

In 2026, the Smithsonian's [National Museum of Natural History](#) is celebrating all things American bison. Through a series of new exhibitions, displays and programming, the national mammal will take center stage on the National Mall to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

On March 11, three larger-than-life [bronze bison statues](#) will undertake a weeklong, cross-country stampede from a foundry in Colorado to the Smithsonian. A gift to the museum by Naoma Tate and the family of Hal Tate, the bronze bison will stop at several museums along the way before being permanently installed on a pair of plinths flanking the museum's entrance on the National Mall on March 18; they will be on view to the public beginning March 19. The arrival of the bronze bison to the National Mall marks a homecoming for the massive mammals. In the late 1880s, when the species was teetering on the edge of extinction, several bison were brought to live in a pen behind the [Smithsonian Institution Building](#), or Castle, as part of one of the country's earliest conservation efforts.

The arrival of the bronze bison sets the stage for "[Bison: Standing Strong](#)," a new exhibition exploring the enduring cultural and ecological legacy of American bison. The exhibition, which opens Thursday, May 7, will spotlight the complex tale of this remarkable species from ancient times to the present through fossils, mounted specimens, anthropological objects and images of bison-themed items from across the Smithsonian's vast collection.

"The incredible story of bison—from their ancient origins to their dramatic decline and remarkable comeback—is truly an American tale," said [Kirk Johnson](#), the Sant Director of the National Museum of Natural History. "It is fitting that the Smithsonian helped lead the effort to save the country's most magnificent mammals from extinction, and the Institution's work to better understand and conserve this species continues to this day."

Bison History

While bison only became the United States' official national mammal in 2016, these burly bovines have long been intertwined with the nation's history. George Washington once hunted bison in West Virginia, and Lewis and Clark encountered vast bison herds that "darkened the whole plains" during their famed expedition. The species' ongoing relationship with Native communities goes back much further. For millennia, various Tribal Nations appreciated bison for their spiritual significance and relied on them for food and clothing. The gargantuan grazers also maintained healthy prairie ecosystems and created habitats for other species.

Bison were nearly wiped out in the late 19th century when the transcontinental railroad brought settlers and sportsmen armed with high-powered rifles westward. During the 1870s, the bison population dwindled from millions to just a few hundred.

In 1886, Smithsonian taxidermist William Temple Hornaday experienced the aftermath of this collapse firsthand when he ventured to Montana to collect bison and encountered largely empty prairies. To draw attention to the species' plight, Hornaday mounted several bison specimens into a lifelike display that was exhibited at the Smithsonian for nearly 70 years and also brought back several bison to reside on the National Mall. The living display was a precursor to the National Zoo, which Hornaday helped establish.

“Bison Standing Strong” Exhibition

“Bison: Standing Strong” highlights the species' resurgence through a pioneering conservation effort, spearheaded in part by the Smithsonian. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a mounted bull plains bison, which can weigh as much as a small car and clear 6-foot fences in a single leap. The exhibition also features several fossils, including a 12,000-year-old bison vertebra pierced with a projectile point and the giant skull of *Bison latifrons*, an ancient species whose horns could stretch some 7 feet across, that is on loan from the Idaho Natural History Museum (courtesy of the Bureau of Reclamation). Other displays spotlight bison-related objects from Indigenous communities, including artwork, traditional tools and even a toy bison fashioned out of the animal's woolly fur. The museum's holdings are complemented by images of objects from across the Smithsonian, including currency, stamps and athletic gear, that attest to the bison's lasting impact on American history and culture.

The exhibition will also contain an immersive prairie soundscape, mural-sized visuals and videos. Visitors can touch replica bison bones and visualize how bison fit into the larger prairie ecosystem puzzle. The videos also allow guests to hear firsthand how Indigenous communities maintain their traditional connection with bison today.

Bronze Bison Road Trip

In the lead-up to the exhibition's opening, the trio of bronze bison statues will begin their journey March 11. On their way to the nation's capital, the giant bison, which were designed by natural history artist Gary Staab and modeled after specimens in Hornaday's original Smithsonian display, will stop at the [Denver Museum of Nature and Science](#) in Denver (March 11–12), the [University of Nebraska State Museum—Morrill Hall](#) in Lincoln, Nebraska (March 14), the [University of Iowa Museum of Natural History](#) in Iowa City, Iowa (March 15) and the [Field Museum](#) in Chicago (March 16–17). They will be installed along the museum's entrance on the evening of March 18 and on full public display beginning March 19.

“These larger-than-life bronze bison depict museum specimens that literally helped turn the tide of extinction,” Johnson said. “Bringing the bronze bison to museums across the

bison's native range emphasizes the historic role the Smithsonian has played in preserving America's natural history for future generations."

"Imagining Bison" Exhibition

Later in the spring, the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives will present the new exhibition "[Imagining Bison](#)" on the museum's ground floor. The display, which opens May 21, will feature historic books, art, archival documents and photographs that explore the Smithsonian's central role at the advent of bison conservation and science. By weaving together rare illustrations and Indigenous art with important publications, the exhibition highlights the Smithsonian's rich collections as a bridge between historical record and contemporary discovery, illustrating how the intersections of art and science have long been essential to visualizing and preserving the natural world.

To complement the new exhibitions and arrival of the bronze bison, the museum will host several bison-related educational events throughout the year that will include expert talks, film screenings and hands-on activities that introduce the incredible story of the national mammal to learners of all ages.

The museum's bison exhibitions and programming received support from "[Smithsonian's Our Shared Future: 250](#)," a Smithsonian-wide initiative commemorating the nation's 250th. Signature support for "Our Shared Future: 250" has been provided by Lilly Endowment Inc. Additional contributions have been made by Target.

The museum's salute to bison will continue: "Bison: Standing Strong" will be open through May 2029, and the bronze bison will continue to welcome museum visitors for generations to come.

About the National Museum of Natural History

The National Museum of Natural History is connecting people everywhere with Earth's unfolding story. It is one of the most visited natural history museums in the world. Opened in 1910, the museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world's most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. The museum is open daily, except Dec. 25, from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, visit the museum on its [website](#), [blog](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).

About the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

The Smithsonian Libraries and Archives is an international system of research libraries and an institutional archives. With 44,000 cubic feet of archival materials and a comprehensive collection of print and electronic materials covering art and design, history and science, the Libraries and Archives serves as an educational resource for the Smithsonian

Institution, the global research community and the public. Locations are in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, New York City and the Republic of Panama. Find out more at librariesarchives.si.edu.