



North American Hunting Expedition 2009

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Denver Airport
10th October
Morning

At the entrance to the airport is a hand-written notice welcoming everyone to the airport, and telling us that the 8.30am flight has been cancelled.

I'm not surprised.

It has been snowing all night. In some places at the airport the snow is knee-deep. What you need here is a motorized sledge, not a plane. The local representatives of Great Lakes Airlines can't give us any definite information. The snowploughs are struggling away; the 11.30am plane might be able to take off.

Yesterday, Jeff thought this might happen. We even checked on Google Earth how to get to Chadron, the next stage on my journey. Jeff, a truly wonderful man, made me an offer that, if the planes were still snowbound, he would drive me to Nebraska, the neighboring state, in his jeep.

Provided that the highways are open by then; at the moment they are all closed.

But why do I have to get to Nebraska?

Because I want to hunt bison.

The hero of all stories about the wild west, the most American American animal. A species that has been saved from extinction several times, a real survivor: that is the American Bison (Bison bison). Americans, interestingly, also call it a buffalo, but no-one knows why. There are also many buffalo living in Asia and Africa (they can also be found in some Hungarian nature reserves), but in America you will look for them in vain. Whoever wants to see a real buffalo in the US, will have to go to a zoo. Like many other American species, the bison also originated in Asia and struggled over the Bering Strait about 200,000 years ago, to find its new home. The shortest distance between America and Asia is at the Bering Straits; there is only 53mi. between the two continents. The sea is no more than 98 - 160ft. deep and, according to certain theories, before the last ice age, you could walk over with dry feet. This must have been the route which, following the bison's ancestors, the first Native Americans took. The strait got its name from Vitus Bering, a Russian explorer of Danish origin, who sailed through it in 1728, but did not realise it, as he couldn't see the American continent because of the fog.

The species has a European cousin, the European Bison (Bison bonasus), and, according to the latest genetic research, the two are identical. The body of the bison looks slightly out of proportion, very much like the worked-out bulldog in Tom and Jerry cartoons, with a slim waist, wide, powerful shoulders, and a huge head.

The bison population used to be the largest of any grazing animal in the world.

At the start of the 19th century there must have been a stock of between 50 - 70 million animals on the prairies. In any single area of 25 x 50mi. there could be a population of 4m. animals. But after the arrival of the settlers, one of the greatest animal exterminations in history began.

Hunting of the species spiralled out of control, and the carts carrying their skins rolled across the prairies in endless lines. Their original habitat almost entirely covered what is now the US, and some theories say that they were even found in Eastern Canada and Alaska. Buffalo Bill, something of a hero in his time, and his associates, managed to reduce the numbers to 1000 by 1890, and it was only by taking the strictest steps that the species was saved from extinction. By his own reckoning, William Frederick Cody, to use his proper name, killed, between 1867-68, a period of 18 months, 4280 bison; but he didn't do it for fun. He was in charge of supplying meat for the workers on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, and many bison were victims of this program.

Although the species was eventually rescued, there will never again be the herds that were once seen roaming over the prairie. Today they live almost exclusively in national parks and private reserves in Canada and the USA.

After the walrus, it is the largest animal in North America. The males can reach a weight of 290lbs. and a height, to their shoulder, of 70ins. This gigantic animal, despite its awkward build, can run at up to 30mph. and is also an excellent swimmer.

It has two sub-species. One is the Plains Bison, to which scientists have given the absurd name of *Bison bison bison*. The larger, and darker, Wood Bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) lived in the distant western territories, as well as in Canada and Alaska. Some scientists mention two other sub-species, the Mountain Bison (*Bison bison haningtoni*) and the Eastern Bison (*Bison bison pennsylvanicus*). This last name refers to the place where the bison used to live. At present, the general belief is that the Yellowstone National Park and Wood Buffalo Park are inhabited by crossbreeds of the Mountain and Wood Bison.

