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Bison carcasses cleaned up outside Yellowstone following heavy winter of hunting

Brett French

Mar 14, 2023



Forest Service workers clean up bison gut piles

In one of the deadliest winters for Yellowstone National Park bison, state and federal officials cooperated last week to clean up carrion left behind by tribal and state hunters.

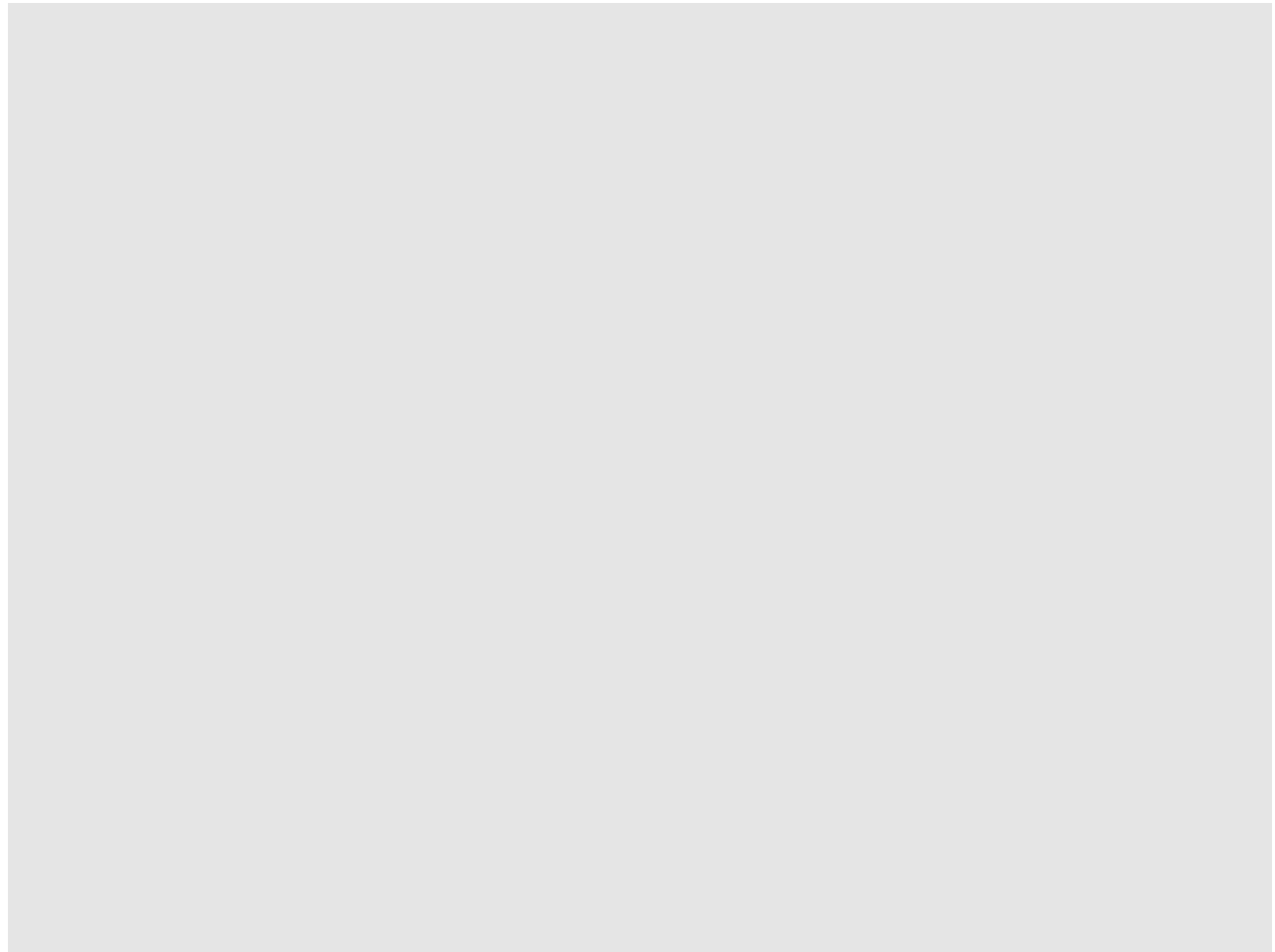
A 14-foot trailer and three dumpsters — one 30-yard and two 20-yard containers — filled with bison entrails, hides and bones were hauled from the Gardiner Basin to the Gallatin County landfill near Logan last week.

