

# Buffalo Gal

A heavy heart is lightened by gratitude during a once-in-a-lifetime hunt. **By Ben Pierce**

The call came on New Year's Day. Christine Bailey, of Stevensville, her husband Randy, and their three children were driving to Deckard Flats near Jardine for a once-in-a-lifetime bison hunt. Over the phone, the Baileys learned that Christine's father, Thomas Craig, the man who'd taught her to shoot a rifle and field dress a deer on high-country outings near her childhood home in Flagstaff, Arizona, had just died of cardiac arrest.

Passing through Bozeman with their mules in tow and children Tanna, 9, Zachary, 7, and Brianna, 5, in the back seat, Christine and Randy weighed the situation. Thomas had suffered from Alzheimer's disease late in life, but he'd spoken with Christine about her upcoming bison hunt, and she knew he had been excited for her opportunity.

The Baileys decided there was little that could be done at that moment. And they knew something else: Thomas would have wanted them to hunt. "My father gave me the love of hunting," Christine said.

## ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY

Eight months earlier, on a whim, Christine had applied for a Montana bison license. While applying for moose and elk tags, she asked her husband about the bison hunt. Randy told her to go ahead and put in, but that she'd "never draw a tag." Of the more than 10,000 hunters who apply to hunt bison in Montana, only 80 or so get drawn for a license. When Christine's bison hunt packet arrived in the mail in late June, it took a while to register what happened. She read through

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the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks pamphlet three times before realizing she'd drawn a tag. "I actually took a picture of the pamphlet and the letter and put it on Facebook to share with my friends," Christine said. "We go to a church that has a lot of hunters, so there was a lot of excitement and disbelief."

To prepare for the hunt, Christine and Randy pored over maps, watched YouTube

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videos, and studied the extensive bison hunt information provided by FWP. The couple then contacted the department's Gardiner-area game warden, Chris Kerin, to learn about the area where they'd be hunting and what to expect. Despite its name, Deckard Flats is anything but flat, Kerin told them. The area lies just north of Yellowstone National Park and is defined by rolling hills and ravines that extend from the west flank of Buffalo Mountain.

Experienced hunters comfortable in the

backcountry, the Baileys wanted to hunt with their children, stay far from roads, and ride in on their mules. "Because Deckard Flats is a mile or two away from a road, it's a big task to pack out a bison," Kerin says. "It took a lot of thoughtfulness to pull it off the way the Baileys did. Their hunt on Deckard Flats is what I wish every bison hunter could do. They made it an event for the whole family."

## DAY OF THE HUNT

The Baileys awoke in camp on Saturday to bright sunshine. The forecast called for temperatures below freezing and blue skies, good conditions for hunting. Excitement tempered by heavy hearts over their recent loss, Christine and Randy saddled the mules and dressed the kids for a day out in the cold.

The family rode onto Deckard Flats around 9 a.m. Deer dotted the landscape, but the bison the Baileys expected to find were nowhere to be seen. Christine said a prayer. "I said to myself, 'Dad, I know you're up there. Give me something,'" she says.

At that moment the Baileys spotted a group of six bull bison moving across the flat. The family rode to a rock outcropping, where they glassed the bulls for 45 minutes. Christine and Randy picked out a big male that appeared to be the oldest of the bunch. "It was an older bull, past his prime, no longer breeding," Christine says.

Christine and Randy rode from the outcropping to get closer to the bison herd. At around 11 a.m., Christine was off her mule, prone in the snow, with the bull bison's kill zone in her scope. She squeezed the trigger. The bison jumped and then collapsed in a

patch of snow as the rest of the herd slowly drifted away.

## LASTING MEMORIES

Christine tagged the bison, called Kerin to report her success, then returned to the outcropping to fetch the kids, who'd watched the entire hunt. The family rode out on their mules to begin the long process of field dress-

ing and packing out the bull, but not before taking a few photographs to share with friends and other family members.

The couple and their kids worked together to remove the bison's cape to help the meat cool down, and then spent the rest of the afternoon removing the animal's massive head. By then it was dark, very cold, and time to head to camp.



**MULE MOBILITY** Christine Bailey, her husband, and their three children looked for bison near Gardiner last season in freezing temperatures. They rode the family's mules (left) onto Deckard Flats and searched for a bull. By late morning they had found an old one, past its prime, and Christine's shot was true, dropping the large animal in the snow (below). After she called the local game warden to report the harvest, the family got to work caping then butchering the bison. Making several trips, they ferried 600 pounds of meat back to their truck and then headed home to Stevensville.

The next morning, the Baileys faced even more work. They returned to the bison and finished field dressing the bull. They hauled roughly 600 pounds of meat, about twice what they were used to harvesting from a bull elk. "Growing up with my dad and the hunting ethic he instilled in me, we use everything we kill. My husband and I are instilling that in our kids." Randy spent the next three weeks butchering and processing the meat into steaks, sausages, ground meat, and jerky.

"For being an old bull, I was surprised how tender the meat is," Christine says. "It's very good."

Christine says she's had a lot of great deer and elk hunts over the years, but nothing can compare to the day she and her family rode mules onto Deckard Flats and hunted a bison, just as mountain men and American Indians had done 150 years before.

"I will remember my dad watching over us," she says. "Being able to share that experience with my husband and my kids is something I will always remember." 🐃



RANDY BAILEY