Today there are approximately 100,000 bison on the continent. The stock of Plains Bison is stable and secure, and it can be hunted on US territory, but only under very strict conditions. The Wood Bison has not been so fortunate; in the US it has a CITES II rating, meaning it qualifies as an endangered sub-species. Interestingly, in Canada, the population of Wood Bison has risen dramatically, so they can now be hunted there, but, according to the USF&WS ruling, their trophies cannot be imported into the US.

But I've still got a long way to go before I see a bison.

Jeff and I accept the inevitable, and get in the car. We try to look on the bright side: at least we have time for a big breakfast. For that we vote to go to the nearest McDonalds, where we manage to kill an hour. At least it was something to do. We go back to the house - the silly dogs are all over us - check the latest weather forecast, and watch what's happening on television. The

roads in and out of town are still not open, and the announcer won't even make a guess as to when the highways will be open. 30mins. later we get a phone call saying the 11.30am flight is going to take off. We get back in the car immediately, and race off to the airport.

I must confess that I have become so weary of dealing with airline employees that I'm automatically starting to view anyone sitting at a check-in desk in a negative light. I suspect the two men behind the Great Lakes Airlines desk, doing nothing in particular it appears, probably worked at some point for United Airlines, and have brought their unhelpful, inefficient attitude with them to their new job. The passengers for the early and mid-morning flights have to be rounded up and put on the next flight. That is what they should be doing. But the effort seems to be too much for them. Things are moving so slowly that everybody's patience is being severely tested. One of the computers won't connect to the central office - they must have a very good systems operator - the other one does, but isn't much use; the young man doesn't know how to use the program. Sometimes he stares at the screen for up to 5mins. without pressing a key. I wonder what he's thinking, or expecting to happen. Why isn't he doing anything? Whether it's right or wrong, he ought to do something. Now he has given up completely, and is on the phone asking for help. "Shall I press F5 or F6? I've pressed it and nothing's happened." That's how the conversation goes.

We check in.

We are just about to board when they announce that the plane is not only full, it's overloaded, and the pilot is refusing to take off. And the reason for this is that there are some passengers who had the nerve to check in two, or even three heavy bags. They now want these passengers to come forward; they will have to leave one bag behind to come on the next flight. I lie low.

I pull my cap down over my eyes and stare fixedly at the pattern on the carpet.

Two sinners give themselves up. They watch sadly as their bags are removed. Then they suddenly brighten up when the bags are put back on again. The desk staff has made another mistake; the plane is not full, so everyone can take as many bags as they like...



Bed and Breakfast Bunkhouse (somewhere in the middle of the prairie)

Nebraska

USA

10th October

Evening

I changed planes in Denver - where I had to wait 4hrs. - and finally got to Chadron, Nebraska. This is the nearest airport to my bison hunt, and there is my guide Rick Dodson, waiting for me. Rick is a genuine cowboy; his broad-brimmed hat, cowboy boots and big belt buckle all prove it. I'm a bit tired, so we quickly buy a couple of hamburgers and eat them in the jeep. In my itinerary the accommodation for my last hunt is down as being in a motel. I wasn't too happy about it, as I don't like cheap hotels, but there was no other choice. To my great surprise the motel turns out to be the Bed and Breakfast Bunkhouse, which is a bungalow-like hunting lodge, right in the middle of the prairie. I'm on my own in one of the four-roomed huts. For three nights this will be perfect.

I go to bed at once; I'll have time to do my unpacking tomorrow.

Bed and Breakfast Bunkhouse

11th October

The Nebraska state flag is surprisingly similar to that of Montana. It also has a blue background, with the state seal in the center. This shows the Rocky Mountains and the Missouri River. In the middle is a blacksmith at work, denoting industry. The sheaves of wheat and a typical settler's cabin refer to agriculture, and the train and boat suggest the importance of transport. I imagine that historians from both states constantly argue over which flag borrowed what, from whom.



We have arranged to have breakfast at 7.00am, and I manage to turn up on time.