The cooperative effort involved the Montana Department of Livestock, Custer Gallatin National Forest, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Workers used equipment like a backhoe and skid-steer to haul the heaviest remains, utilizing shovels to pick up smaller parts.

“The main reason to do a cleanup this year is just the heavy concentration of carcasses on the landscape,” said Mike Thom, Gardiner District ranger, in an email. “When I say carcasses, I’m meaning gut piles, spines, ribs and hides.”

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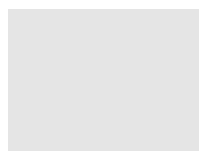


Bison carcasses and gut piles dot a field just north of Yellowstone National Park's border. The Beattie Gulch area on Forest Service land has seen intense bison hunting by tribal and state hunters this winter.

Bonnie Lynn, Yellowstone Voices

Hunts

The waste comes from bison shot mainly by tribal hunters just north of the Yellowstone National Park border. That's where the animals migrate onto Forest Service land where they can be killed. Hunting is not allowed inside Yellowstone.



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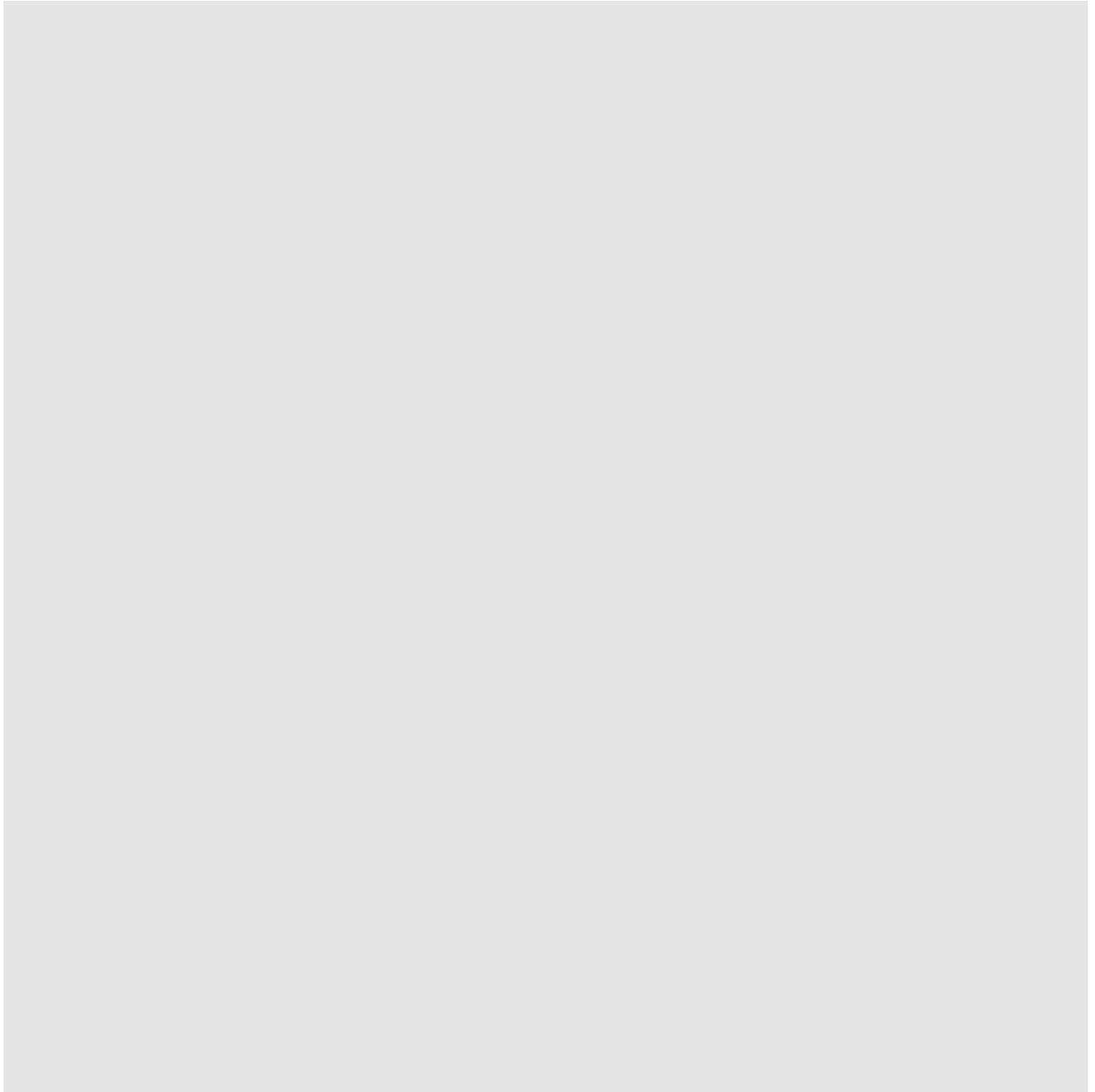
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As of March 3, about 900 park bison had been killed by hunters, or agency officials who euthanized wounded animals. Seventy-five bison were killed by state-licensed hunters. Tribes with treaty rights police their own hunters and set limits. So far, eight tribes have taken part in this year's bison hunts. The Nez Perce Tribe has killed more bison than any other, reporting the killing of 98 adult bulls, 101 adult females and 123 calves for a total of 322 bison.

