

Home Free

Pushed to extinction by early European settlers, the bison have recently returned to Northern Alberta, marking a new chapter in Canada's history. By Megan Honan

I'm face-to-face with a white bison nearly double my size, who is staring me down. I'm not sure whether to run or stand perfectly still.

"Don't worry, he won't getcha," says my guide, Len Hrehorets. He speaks softly, with a slight lilt. A seasoned rancher, he looks the part, with a Western hat perched atop his head and country music blaring from his pickup truck. Along with plains bison and woods bison, white bison were released onto these hills in 2021, the first time they have roamed here in more than 150 years. I've come to a 320-acre area on Hrehorets's property in the remote wilderness of Smoky Lake, Alberta, named Visions, Hopes and Dreams at Métis Crossing, to join a new tour that lets guests get close to these majestic creatures.

The disappearance of the bison—called "buffloo" in Michif, a language of the Métis peoples who have historically lived on these lands—began in 1814, when the Hudson's Bay Company, a fur trader incorporated by English royal charter, issued a ban on the running of the buffalo, also known as the buffalo hunt. This biannual event was hugely important to the Métis, an Indigenous group of First Nations and European ancestry who had by then emerged as a discrete nation. Attended by thousands, the hunt gave rise to various social, political, and legal rituals, including elections of buffalo councils. In addition to providing sustenance, the bison drove the Métis economy as the primary currency of the fur trade.

By the 1850s, Canada's bison were nearly depleted, thanks to the rifle's increased hunting



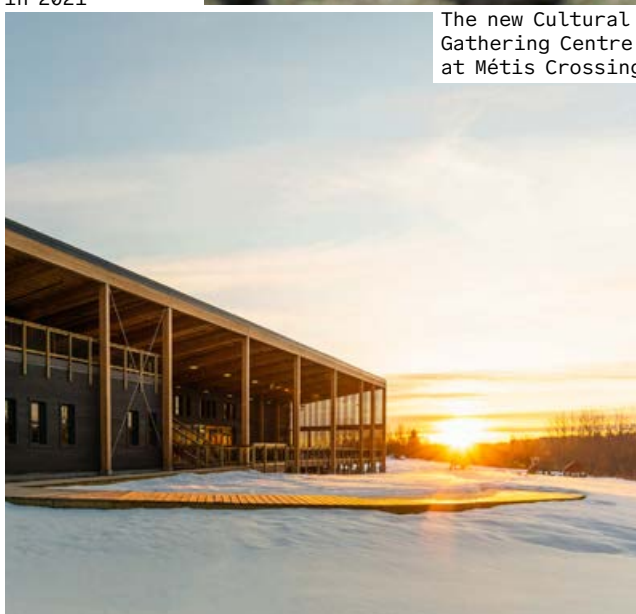
Lilyrose Meyers, a Métis elder and knowledge keeper

capacity and policies advocating for the animals' extermination—a ploy to force Indigenous peoples into dependence. The government enacted the Unorganized Territories Game Preservation Act of 1894, which severely limited local hunting rights; herds were tracked down and moved to reserves where hunting was banned outright. Ultimately, the bison nearly went extinct. The Métis and other Indigenous peoples were left to find other means of survival, including fishing and trapping for smaller game.

Hrehorets and I drive past other newly released plains wildlife—elk and Percheron horses that zip past before fading into the winter landscape. "I've had bison since 1981," he says. "I know everything there is to know about them." Hrehorets's grandfather, who settled across the river from Métis Crossing, hunted and fished alongside Indigenous peoples. That legacy of coexistence and cooperation is part of what prompted Hrehorets to establish a version of Visions, Hopes and Dreams



White bison were reintroduced to Northern Alberta in 2021



The new Cultural Gathering Centre at Métis Crossing

in 2019. “I wanted to build a park that would bring people together—to show them the beauty of this land and also honor my grandfather,” he says. “But I knew I couldn’t do it alone.”

In 2020, Hrehorets proposed that Visions, Hopes and Dreams partner with Métis Crossing, Alberta’s first major Métis cultural destination. The center, which is connected to a new 40-room lodge, offers various ways to engage with Métis tradition, from art workshops and storytelling sessions to wildlife tours that explain the bison’s historical significance to the community. After the bison release in 2021, the organization celebrated the grand opening of the Cultural Gathering Centre and Lodge at Métis Crossing this past fall.

“Métis Crossing was never meant to be a museum, never a place to look at old things behind glass,” says Juanita Marois, its chief executive director. “It’s about engaging people with our culture and helping them to experience us through their

heads, their hearts, their hands. The bison are foundational to that.”

The next day, I join resident Métis elder Lilyrose Meyers on a snowshoe hike along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, one of Métis Crossing’s activities. “We have just walked in the footsteps of our ancestors; they will provide many blessings for you, just as they have for us,” she says, nodding toward the nearby bison. I feel a kinship with Meyers. She reminds me of my great-great-grandmother, a proud Mi’kmaq woman who welcomed friends and strangers alike into her community.

We’re standing on the river lot lands where the region’s first Métis settlers set up camp in the late 1800s. Now travelers come for the wildlife tour and to learn about the heritage of the Métis people. Nationwide, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC), a partner of Métis Crossing, continues to expand its offering of Indigenous experiences, underscoring the connection between these original inhabitants and the lands on which their ancestors lived.

Together, Métis Crossing and Visions, Hopes and Dreams have built something greater than what either could have achieved alone. It comes at a time when Canada continues to grapple with its treatment of Indigenous peoples. In 2015, the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission published its report on residential schools, which sought to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian culture by displacing them from their own; in it were devastating accounts of abuse, forced separation, and death, prompting last year’s historic apology from Pope Francis to Canadian Indigenous peoples. But reconciliation can take other forms too; land back and renaming movements have taken root here and in the United States, where national parks have begun returning animals to the care of their original stewards. All are small strides toward acknowledgment, repatriation, and, for some, hope.

Hrehorets and I stand side by side at the wooded gate, watching the bison run up and down the hillsides. The sun is setting, and Hrehorets tips his hat to block its rays. “I have hope for the future,” he says quietly. “Life will start again this summer, when the first generation of baby bison is born. They’ll only know this land—their home. Back where they belong.”