Clyde Leffler, the motel manager, is already busy in the huge communal kitchen. There are good smells wafting through the air. Sarah, the owner's ugly, gnome-like, little dog is running around under our feet. Supposedly, she is a pedigree, but I have my doubts about that. There's no breeder in the world who would deliberately create such an animal. She looks like the failed by-product of some experiment in genetic engineering that went wrong. Like a character out of the film "Little Monsters"; but her weird looks belie a very high intelligence. On a command from her master, the little rat-dog will perform some amazing tricks.

Die for your country! comes the order, and Sarah falls down with a thud. She even closes her eyes, playing dead very convincingly. She is made to repeat this trick many times, and I almost fall off my chair laughing.

The hunting ground is approximately 28mi. away.

I must warn in advance that this is going to be a canned hunt. In my defence, I deliberately left this hunt until the end of my trip, to be my final farewell to America. I don't place it among my real hunts, but we couldn't find anywhere where it was possible to hunt buffalo out in the wilds. Either I hunt it here, or nowhere. This one of the few arguments I can muster to justify canned hunting.

Even I am prepared to bend the rules when it comes to my own hunting. To mitigate my actions, let me say that this is the first - and, for the foreseeable future, the last - canned hunt I have ever done.

I don't know what to think about canned hunting. I have not managed to formulate a general philosophy, even for myself, which is valid for every example of this type of hunt. Generally, if I was asked about it, I would say that it is certainly unjustifiable, cannot be called true hunting, and that I would never do it. But, nevertheless, I'm here. I might even be prepared to participate in a beat for a canned hunt, one day. But I'd never shoot a canned stag, or any other type of deer if I had the option of shooting wild ones. Just as I wouldn't shoot any game that had been reared in captivity, even if it was now living wild. It just isn't done to shoot big game or cape buffalo under canned conditions. I think you should always avoid hunting in enclosed areas. If there is the slightest chance, then all stalking should take place in the wilds, even if it is much more expensive, there is no guarantee of success, and the hunt is more demanding physically.

We drive to the ranch.

Several trophies of almost record size have been bagged here, so my chances are good. The cold front that has hit Wyoming has reached this state as well; it has started snowing heavily, and there is fog too. We can't see beyond 600ft. There are no bulldozed roads here, and the jeep is shaking us about unpleasantly. We drive around in the terrible weather, but can't see any bison. It is very cold; 25F is not normal for this time of year, and the snow is early as well.

We can't see anything.

No tracks, no bison. No small ones, no big ones, no bulls, no cows. We can't see any.

The constant bone-shaking vibration is becoming exhausting; such a hunt, in such a car, over such terrain, is not for me. Sometimes we drive into pot-holes that are so large, I hit my head on the roof of the car.

I am holding my gun between my knees. Time is passing. The snow is getting deeper and deeper, making it harder and harder for the jeep to go on. The air is slowly cooling down, and our range of vision is decreasing.

The hours are spinning by; we are now in our fourth.

We are driving around randomly. We watch the storm. I'm starting to get nervous. I grab at every opportunity to stop. When we do, I get out into the open air for a look around.

I can't see anything but snow.

Will it really turn out that my last hunt, which should have been so easy, is going to be the one that causes all the problems?

Rick is optimistic; all that worries him is the snow. If it gets much deeper, then very soon our

vehicle will sink into it, and we won't be able to move. And the snow won't help us in our search for bison, either. Snow doesn't melt on their thick fur, but just covers it completely. That makes them almost invisible among the snow-covered bushes as, in this weather, they don't move very much. I don't like this situation. I thought - obviously wrongly - that for a hunt like this I'd just be sitting in the car, staring at the bulls. I would be able to pick my target carefully and fastidiously.

But, instead, we are driving around in a deserted, lifeless landscape.

We cannot see any living creatures at all.

There is just a lot of wind, snow and cold. I turn up the heating; I have been cold too often during the last few weeks.

Rick can't understand what's going on, either, but tries a few explanations. The weather and snow are the problem, but nothing can be done about them. I would have thought the bison should be here, even if the weather is bad. Finally, Rick stops the car and telephones the ranch owner. Can he kindly tell us where the bison are? He gives us some detailed directions, how to drive across the same places that we have driven over 15 times already. It's not much help.