The majority were killed or captured near the park's northern boundary close to the community of Gardiner. Thirty-nine were taken on the west side of the park, closer to West Yellowstone.

The Park Service has captured and corralled 276 bison for inclusion in its live bison quarantine and transfer program. Another 350 were captured and will be released back into the park once the hunting season is over, said Cam Sholly, Yellowstone superintendent.

Going into the year, the park's bison biologists did not want bison removals to exceed 25%, Sholly added, which would have been 1,500 animals. Altogether, **1,675 bison** have been removed so far. When the 350 corralled bison are returned to the park that number will drop to 1,325, although tribal hunts are continuing. No more bison will be shipped to slaughter, Sholly said.



National Park bull bison emerges from the trees with its face covered in snow. The animals use their heads to clear snow from the ground beneath.

Critics

James Holt, executive director of the conservation group Buffalo Field Campaign and a member of the Nez Perce Tribe, criticized the Park Service, state of Montana and tribes in a recent online post for the number of bison killed and the firing line situation.

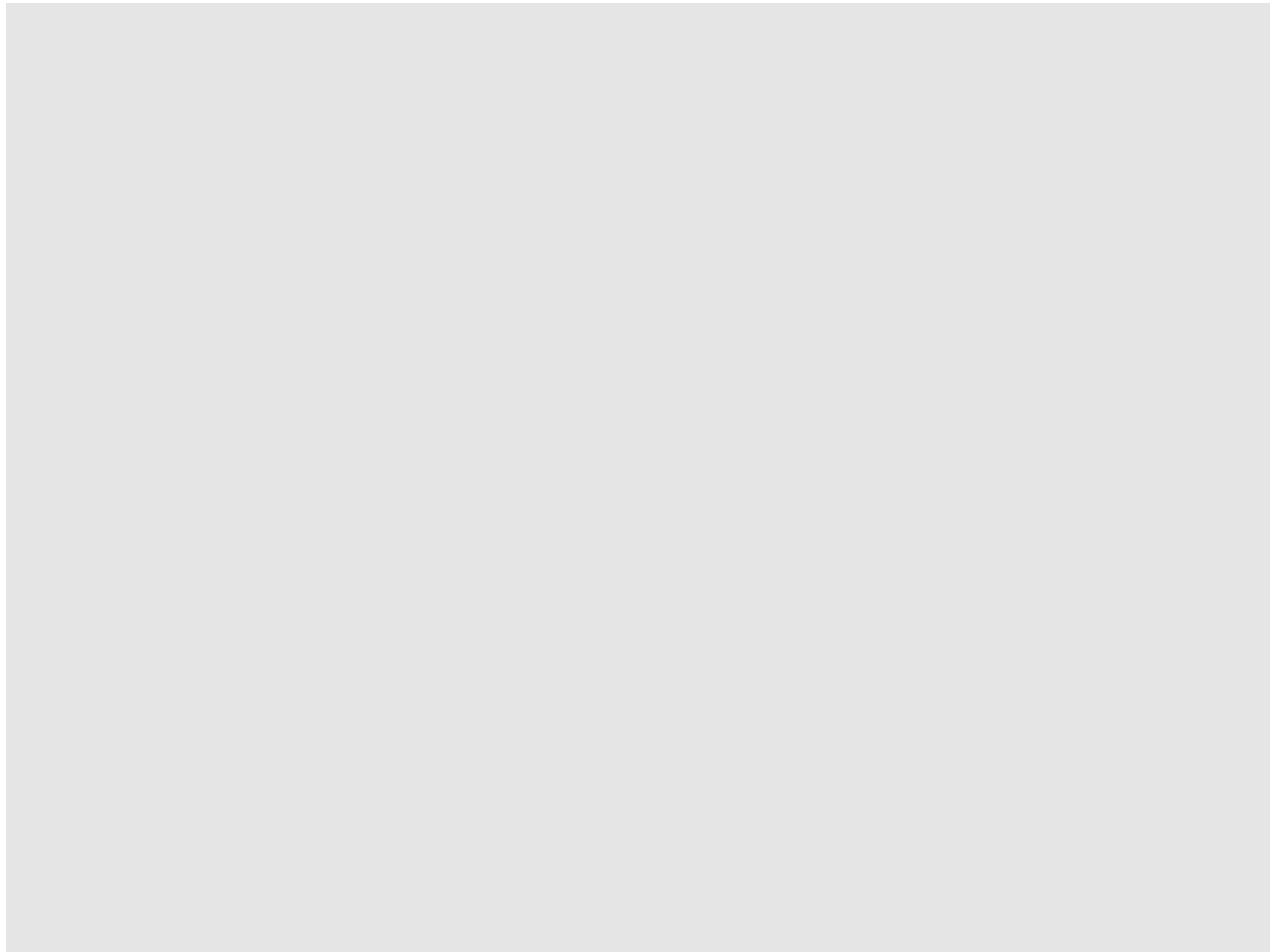
“Today, the goal continues to be slaughter as an acceptable management tool, with every sovereign entity participating in the demise of the only continuously wild herd of buffalo in the contiguous United States,” Holt wrote. “This is an abject failure by every Decision-Maker.”

Stephany Seay, cofounder of the bison advocacy group Roam Free Nation, said in a statement that “Bison mismanagement is growing out of control.” She called the state and tribal hunts a “killing frenzy” and pointed to natural winterkill deaths as “compounding the dire consequences for the bison population.”

Bonnie Lynn, who lives across from Beattie Gulch where a large percentage of the hunting occurs, is the executive director of **Yellowstone Voices**, a group formed to advocate for “ethical bison management.” She questioned the safety of transporting bison entrails from the fields to the Gallatin County landfill.

The Department of Environmental Quality has no requirements for such waste, a spokesperson said. The Gallatin County solid waste director said the remains were buried in lined cells at the landfill, as required by DEQ.

“Deceased animals and animal carcasses are not regulated as bio-hazardous waste in Montana,” he wrote in an email.



Bison hides, bones and flesh fill a 14-foot dump trailer being used to haul carrion from Beattie Gulch north of Yellowstone to Gallatin County's landfill.

