

HANDS-ON HUNTING IN -40°C

Harvesting a bison was the goal of a school hunting trip, but the experience went beyond that

Story by Rhiannon Russell
Photos by Peter Mather

The students had been on the land for three days when they found bison tracks in the snow. They knew they were getting close. The group, which included elementary- and high-school students, teachers, parents, and an Elder, pushed on, travelling further by snowmobile on the frozen Nordenskiöld River in hopes of finding the animals.

The next day, tracking continued. Ten sleds moved in a line along the trail until the group's two designated shooters—a parent and the executive director of the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board—went ahead to scout an area up a cut bank. The others waited in anticipation.

“All I just see is people jumping up and down and super excited,” says Kaidence Reynolds-Fraser, a Grade 8 student at the time of the hunt, in March 2020. “And at that point, we knew that we had been successful.”

The shooters harvested two bison. At the kill site, about half a kilometre ahead, the group participated in a respect ceremony, putting their hands on the bison, giving thanks, and honouring them with a moment of silence.

As the sky darkened, the adults began cutting up the animals and showing the youth how to do it. “Field harvesting a bison for sure was new to me,” says Alex Kiriak, who was also in Grade 8 at the time. “I got to pull out the guts—a lot heavier than you would expect.” The process took hours, and, once night fell, the temperature dropped to -40°C . By the end, everyone had blood on their hands. The group made it back to camp around midnight, happy and exhausted.

“After this high of trying so hard all week and putting so much work in, a bunch of us collapsed on the floor of the main lodge and laughed for a solid 15 minutes—like we were crying,” says teacher Alexandra Morrison. “I don't know what was so funny.” She says it was a beautiful moment, the culmination of all the effort they put in together with their feelings of elation and gratitude.

Morrison is one of three teachers at Porter Creek Secondary School, in Whitehorse, who organize the annual hunt. Five years ago, a teacher at Elijah Smith Elementary School approached Morrison with the idea of a mentorship program for students from both schools. A hunt had been running for years at Elijah Smith; how did she feel about having high-school students join and help the younger kids, while learning new wilderness and leadership skills? A hunter herself, Morrison was game. They did that for two years, then, more recently, the hunt has been organized by Porter Creek teachers—Morrison, along with Terry Milne and Brad Gustafson—with elementary students joining in.

Alexandra Morrison, a teacher at Porter Creek Secondary School, was the lead organizer of the student bison hunt.



Above: Sixteen students from Elijah Smith Elementary School and Porter Creek Secondary School participated in the hunt.

“IT’S ALWAYS SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST A BISON HUNT.”

Organizing the trip is a six-month-long logistical feat that involves coordinating snowmobiles and skimmers, food, student and group gear, and the attendees, including Environment Yukon’s hunter education and outreach officer, who taught the youth about ethical practices and field dressing.

Sixteen students participated in the hunt, which was held on the overlapping traditional territories of the Champagne and Aishihik, Little Salmon/Carmacks, and Kwanlin Dün First Nations, as well as the Ta’an Kwäch’an Council. The group stayed in cabins and wall tents at Braeburn Lake Summer Camp, north of Whitehorse, and set out every day on snowmobiles to search for bison.

While it was a hunt—and certainly the youth wanted to bring home a bison—it was also a much broader wilderness experience. Students learned how to set up camp, start a fire, analyze wildlife tracks, travel safely on ice, and properly layer their clothing for hours spent in cold weather. “For me, it’s always so much more than just a bison hunt,” says Gustafson, whose father worked as a Yukon conservation officer for nearly four decades and taught the high-school teacher much of what he knows about the outdoors. “There’s just non-stop

learning on these trips for the students, which is really cool. I think, too, it makes them a lot better equipped afterwards for the Yukon wilderness for any trips they want to do on their own.”

