

Aerial Wildlife Survey Report

Hay-Zama Wood Bison Aerial Survey (2020)

Background

The Hay-Zama wood bison herd (*Bison bison athabascae*) was established by introducing wood bison as part of the National Wood Bison Recovery Plan, which calls for establishing a herd of free-ranging, self-sustaining and disease-free wood bison in each of the provinces and territories in Western Canada.

The Hay-Zama herd is managed by a controlled hunting season and has a population objective between 400 and 600 animals. This ensures a sustainable population while also limiting bison spreading toward Highway 35 and reducing potential contact with diseased bison to the east, in and around Wood Buffalo National Park. A minimum total count is conducted annually in late February or March. All bison found are counted and classified as adult or calf to determine the herd composition.

For more information about management of the Hay-Zama Wood Bison herd and issues of diseased bison in Alberta, readers can link to:

- My Wild Alberta – Wood Bison Hunt: Hay-Zama:
<https://mywildalberta.ca/hunting/game-species/wood-bison-hunt-hay-zama.aspx>
- Alberta.ca – Wood bison disease management:
<https://www.alberta.ca/wood-bison-disease-management.aspx>

Survey method

The 2020 Hay-Zama bison survey was conducted by flying transects orientated west-east and spaced one degree of latitude apart (roughly one statute mile) within the historical range. The crew consisted of 3 observers in a Bell 206 Jet Ranger equipped with bubble windows in the rear. Survey speed was approximately 90 to 110 km per hour on line.

All groups were photographed to confirm total counts and classification of calves. Calves were classified based on relatively small size and shorter nasal bridge.

Results and discussion

The Hay-Zama bison survey was undertaken from February 19-22, 2020. A total of 368 bison (309 adults and 59 calves) were seen in 18 groups. There was 16 percent calves, compared to a 15.6 percent 5-year average.

The 2020/21 hunting season will remain suspended as the number of bison found on the 2020 survey are lower than the minimum population objective.

Table 1. Comparison of current and previous Hay-Zama wood bison surveys, 2015-2020

Year	No. of Groups	No. of Bison			
		Adults ^a	Calves	Total	%Calves ^b
Feb. 2015	28	498	92	590	16
Feb. 2016	21	506	120	626	19
Feb. 2017	8	410	67	477	14
Feb. 2018	7	263	53	316	17
Feb. 2019	12	252	33	285	12
Feb. 2020	18	309	59	368	16

a - Adults include yearlings | b - %Calves = calves/total population x 100

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