Bonnie Lynn, Yellowstone Voices

Dichotomy

The disposal and transfer of dead bison doesn't raise the state's concern like live animals do. Live Yellowstone bison cannot be trailered across the state unless they have repeatedly tested negative for brucellosis. The disease is spread from contact with birthing material from an infected female bison. Elk also carry the disease, which can cause pregnant cattle to abort. In humans the disease can cause undulant fever and other ailments.

Lynn shot photos and video of the cleanup effort. Workers wore no protective clothing and the trailers loaded with bison entrails, hide and bones were not covered. Thom, the Gardiner District ranger, said workers took appropriate precautions. Montana veterinarian Marty Zaluski said any risk of spreading or contracting brucellosis during the cleanup effort was low.



Aesthetics

Thom said the cleanup was organized to “improve the visuals and aesthetics of the area.”

Photos prior to the cleanup show mounds of bison parts scattered across a field close to the Old Yellowstone Trail, a gravel road on the west side of the Yellowstone River.

“We all know people come to the area to check out the scenery, so let’s help improve that,” he said. “Ancillary purposes are to mitigate the risk of human wildlife conflict as the spring approaches. Bears could be coming out of hibernation shortly. Wolves may come down, you never know. We haven’t seen any predators just yet on the landscape.”

He added, “Each tribe is offering support in different ways and exploring how they can help the situation.”



This chart shows bison removals from Yellowstone from 1990 through 2023. Note the rise in bison harvest by hunters beginning in 2011.

YNP

Not new

In 2019, Lynn sued the Forest Service and National Park Service to halt the hunting across from her home. One of the documents submitted supporting her arguments was from Peter Nara, a veterinarian specializing in immunology. Nara was part of a national panel of scientists engaged by the federal government in 2013 to study brucellosis transmission in the park and surrounding areas.

In his **statement to the court**, Nara said, “The small, quarter-mile acre area in Beattie Gulch in which hundreds of bison are killed by hunters in only a few weeks to months each season, creates an unstable and unpredictable environmental setting year to year for potential infectious spread of brucellosis to other wild/domestic animal species, including wild cervids such as elk, and people in the area.”

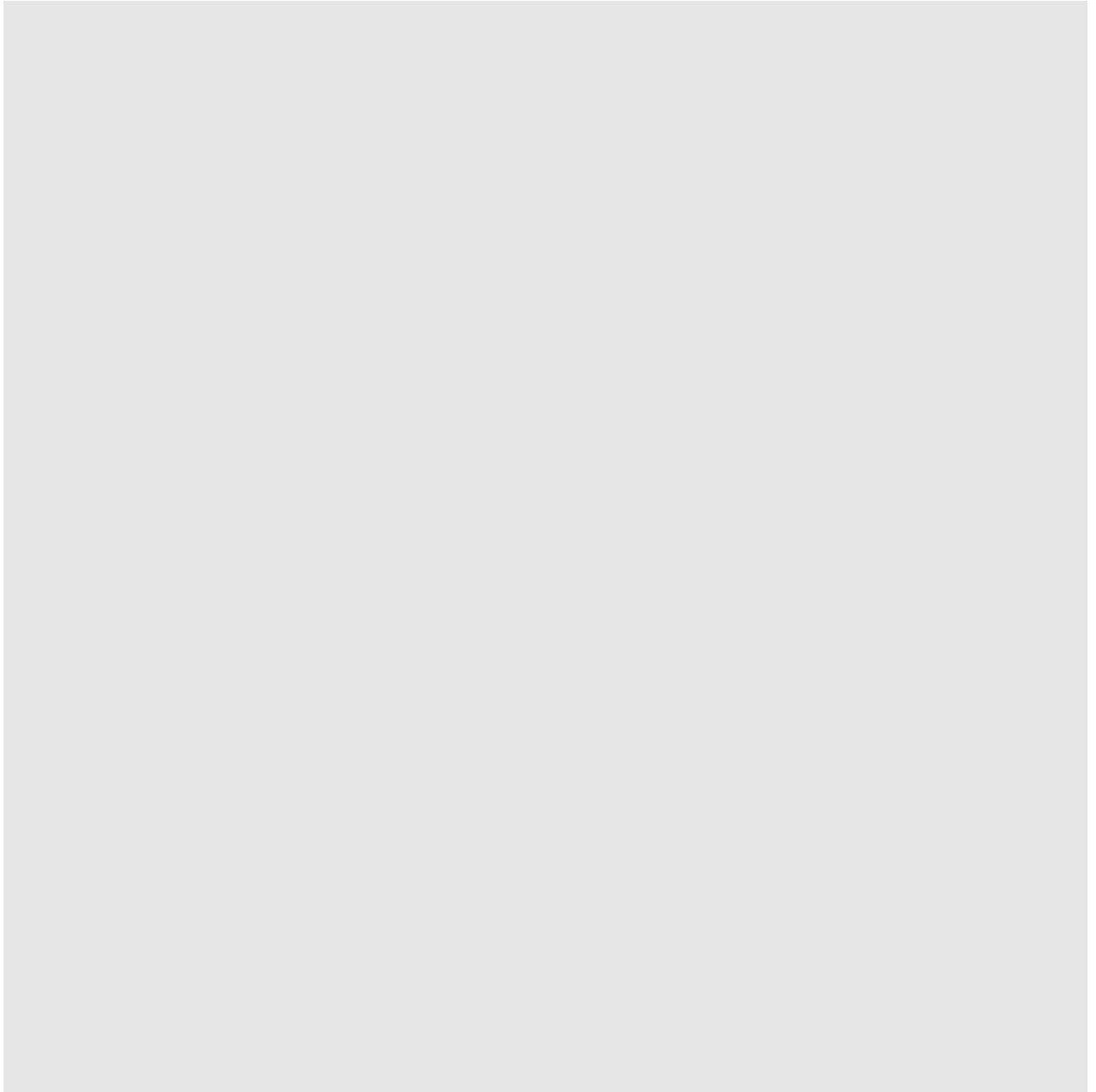
Sholly agreed the concentration of carrion in such a small area is a concern, especially if grizzly bears move into the area to dine. He applauded the cleanup and said work needs to continue to deal with the issue of bison hunting outside Yellowstone in the future.