There is nothing to do but keep going. They must be here somewhere.

From the top of a hill we make a scan with the binoculars.

THERE! - I hear the long-awaited exclamation.

I point my Swaro in the same direction and yes! There are two huge bodies, standing motionless in the cruel wind. They seem oblivious to the cold, the wind, the snow. Their big heads are hanging down, and they are grazing on the thin grass. What huge creatures! Larger than a musk ox, without question. They are far away, and we can't assess them properly from where we are. Because of the heavy snow, the spotting scope is not much help, as it only magnifies the snowflakes. We try to approach them by going in a large circle. The landscape is hilly here; there are lots of places for cover, enough to hide even a car. I have no doubt that we can creep up on them successfully. The wind is changing unexpectedly all the time; we must keep that in mind. We view the two bulls from different angles, but can't decide on which one. We can't really see any difference between them, even from 600ft. Both have beautiful horns, but which is better? Rick studies the horns, while I take a look at our surroundings. The nearby hills provide several good places for a shot. I work out which would be the best, and how I'll do it. We make another turn in the jeep and get within 300ft. of the bison. They see us, but are either unafraid, or don't know what we are.

I set up the camera quickly, and sit down in the snow.

Rick thinks the bull on the right looks a little better. I can't actually see why, but he's the expert. By the time we have come to a decision, all we can see are the bull's hindquarters. I don't really want

to try a Texas Heart Shot, so I wait. Meanwhile, I get out the laser: it is 351ft.

It slowly turns to the left, and I take a leisurely aim.

BANG!

It collapses with the first shot, but, to be sure, I repeat immediately, taking one more shot at its fallen body.

Both my shots are hits, we heard the sound of two impacts quite clearly.

I approach it holding my camera... but, suddenly, the enormous head rises ...

It is not the done thing to get too close. Rick won't let me take another shot. He explains that the bison is a very tough animal, and, even in the case of a very good hit, can still remain alive for a long time. But I'm not happy about it. Whether he minds, or not, I am going to put it out of its misery.

I put down my camera, and approach it from behind with my gun. It is just on the point of death.

I've shot a bison in Nebraska!

The last big game of my trip is lying here in front of me.



Here in Nebraska, exactly 2417mi. from where I bagged my Dall sheep, I have pulled the trigger of my Blaser for the last time. This happy moment is tinged with sadness, as my hunting in the New World is now over.

The first expedition of my life is slowly coming to an end.

Because of the snowstorm, which is getting worse, we keep the photo-session brief.

It feels really good getting back into the warmth of the 4-wheel drive. Rick drives to the rancher's house. We left the trailer in front of the ranch house, and need it to transport the huge carcass. We don't know how we will manage to pull the massive body out of the snow on to the trailer, so we ask John Deer, the ranch owner, to help us with his tractor. It is equipped with a huge bucket on the front, and will lift the bison as if it was a grasshopper.

I have carefully saved the exact position of the bagging on my Garmin Oregon 300-s GPS, a very useful device. I shot the bison on a quite distant part of the ranch, and our trail disappears under the snow in seconds. It would not be much fun wandering about looking for it for hours. The longer we take to get back to the bison, the more difficult it will be to find it, as the layer of snow is getting thicker by the minute. But the Garmin points us in the right direction, and leads us right back to where the animal is lying on its side. They tie a rope to the tractor's bucket and by attaching it to one of the hind legs, raise up the animal for Rick to start gutting it. I am watching all this from the car, as it has now got very cold. Then the tractor's engine gives a roar and, with the bucket, scoops the bull up into the air. In the ranch's courtyard we reverse the trailer under the bucket. The springs groan under the weight of the body.

The processing plant is not far away, about 30mins. by car. A complex system of pulleys carry the bull into the building. We don't wait for them to start their work, we go straight off to a Pizza Hut. We've only had a sandwich during the entire day, and the warm food feels good. There is no beer.

They are not allowed to sell alcohol on Sunday.



