

BEAST OF THE WEST



JONATHON GRUENKE / GAZETTE

A male bison emerges from a cloud of dust after rolling on the ground Tuesday afternoon. Bill Schultz has raised bison at Gravel Canyon Bison Ranch in Prairie Ronde Township for the past 14 years and claims bison are the original health food.

BISON BITS

- ❖ Bison were hunted to near extinction in the 19th and 20th centuries but have since rebounded to a U.S. population of about 350,000 — mostly in Western states.
- ❖ Michigan has 41 registered bison ranches.
- ❖ For more information on Gravel Canyon Bison Ranch, 60139 County Road 652, Mattawan, call 668-3724 or visit

www.schultzfruitridgefarm.com.

Source: National Bison Association, Michigan Bison Association.

Bison migrate from nation's past to today's ranches

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MATTAWAN

Heat rises from the asphalt county road, transforming fields of crops into a rippling haze of grain and corn.

The dusty air is searing and silent, save for the rumbling of an occasional pickup truck. As the sun beats down on Prairie Ronde Township, livestock are at home on miles and miles of rolling farmland.



Bill Schultz

But there are a few occupants, 12 to be precise, who seem a touch out of place. A dozen bison roam at Gravel Canyon Bison Ranch, on West U Avenue, five miles west of U.S. 131.

Big, burly bison, ranging in age from 16 months to 16 years, make their way through the broiling afternoon air.

See **BISON MIGRATE**, A5

Bison migrate from nation's past

The herd's head honcho is a 2,000-pound megabeast, 6 feet tall at the shoulders and 8 feet from nose to rump.

"He's the big boy," says Bill Schultz, 50, a leather-skinned farmer who's surprisingly quick with a smile. "We don't name the animals, but if I was to give him a name, it would be Big Bull. My Big Bull."

Michigan may seem an odd habitat for bison, but Schultz's 80-acre ranch is just one mile from Texas.

Texas Township, that is.

"The biggest comment I get from people is that they're surprised that a bison ranch even exists in Michigan," said Schultz, who added bison in 1994 to diversify his Schultz Fruitridge Farms crop that includes peaches, cherries, grapes, apples, pears, pumpkins and corn.

The fruit farm has been in the Schultz family since 1951. Bill Schultz and his sons, Bill, 26, and Dan, 22, work the orchards and the bison ranch. The elder Schultz's wife, Denise, operates the fruit market.

"I was pretty surprised when Bill said he wanted to get into the bison business," Denise Schultz says. "But I supported the decision after we talked about it. I made brochures, and I talked to my customers at the fruit market."

Bison burger costs \$4.50 a pound, which is more expensive than beef, but it is virtually fat free and healthier. Three of the bulls — not the big boy, he's strictly for breeding — are on their way for slaughter at Pease Packing in Scotts.

So there's plenty of lean, tender bison for those with the appetite and the palate.

"The biggest challenge is letting people know it's available, first of all," Bill Schultz says. "Then, informing them that it's better for them than beef. One other thing. It tastes darn good, too."

Increasing profit was Bill Schultz's motivation when his herd reached a peak of 72 animals a few years ago, but the market is less demanding now. He's been thinning out his herd while hoping for a re-

bound.

Bill Schultz says he isn't afraid of even the biggest bull, but he is "respectful." He gives them distance if that's what they covet.

Bison are faster than horses, Bill Schultz says, and they are stealthy enough to sneak up on an unwary farmer. Then there's the roar.

"Three times in 14 years I've heard bulls let out with a roar like I can't even describe," Bill Schultz says. "It's like a lion only much, much louder. The first time I heard it, two bulls were tussling and one let out with this incredible noise.

"It scared me to death. I jumped up on my truck and stayed there a while. Another time, one ripped the grill off my truck. Their idea of play can kill you."

Sweat pours from Bill Schultz's brow as he recalls the fright, then he is quiet. Sun burns down on the farmer and his herd, the air filled with dust, heat and silence.

Somehow, the bison don't seem so out-of-place anymore.