"I get it, this is not a super popular thing," he said, but noted the Park Service is shifting the paradigm from shipping the animals to slaughter to allowing tribal hunters to kill the bison. He also praised tribes and landowners for "making the best of a difficult circumstance.

"There needs to continue to be discussions about what that hunt looks like in the future," Sholly said.

This winter's Yellowstone bison migration into the Gardiner Basin is the largest in about a decade – more than 1,200 animals as of this week. The animals leave the park only when food becomes difficult to acquire.

Heavy snow and cold arrived early last year. On Monday, Wyoming Game and Fish issued a press release highlighting the challenging conditions for wildlife across the state. Some mule deer populations were seeing greater than 50% fawn mortality due to malnutrition.



Yellowstone bison have migrated north this winter in search of food due to heavy early snow and cold temperature

NPS

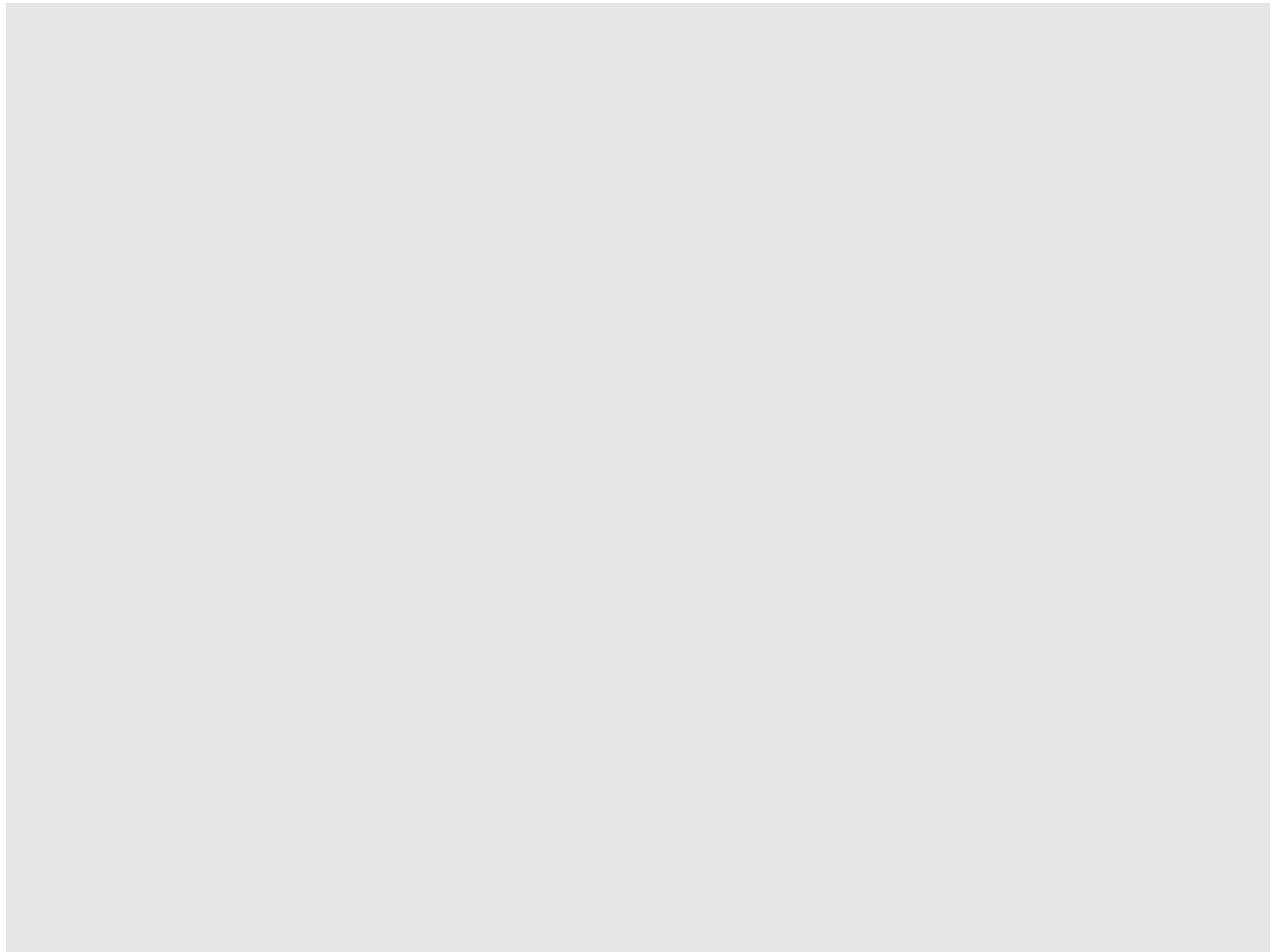
Large losses

This isn't the first time the park's bison population has taken a hit. In 2008 more than 1,600 were shot by hunters or sent to slaughter by the Park Service, with another 700 dying within the park due to a harsh winter. Two years ago and then four years ago, 1,200 bison were killed each winter.

Unlike those years, however, the Park Service is shipping fewer bison to slaughter plants this winter – 88 so far, 107 in the last three years. That's down from 3,100 bison shipped to slaughter between 2013-19. The Park Service's plan is to keep bison transfers to slaughter low in the future and instead rely on live bison transfers to tribes and tribal hunter harvest to keep the park population in check. Since 2019, the park has transferred almost 300 bison to tribal partners, a slow process because the quarantine protocol is lengthy and the available quarantine space is limited.

Last week, the Department of Interior announced the creation of a Bison Working Group to develop a Bison Shared Stewardship Plan to establish a framework for bison restoration. In addition, the department committed more than \$25 million to promote bison conservation. Of that amount, more than \$7.5 million will be dedicated to advancing bison and grasslands restoration at national wildlife refuges.

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WATCH: To see a video of National Forest Service crews clean up gut piles, point your smartphone or tablet camera at this QR code and tap the link.

By Brett French

Montana Untamed Editor

Montana Untamed editor for the Billings Gazette.