Bed and Breakfast Bunkhouse
12th October

After yesterday I'm having a rethink about the bullet impact and killing power of my gun. Rick watched me bag my bison. Many hunters come here with .375 H&H Magnums, as it is well known how tough bison bulls are. Rick has witnessed several occasions when the bull, despite having been well shot with a .375, merely stopped grazing, and didn't seem to notice it. The spectacular, almost instant, collapse that happened yesterday, is not seen very often. During his time in this job he's only ever seen it happen twice before. He asks me several times what type of bullet I am using, as he'd like to try it. He feels that, for bison, the .375 is not able to transform the huge bullet mass and diameter into effective killing power. That's the difference between ballistics in theory and in practice. He personally thinks that the .300 Winchester Magnum is better for this type of hunt and prey. This is backed up by my second musk ox bagging. That not-so-small animal was dashed to the ground from a distance of 696ft. using an SST.

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of an accurate shot. Yesterday, and at almost every bagging on this trip, I have managed to take fairly accurate shots. It must be the result of all my preparation. All those hours of practice were not wasted. Nobody is born a marksman, but anyone can learn how to shoot above the average. Provided he trains often enough, but not on live animals, with a target...

I'm just wondering if, for a brown bear hunt, it might be better to switch to a .375 caliber H&H Magnum. To change the barrel on my Blaser is no big deal, as they say over here. But it is just possible that, with that type of gun, my shots might not be so accurate. It has a bigger kick and its trajectory is not very flat. During coastal brown bear hunts you often have to take long range shots. I wouldn't like to lose any accuracy in my shooting just for a slightly bigger diameter or bullet mass. I must study this problem thoroughly. The best solution might be for me to get a .375 barrel and at the Nagytétény shooting range we will see what the two of us can do.

I spend the day on the ranch, getting ready to leave for home tomorrow. I am packing up my clothes and equipment, and sleeping a lot.

I am, indeed, very tired.

Over the last 2 1/2 months I have been on the road constantly.

Images of hotels, airports, camps, tents, and people all whirl around my brain. I have travelled by canoe, kayak, rowing boat, motor boat, yacht, airplanes of various sizes, motorized and dog sledges, bus, train, jeep, ATV, Polaris in Montana, helicopter and horse. I have walked, crawled, run, shot, and laughed a lot. I have met so many people, many of whom I can still call friends

today. And there is no denying that I have drunk quite a few cans of beer. I've been living out of a suitcase, with all my clothes in plastic bags. I was never in one place long enough to make it worth unpacking. Glamorous hotels were followed by lonely, rain-beaten tents and basic little huts. I hardly ever had time to have a good rest. I suffered from a constant lack of sleep, and the last time I was in Denver Airport I even fell asleep in a chair. I've had so many adventures that I can't begin to list them all. I have re-read my diary, looked at the photos and videos, and can't take it all in. The installation of the Széchenyi plaque, and my ill-fated sea-fishing episode... did they really happen on this trip? It's as if I was seeing images on the screen of events that took place many years ago. In my diary I find notes I made on certain days that completely surprise me. If I hadn't written them down, I would have forgotten them completely.

It has been the *adventure of a lifetime!*

In the evening Rick drives me to the nearby town of Gordon for some final shopping, and a farewell dinner. I have a hamburger and drink a beer.

This time tomorrow I shall be sitting on a plane heading for Frankfurt.

On Board Flight UA 8742
Frankfurt - Budapest
14th October
Early Afternoon

My diary entry for "yesterday" was written on the 12th October, and it is the 14th today. Most of the 13th got lost. Not from my diary, but time-wise. Because of the time differences, the day quickly disappeared as I constantly kept having to wind my watch forward.

I am sitting down to my final breakfast in the Bed and Breakfast Bunkhouse, at 9.00am on the 13th. I can't decide exactly how I'm feeling.

The expedition is over.

We are all talking in subdued voices, and even Sarah the dog has stopped running about. Even though my flight to Denver will leave Chadron in the early afternoon, we will still be leaving this last location of mine at 10.00am. I feel restless, I don't want to hang around. I'm already packed, ready for the journey, and I don't want to sit in my room for hours. I say my goodbyes to my fellow boarders at the motel and put my bags into Rick's car.

