd near fresh grass, usually feeding early and late in the day. When the herd reaches grazing capacity for the enclosed prairie, we sell excess bison at public auction.



**Other Wildlife:** Wild turkeys, coyotes, skunks, rabbits, raccoons, bobcats, bats, box turtles, Eastern kingsnakes, garter snakes, quail, red-tailed hawks, and owls enjoy the prairie habitat. You might also see songbird species, such as indigo buntings, Eastern kingbirds, Eastern bluebirds, and Savannah sparrows. Butterflies, such as monarchs, cloudless sulphurs, red-spotted purples, and zebra, black, and tiger swallowtails, can also be observed fluttering around the prairie.

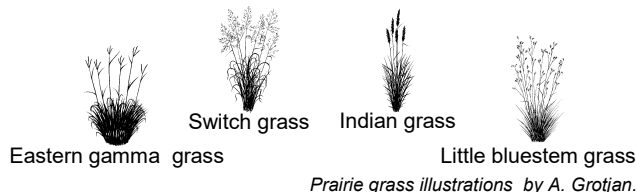
### Weight and Height Comparison of Bison, Elk, Deer, and Human



**Elk:** Elk are the second largest member of the deer family behind the moose. Our elk originated from Elk Island National Park in Alberta, Canada. Because we frequently test the health of our elk herd, we offer elk to other states for release into the wild. Only bulls have antlers. They shed them each spring to grow a new pair. Antlers can grow up to one inch a day and weigh up to 40 pounds. Elk spend most of their day in cover and graze in late afternoon or evening.



**Tallgrass Prairie Habitat:** Periodic fire creates an environment where warm-season grasses and wildflowers thrive, which supports wildlife habitat.



## Seasons Vary Greatly– Visit Often!

### Spring: A Time for New Life

Elk and bison shed their winter coats. Many seek out “rubs”— trees, stumps or rocks — to help the shedding process. In March or April we use prescribed burning to maintain and promote the prairie habitat with its native wildlife. During May, the first bison calves appear. Bison calves stay close to their mothers. Elk give birth in late May or June. Elk keep their newborn calves hidden until they’re strong enough to keep up with the herd. The vibrant blue spring azure butterflies are one of the earliest spring butterflies to appear.

### Summer: A Time to Grow

Some prairie grasses grow nearly two feet high by July, and eight feet tall by early September. During the hottest days, elk and bison seek relief in shade trees or in a pond. The best time to visit is when wildlife is most active — just after sunrise and just before sunset. Elk and bison “wallow” in dust or mud to protect themselves from biting insects. A bison wallow is often more than 15 feet wide and a foot deep. In July and August you may see raw sores and bloody scars from fighting during the bison breeding season. Be extra cautious because bulls can be especially aggressive during this time.

### Fall: A Time for Autumn Colors

During late August through September, you may see prairie wildflowers bloom — purple blazing star, asters and partridge pea — and eight-foot tall native grasses. Stop by in September and October to hear the elk bugle during their breeding season. See trees stripped bare of bark where elk rub the velvet from their antlers to prepare for mating season. Like bison, bull elk may have raw scars and sores from fighting during their breeding season. In cool weather, snakes sun themselves on the road. Do not harass or hit the snakes.

### Winter: A Time for Viewing

When the forest has retired its leaf cover for the winter and the frost has laid the vines to rest, the prairie reveals areas previously hidden by vegetation. Visitors can see into the leafless woods and field edges much further to help them locate elk and bison. Animals are more active and roam further during the day as foraging becomes more important to help them keep warm. This helps make wildlife more likely to be seen at any time of the day. Elk and bison have their full winter coats by December. Elk browse on dried grasses, twigs, bark, and mast (acorns).