

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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**Bison make a return to Kane County prairie, after 200+ years**  
*Forest Preserve District makes good on referendum promise*

GENEVA, IL — With a few steps off a trailer and onto Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve in Sycamore, American bison, also known as buffalo, have made a triumphant return to Kane County prairie, for the first time in more than 200 years.

The move follows a three-way partnership between the Forest Preserve District of Kane County as land owner, the American Indian Center of Chicago (AIC) as owner of the animals, and Ruhter Bison as the herd manager. It was an agreement the Forest Preserve District had worked to bring to completion for years, and something promised to residents as part of the 2024 Land Acquisition & Preserve Improvement Referendum.

More than 200 years ago, bison freely roamed Illinois' waves of prairie grasses that grew as far as one could see. However, with the industrial revolution, much of Illinois' prairie was converted to farmland or developed upon.



TOP: The first of six American bison sets foot back on Kane County prairie in more than 200 years, Dec. 5, at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve. BOTTOM: Six American bison check out their new prairie home at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve in Sycamore.

Photos by Keeping Moments Photography, © Forest Preserve District of Kane County

— ADD ONE —

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In fact, the prairie nearly vanished from ‘The Prairie State,’ with less than one-tenth of one percent still remaining. Prairie removal and subsequent soil erosion led to the loss of countless plant and animal species that relied upon the important ecosystem. Over a century later, conservation agencies have worked to bring back Illinois prairie and reestablish these important habitats. Larger dreams for these agencies often include bringing bison back to the prairie as well, but have been rarely realized.

“People have wanted to bring buffalo back since we first learned that our actions could cause the extinction of a species,” said Forest Preserve District of Kane County Executive Director Benjamin Haberthur.

“The scale of what has been needed to make this happen has been prohibitive, until now. Land managers have been slowly growing the remnant herds across

the country, and now we are hitting a watershed moment in which there are enough animals to see them return to small pockets all across their historic North American range. This is something I’ve waited my entire career to see, and it’s an honor to play a small part in this continental project. This is a moment that transcends generations. This day has honestly been hundreds of years in the making, and I’m glad we’re here to be part of this historic occasion,” Haberthur said.

Forest Preserve District Natural Resource Management Director Patrick Chess said that bison are important to prairie not only because they were originally here, and that’s part of a wider restoration goal, but there are also ecological benefits. These large animals feed on prairie plants, and wallow on and use the land. Wallowing, in turn, causes small depressions that fill with water and then create their own microclimates that provide habitat for other wildlife. Everything is interconnected. Anytime we can restore a property and bring back long-lost flora and fauna, it’s a victory,” he said.



Photo by Keeping Moments Photography  
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— MORE —

— ADD TWO —

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While the animals weren't so sure about their new surroundings, as they first stepped off the trailer and onto Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve, the small, invite-only crowd was enthusiastic, with Forest



Photo by Keeping Moments Photography  
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Preserve District and AIC representatives welcoming the animals to their new home. AIC also held a ceremonial blessing of the land, prior to the animals' arrival.

AIC Co-Executive Director Jay Young said, "This is something that feels both historic and deeply personal for us as a community. For us, this isn't about bringing animals onto the land. It's a *rematriation*; it's the return of relatives who have been missing from this place for far too long. Bison have carried our stories, our teachings, and our responsibilities for generations, and welcoming them home is an important moment for our people and for the generations who will come after us," he said.

"This is also part of the broader healing work happening at the American Indian Center — reconnecting our community to land, identity and relationships that many urban Natives simply haven't had access to. Living in an urban area, it's rare to stand on open prairie, feel the earth move, or be close to bison relatives in a way that reflects our teachings. Bringing them home opens a doorway for our community to remember who we are and to rebuild connections that history tried to sever," he said.

— MORE —

— **ADD THREE** —

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“AIC will be the community stewards of the bison as part of a two-part project with the Forest Preserve District of Kane County. The first part is this homecoming. The second is the work ahead — building programming, education and opportunities for our community to learn from the bison and the ecosystem they help sustain. This herd is a key part of a prairie regeneration effort, restoring the land with the help of a keystone species that shaped these landscapes long before any of us were here. We’ll also be launching a community science program in conjunction with the Forest Preserve District environmental education team, this spring, where community scientists will work alongside us to monitor prairie health, track changes over time, and learn what it means to care for a living ecosystem in real time. This is a chance for our community to be part of the restoration of both land and relationships,” Young said.

While Forest Preserve District staff call it exciting to return bison to prairie after so many years, they ask residents to be patient a while longer before seeing them, to let the animals acclimate to their new surroundings. The bison were first unloaded into a small corral at Burlington Prairie on Dec. 5. They’re going to be released into the larger, fenced prairie, later this month.

“Quietness and calmness are what is needed to give these animals time to adjust and feel safe and secure at Burlington Prairie Forest Preserve,” said Haberthur. “In addition, Burlington Prairie is one of the preserves that we partially close seasonally, due to the blowing and drifting snow in winter time. This will give the bison even more time to adjust. Come spring, we’re planning public events to celebrate and welcome the buffalo back to Kane,” he said.

For more information on the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, visit [www.kaneforest.com](http://www.kaneforest.com) or find the District on social media by searching [@forestpreserve](https://www.instagram.com/forestpreserve).

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