On the way we stop off at the processing plant to pick up my bull's head. Rick will take it to the

taxidermist in the afternoon.

We soon get to Chadron. I quickly buy a few essential presents, and unexpectedly find a coin shop. It's here that I manage to find the cheap coin for which I have been searching a long time.

We wander around the shops, but I no longer have the patience for shopping. We get to the airport too early: it is still closed. So we go back into town and have lunch in the same McDonalds where I bought the hamburgers when I first arrived.

With Rick's help, I check in my luggage and pay my last excess baggage charge. It is a great relief that I can actually send my bags from this small town airport right through to Budapest; I won't have to go through the torture of looking for them at any other airport on my journey. I say goodbye to Rick, the cowboy, and then commence my journey with a 1hr. delay.

I'm on my way home.

At Denver the Lufthansa plane is standing close to the Great Lakes Airlines gate; I don't have far to walk. After my dinner on board, I recline my seat and the next time I wake up we are over Europe. I look out of the window happily. It's only Germany, but I still feel I'm almost home. I don't really like Frankfurt Airport; it's so big that I have to walk long distances. And the airport security here come up with one last problem: they won't let me carry my NightForce binoculars in my hand baggage. I've been doing just that over half of America, and then I run into trouble here. They call a supervisor; what can be done? He doesn't know if this device is legal or not, either. They finally call up the airport police, and I start to wonder if they are going to arrest me. I'm surrounded by commandos wearing bullet-proof vests, but, in fact, there is no real problem, these military men have only been called in as experts. They establish that the device is legal as it does not have a laser target designator, so I can continue my journey.

On board the Budapest flight I get a pleasant surprise: I hear Hungarian, over the loudspeakers. For the first time in 81 days.

Because of the time differences, I have been keeping in touch with all my Hungarian friends via email, so suddenly hearing it now sounds rather strange.

I take out my netbook and start writing up my diary.

I have just reached this point when I have to stop. We are about to land so no electric devices are allowed to be used. The flight attendant has just given me my third warning to switch it off.

Budapest is beneath us.

I shall be 34 the day after tomorrow.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, to A.T. For everything.

And my heartfelt gratitude to all those who helped to organize my trip, and to prepare me for it. Without them the entire expedition would not have been the success that it was. I'd like to thank them here for everything they've done for me. It is probably impossible to mention everyone, but I'll attempt to list those who have assisted me:

My best friend, H. Fritz, who, a week before I left, alerted a large part of the US about my impending arrival.

Gábor Gázsó and Peti Somogyi, my two online comrades.

Ági Gifló, who, with incredible patience, taught me English. She can't have had an easy job with me...

Kelly Kutasi, my personal trainer, who, with great expertise and a firm hand, helped me reach the best physical condition I have ever been in in my life. Her trainings were quite merciless, but worth it: I climbed all those hills effortlessly.

Dr. Zsolt Kőhalmi and Imre Cseterki from SCI. They unselfishly shared their exceptional knowledge with me, and also activated their enviable network of connections to smooth my travels.

Ottó Simonyi, marksman and shooting instructor. He taught me how to hit a target over impossible distances. I could not have had a better teacher than him.

I would like to express my special thanks to all the employees and the General Manager, Attila Ort, of my place of work, Ombrello Média Kft, for enabling me to take this long trip, and for keeping everything going while I was away. I also wish to express further thanks to all our customers who, despite these difficult economic times, have maintained their trust in us, and, through their continuing commissions, significantly contributed to the finances that allowed me to make this trip.

And to all those unknown, friendly people I came across every day of my journey, who never failed to help me. The pilots, receptionists, drivers, packers and porters, guides, skimmers, organizers, shop assistants, customs and police officers, and all the others in their various walks of life. Without them, this whole adventure would not have been so complete.

And, finally, thanks to all those who encouraged me, who contributed to the success of my trip in so many different ways.