

# The Elk & Bison Prairie Story

As you enter the Elk & Bison Prairie you open a door to the past as it appeared to the native American Shawnee Nation and frontier wilderness explorers. Vast herds of bison and elk blanketed this land, creating broad paths as they migrated. Today, we travel many of those same paths, notably 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 “barren” 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.



Official Website

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the Lakes Facebook



## Elk & Bison Prairie Rules

**Warning!** Wild animals are dangerous and unpredictable! For your safety, we recommend you visit the prairie in an enclosed vehicle.

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. 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. Refrain from feeding animals and littering.
7. Keep all pets secured inside your vehicle.
8. Respect the Resource: Leave shed antlers, plants and other artifacts in the prairie; removing them is illegal.



In case of an emergency, dial 911. To contact Forest Service Law Enforcement, call 877.861.2457.

USDA Forest Service

## Land Between the Lakes

National Recreation Area  
800.525.7077 or 270.924.2000  
[www.landbetweenthe lakes.us](http://www.landbetweenthe lakes.us)

Updated January 2017

# Elk & Bison Prairie

~ Fact Sheet ~

## Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area Kentucky | Tennessee



**Open Daily  
Dawn to Dusk**

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at Golden Pond Visitor Center,  
Nature Station, or Homeplace 1850s Farm



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# Elk & Bison Prairie Wildlife

## Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area

### American Bison

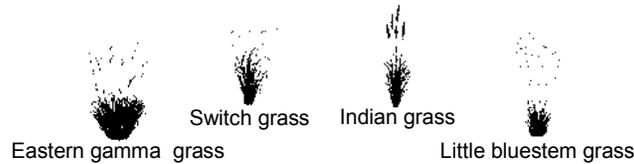
The largest land animal in North America, the American Bison, serves as national mammal of the United States since May 2016. By 1880 these magnificent animals had practically disappeared from herds of 60-70 million at their peak. Thanks to public/private restoration efforts, over 200,000 bison now roam 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.

### 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.



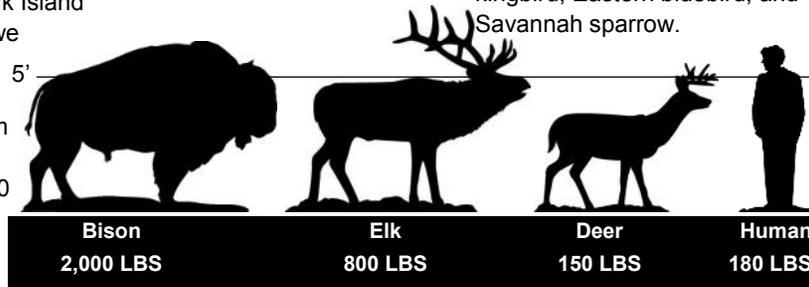
Periodic fire creates an environment where warm-season grasses and wild flowers thrive. Prairie grass illustrations by A. Grotjan.



### Other wildlife



Wild turkey, coyote, skunk, rabbit, raccoon, bobcat, bat, box turtle, Eastern kingsnake, garter snake, quail, redtailed hawk, and owl enjoy the prairie habitat. You might also see songbird species, such as indigo bunting, Eastern kingbird, Eastern bluebird, and Savannah sparrow.



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.

### 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. From July to October 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

In early fall 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 mating season. See trees stripped bare of bark where elk rub the velvet from their antlers to prepare for mating season. In cool weather, snakes sun themselves on the road. Please avoid hitting or harassing the snakes as reptiles belong in the prairie habitat.

### Winter: a time for viewing

The bare landscape of winter heightens wildlife viewing opportunities. Elk and bison have their full winter coats by December. Elk browse on dried grasses, twigs, bark, and mast (acorns). Bison will eat grass throughout the winter months.