

Buddy Bison Visits the Great Smoky Mountains

by

Rob Cohen

Rancher Roy was driving Buddy Bison to visit the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“You’ll love this place,” said Roy. “It’s the most visited park in the country.”

I wonder if I’ll see any bison like me, Buddy Bison thought.

As they neared the park, Buddy Bison saw long, high ridges covered with trees. Narrow roads twisted and turned between the mountains.

I don't see any open fields for grazing, Buddy Bison wondered. If there are other bison here, they must be hiding in the trees!

Rancher Roy turned down a narrow road. “This is Cades Cove,” he said. “You’ll see lots of old log buildings here, just like it was over 200 years ago!”

“And keep your eyes open for wildlife. The park has more than sixty types of mammals and over 200 kinds of birds,” Roy added.

Then surely I’ll find some bison, Buddy Bison thought.

A moment later, a flash of brown darted through the trees. A young bison, perhaps?

No. Stopping at the edge of the road was white tailed deer. She looked at Buddy Bison and winked, then sprinted across the road to the safety of the forest.

Roy drove on to the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail which followed bubbling streams and gentle waterfalls.

“After a heavy rain, this stream *roars* with gushing water,” Roy explained.

But no bison would roar through these thick forests, Buddy Bison thought.

A pair of wild turkeys wobbled down the edge of the road.

“Pee-yeww!” Rancher Roy wailed. “Do you know what that smell is, Buddy Bison?”

It sure wasn't me! Buddy Bison wanted to say.

“That’s a skunk,” said Roy.

Buddy Bison caught sight of a small black and white critter scurrying behind the bushes. He was glad the skunk was running *away* from them.

They returned to the main park road and began a long climb up the mountain. Buddy Bison noticed that as they climbed, the air turned cooler. He also noticed the leaves on the trees become more and more colorful.

“Early Autumn is such a beautiful time to visit the Smokies,” Roy said. “It’s colder at the tops of the mountains, so the leaves change here before the trees in the valley.”

The bison was amazed by the colors—so many bright reds and yellows. He grew up on a ranch where the land was flat and offered few trees. The Smoky Mountains opened up a new and beautiful world for him. He wanted to share his excitement with another bison.

Maybe there are bison at the tippy top of the mountain.

“Now I’ll take you to Clingman’s Dome, the highest point in the park,” Roy said as he turned onto another climbing road.

They stopped at a parking area. Roy took Buddy Bison out to walk to the observation tower. A wide spiral ramp led up to the top to the concrete structure that sat on the border between Tennessee and North Carolina. Buddy Bison huffed and puffed as Roy led him to the top of the ramp.

The view was spellbinding. Buddy Bison gazed across row after row of mountain ridges.

Like waves on the ocean! he thought. *How can there be so many trees?*

“Look in the valley over there,” Roy pointed.

Buddy Bison saw what looked like steam or smoke rising through the deep gaps between the hills.

“That’s fog forming. On many days it fills all the valleys. That’s how the Smokies got its name—from the smoke-like fog and mist.”

Roy walked with his friend back down the ramp and continued to explore a mountain top trail.

As they came to a small clearing, Roy stopped abruptly. “Shhh, what’s that?”

Buddy Bison looked across the clearing and saw something large moving among the bushes. *Another bison?*

But it was only a black bear crawling out of the bushes and into the clearing. The bear sniffed around, then stood up and turned to look right at Buddy Bison! The bison snorted softly at the bear. The bear bobbed her head in response.

Two small cubs scampered out of the bushes to join their mother. The bears watched Buddy Bison as he watched the bears. Then the mother bear nodded again, turned toward her cubs and led them back into the bushes.

“Very exciting,” said Roy. “You got to see a black bear!”

Buddy Bison was thrilled to see a large, wild animal, even if it wasn't another bison. *Maybe on the next trip.*

They drove back to the visitor's center where the park ranger greeted Buddy Bison and Roy.

The ranger said, "You know, we don't have any wild bison here in Great Smoky National Park. You may be the first one to visit us!"

Buddy Bison was pleased.

Roy told the ranger all that Buddy Bison had learned from his visit to Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

“I’m presenting you with our Junior Ranger Badge,” the Ranger said. “Anyone who shows me what they learned about this park can earn this badge. Wear it with honor.” He hung the badge around Buddy Bison’s neck.

“Be sure to tell everyone back home to come visit us.”

I will, I will, Buddy Bison thought, smiling proudly as the Ranger snapped pictures.

About Buddy Bison® and National Park Trust

Buddy Bison is the mascot of National Park Trust (NPT), the nation's only organization dedicated to the completion and full appreciation of the American system of national and state parks through the identification of key land acquisition needs. In addition, NPT's Buddy Bison School Program is designed to fulfill our vision that everyone will have an American park experience, especially those from underserved communities. For more information visit: www.ParkTrust.org.

About the Author

Rob Cohen of Potomac, Maryland is the author of several original children's musicals which have been performed by elementary school students around the country. He has recently turned his creative efforts to writing picture books which capture the same spirit of youthful discovery, humor and imagination of his plays.