

Midwin offers live bison viewing via webcam

By Susan DeMar Lafferty Contact Reporter Daily Southtown - December 9, 2016



If you can't get out to Midwin National Tallgrass Prairie to see the bison herd, the beasts now can come to you and your computer screen via a 24-hour live stream.

A high-definition camera, installed 25 feet above the ground, covers areas where the bison have been known to graze. It is connected to the internet via wireless signal, and the entire system is solar-powered.

The webcam, which started streaming Friday, operates 24 hours a day. But the grazing pattern of the herd is unpredictable and there are no specific times identified as better than others for when the herd will be visible, Midwin's public affairs officer Veronica Hinke said in a news release.

The bison cam can be accessed at www.earthcam.com/usa/illinois/wilmington/midwin/?cam=bison.

An effort to raise funds for the webcam was launched two years ago by the National Forest Foundation — a year before the herd of 27 bison arrived at Midwin in the fall of 2015.

"It's pretty unique," Greg Peters, communications director for NFF said of the webcam. "The public is really interested in the bison."

Peters said the number of visitors to Midwin has doubled since the bison arrived.

Midwin staff and volunteers have accommodated the curious public by installing two new telescopes and four new benches near the bison-viewing areas, which can be accessed from the Iron Bridge Trailhead.

The two 20-power telescopes overlook the bison's grazing areas and are at different heights, making them wheelchair accessible. There is no charge to use the telescopes.

Also, as part of National Public Lands Day this past September, benches were installed along the trails, which are about a 30-minute walk southeast of the Iron Bridge Trailhead.

The trailhead is about 2.5 miles north of the Welcome Center, at 30239 Route 53, in Wilmington.

Visitors are encouraged to bring their own binoculars.

Midwin trails are open from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily and can accommodate bicycles and horses. Trail maps are available online at www.fs.usda.gov/main/midwin/maps-pubs.

Chicago Tribune

Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is a unit within the U.S. Forest Service where volunteers, partners and staff are working together to restore 18,500 acres of land that once contained a prairie in northeast Illinois.

The bison were introduced at Midewin as a 20-year experiment to restore the landscape to native tallgrass prairie. The size of the herd has increased with the birth of several babies last spring.

They are confined to 1,200 acres that has been divided into four subpastures where the animals will be rotated for grazing.

Since bison primarily eat grass, their grazing could allow other important native prairie flowers and plants to thrive, and create a more diverse habitat for wildlife.

Citizen scientists, volunteers, partners and staff are collecting data and monitoring any noticeable increases in native prairie wildlife found at Midewin, according to Hinke.

“We want to show people what the North American prairies might have looked like hundreds and thousands of years ago, and this herd of conservation bison is essential in our endeavor,” Midewin Prairie Supervisor Wade Spang said.

“With the live webcam, people all over the world can now see what is happening here, including how the grazing pattern of the bison could be helping to create a more diverse landscape for birds and other wildlife that are native to the prairies,” he said in the news release.

The bison have created a “lot of momentum” out at Midewin, Peters said, and he hopes to keep building on it. The NFF has obtained two \$1 million grants for more restoration work, one each from the Grand Victoria Foundation and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.

Peters said they have five years to match that \$2 million and will use it to restore the west side of Midewin over the next seven years.

That work, which could begin as early as next spring, includes removing old field tiles, and the ammunition bunkers from its days as the Joliet Arsenal, and regarding the wetlands, he said.

“The Midewin story is a unique and powerful example of public and private organizations and concerned individuals coming together to restore Illinois’ tallgrass prairie. We are proud to be working with the U.S. Forest Service and so many community-based partners to restore this special place. We hope that the bison cam will connect Americans to Midewin and their incredible public lands,” said NFF President Bill Possiel in the news release.

For information about Midewin outreach programs, tours and activities, see: www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stel-prdb5444192.pdf.