Ron Chambers, a Champagne and Aishihik First Nations Elder and former warden at Kluane National Park and Reserve, travelled with the group, teaching the youth about wildlife and First Nations history. With some of the First Nations students, he was able to share stories about their parents or grandparents.

“To me, the biggest thing of all is the respect they had for what they were doing,” Chambers says. He was impressed by how they pitched in and didn’t complain despite the long days and cold. (For experiential learning, the Yukon’s Department of Education sets temperature cutoffs of -20°C or -30°C , depending on the group’s mode of travel. The drop to -40°C on the night they harvested the bison wasn’t forecasted, but despite the cold, the animals had to be processed.)

Before he went on the trip, Chambers wasn’t sure how valuable the experience would be for students. “[You might think] it’s just a glorified bison hunt,” he says. “But it’s not. It was bigger than that. Even if they didn’t get a bison, you could see that it was still something worthwhile doing for those young people.” It’s an especially valuable experience for Yukon students, he adds, more so than it would be for youth from southern Canadian cities, because it teaches them about the northern lifestyle—one they’ve grown up surrounded by.



This page: Students learned skills they wouldn’t have in a classroom, such as how to set up camp, start a fire, and analyze wildlife tracks.

Students are chosen for the trip based on teacher references, with a focus on those who’d benefit from the leadership opportunity and experiential learning. While it’s not a high-school course, Porter Creek students who participate in the hunt twice receive credit for it. But they aren’t the only ones learning. The adults each bring their own knowledge and experience, providing an opportunity for everyone to absorb new skills from each other. During the field dressing, for instance, Morrison learned how to do a rib roll—cutting meat off the ribs in one piece. Some youth also jumped in to offer Morrison advice on loading her snowmobile, while a student with an interest in diesel mechanics stayed up late to help keep a parent’s truck running in the cold.

Learning on the land happens differently than it does in the classroom; the environment encourages kids to assume leadership roles. In the mornings, a Grade 11 student would rise before 7 a.m., of his own accord, to get a fire going in the wood stove and coffee brewing. One night, Milne’s snowmobile was acting up. He wiggled the wires and Reynolds-Fraser, who was riding with him, let out a cheer of encouragement. As luck would have it, the machine roared to life. “The cool thing about experiential learning is it just happens,” says Milne. “It’s learning how to adapt and be flexible and be creative because when you’re out on the land you have what you have. You don’t have a YouTube video you can watch to fix stuff. You can’t call a friend.”

Learning aside, there was also just silly fun. One day, four Grade 9 girls, kneeling in the skimmer, danced and sang as the snowmobile towed them along. The sled would stop, the group would look at some tracks, then the girls would climb back into the skimmer and start singing and bopping again. The trip saw some competitive card games, too. “I was the universal international Crazy 8 champion, for at least one day anyway,” Chambers says with a laugh. “Then somebody took my title away.”

For the students, the trip went beyond what they’d imagined. It was Kiriak’s first hunt and one of Reynolds-Fraser’s firsts. “We will cherish those memories for a very long



Wood Bison

Also known as American bison and buffalo.

- Males weigh about 950 kg and females about 600 kg.

- They can live up to 25 years.

- They prefer meadow habitats, boreal forest, and alpine plateaus, where they eat grasses, sedges, willow leaves, and twigs.

- Their main predators are wolves and bears.

- Bison were reintroduced to the Yukon in the ‘80s as part of a national program.

- The Aishihik herd is estimated to have more than 1,200 animals.

- Hunting is used to manage the herd’s size.

- During the 2019–20 season, 237 bison were harvested.

Source: Yukon.ca



time,” she says. Kiriak agrees. “Going on an open river to getting lost in the forest,” he says, as Reynolds-Fraser laughs. “Elbow deep in bison at minus 40,” she adds.

Typically, the students host a feast for their families and community members following a successful hunt. Last year, though, the COVID-19 pandemic hit shortly after they returned. The feast was postponed indefinitely, waiting for the day when everyone can gather again. **Y**