

# If buffalo bluffing fails, fights can be vicious

Continued from pg. 8

Buffalo rarely get involved in an actual fight, he said, but when they do it's vicious. When they do fight, each buffalo tries to hold the other's head between its horns. This way they can avoid the other's horns, Gunderson said.

Fights to the death are extremely rare because on the open range the injured buffalo can escape. However, Gunderson said one bull was killed at Fort Niobrara when it was trapped in the corner of the corral and was gored to death because it couldn't get away.

Deaths more frequently occur from infection in the wounds, he said.

Fights occur when there is competition for something, Gunderson said, especially for females, food and water, but the fighting is more intense over females.

### Mating season fights

Fights and challenges during mating season are frequent because there is no permanent pair-bonding, and, contrary to popular belief, buffalo males do not have harems of females, he said.

When a female is receptive to a male, he establishes a tending bond, standing near the female and challenging any other male who approaches, Gunderson said.

There is constant challenging and fighting, and whichever male is in attendance when the female

comes into complete receptivity breeds her, he said.

The male stays with that female for a couple days and then leaves to find another female.

According to Gunderson, buffalo have a maternal society. The core herd is made of females and young males, and except for the breeding season the males are scattered in groups by themselves.

### More females

There are more females than males in a herd, and even at birth the ratio favors females, Gunderson said.

He said he has a theory, which hasn't been proven yet, that production in natural herds is lower than in domestic herds, and that removal of most males from

For example, he said he has seen a male who had been drinking from a pond walk away when another male approached to drink.

There has been a great deal of talk lately about cross-breeding of buffalo and domestic cattle, Gunderson said. Experiments of this type have been going on since the 1920's without much success, he said.

According to Gunderson, the National Buffalo Association (NBA) advised ranchers at their 1974 convention to avoid trying to cross-breed unless they were prepared to assume heavy financial losses over a long period of time.

### Several problems

The NBA cited several problems with the breeding, including a maternal death rate of 90-95 per cent, a surviving calf rate of only 1-2 per cent and the sterility of any surviving male calves.

Gunderson said that the breed is now one-fourth buffalo and that by the time complete fertility is achieved, there won't be much buffalo in the animals, and any advantages would be lost.

Also, Gunderson said, there is no proof that claims made about the buffalo's immunity to cancer or the high content of polyunsaturates in buffalo meat are true.

Gunderson agreed with an NBA suggestion that the research be left to large companies who can assume the risks.

Photos courtesy of

Harvey Gunderson

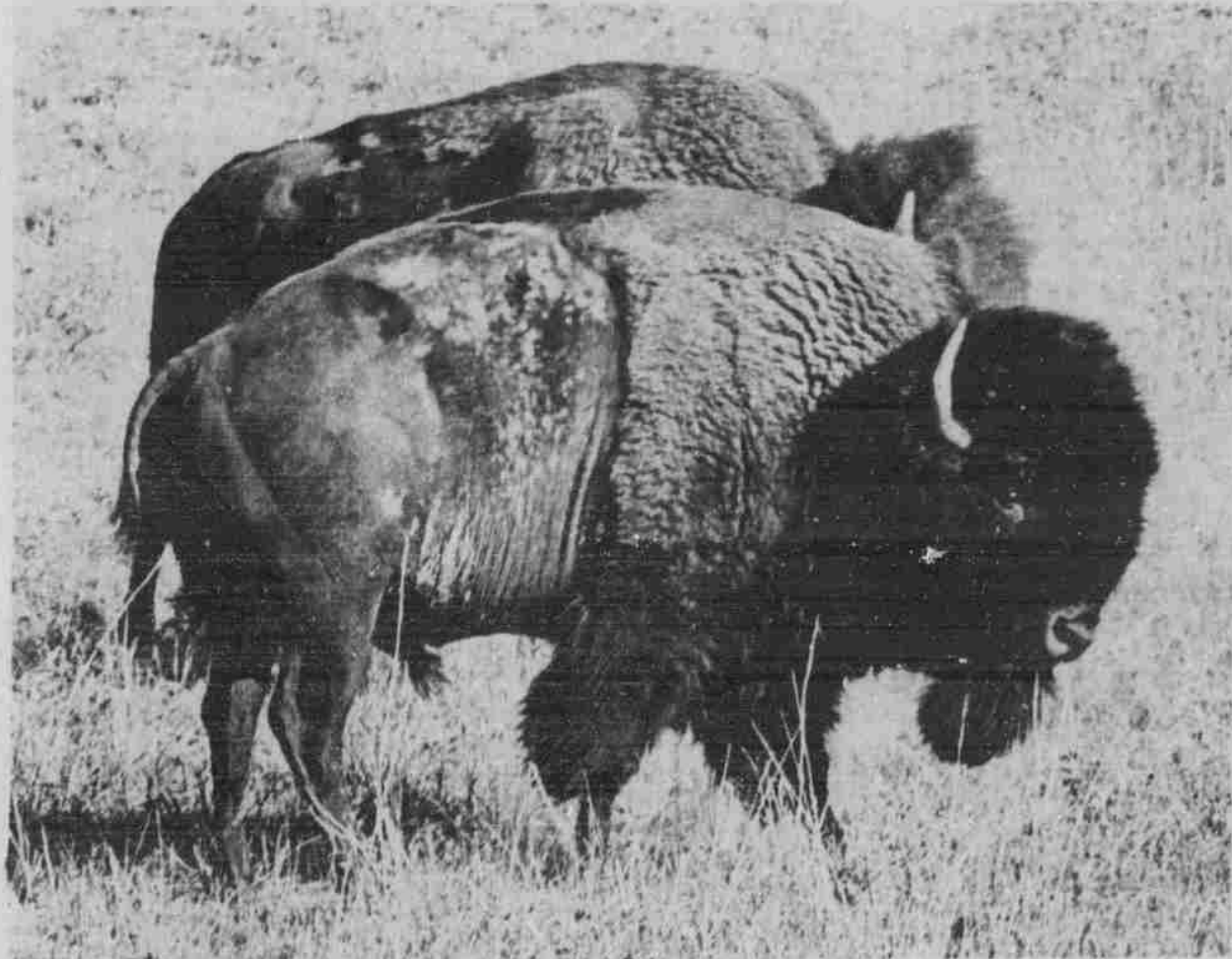
a herd would increase production by decreasing the fighting.

Buffalo herds are loosely organized, Gunderson said. They are not a solid herd as often visualized, but are gathered in groups which are constantly shifting.

According to Gunderson, they are a social animal up to a certain point and in effect say, "don't get too close but I'd like to have you at arm's length."

### Buffalo hierarchy

There appears to be some sort of a hierarchy in the buffalo herd, but it's not very clear-cut, he said.



The buffalo (left, foreground) has just turned its head to avoid a fight, according to Harvey Gunderson, Assistant Director and Curator of the Zoology and Records Museum.

Hair and horns typify male buffalo features (right).

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