

Interesting Facts

Big Medicine was born in 1933 and lived for 26 years, passing away in 1959. The average lifespan of a male bison is 15 years, so 26 is quite old!

Big Medicine was not an true albino, but leucistic. Unlike true albinism, which is the result of a complete lack of melanin, leucism is only a partial loss of pigmentation. While albinos are fully white with either red or blue eyes, leucistic animals can have either blue or dark colored eyes and often retain some dark coloring on their body, usually in patches. This was the case for Big Medicine, who had blue eyes and a dark brown topknot.

Big Medicine was the first white bison to be born in the Bison Range. He fathered one white offspring, a male calf born in 1937. A true albino, his son was born deaf and mostly blind. He was donated to the National Zoological Gardens in Washington, DC, where he lived for 12 years.

During his life, Big Medicine was said to be the most photographed bison in America. Not only did local tribal members come to see him regularly but he was seen by thousands of visitors from all over the world.

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Big Medicine: A Visitor Guide

Culture & History

For many, Big Medicine's birth was an auspicious sign for the Bison Range's bison herd but none so much as for the local tribes. After Big Medicine's birth was discovered by tribal member John A. McDonald, a Range Rider, the news spread throughout the Valley. Very quickly, CSKT members conducted a welcoming ceremony for the new calf, honoring him as a special gift from the Creator.

For many, Ipíq Q^weyq^way, the Séliš term for white buffalo, were a natural phenomenon akin to thunder and lightening. Ipíq Q^weyq^way were a reminder to the Séliš, Qlispe, and Ksanka people of their small place in the world and that they should always be respectful to animals for what they provide.

After his death, the then chairman of the CSKT Tribal Council, Walter McDonald, petitioned to have Big Medicine preserved and kept on the Flathead Reservation. However, the National Bison Range officials donated the hide to the Montana Historical Society, where he remains to this day. Currently, the CSKT Bison Range is attempting to bring Big Medicine back to the Bison Range and discussions are on-going.

Sore Thumb...

For most mammals, the chance of a leucistic or albino offspring is estimated to be one for every million births. For American Bison, this chance is even smaller at one in every ten million. As the genes for both genetic mutations is recessive, both parents must be carriers of the gene.

In addition to the low chance of having two parents with the right genetics, it's often difficult for albino or leucistic individuals to make it to adulthood. Being white can have a lot of drawbacks! The lack of melanin often causes blindness when the eyes do not develop correctly. Not only are they not able to spot danger, they're also a clear target for predators.

For species without a cover of fur or feathers, lighter skin may lead to higher risk of skin cancers. This is particularly a problem for basking animals, such as reptiles. White coloring can also be a huge disadvantage in species that rely on coloring for mate choice.

With so many obstacles to producing offspring, its easy to see why albino babies are so rare!

BIG MEDICINE



Ipíq Q^weyq^way

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