



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps

Buffalo Jumps

During most of the year, Niisitapi hunted buffalo by looking for small, isolated groups and shooting one or two individuals. Sometimes, in the late summer, a large number of buffalo might be gathered and driven over a pisskan, or buffalo jump.



Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump
Photograph Courtesy of Glenbow Museum

Any steep cliff could be a pisskan. However, because buffalo have a good sense of smell, and the prevailing wind is from the west, most buffalo jumps faced east so the buffalo could not smell the people camped at the foot of the jump. It was also important to find a place with plenty of fuel and water.

The hunt began with a ceremony to thank the buffalo for sacrificing their lives and to ask for the safety of the men who were taking part in the hunt. After the ceremony, young men were sent out to find the buffalo and lure them toward the cliff.



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps

Once they spotted the buffalo, each man covered himself with a hide. Some wore a wolf hide while others wore a buffalo calf hide. The buffalo became wary if they saw the wolf hide. If they saw the bison calf, they became concerned over the stray youngster and moved toward it. Sometimes an animal challenged the runners; the men had to be very speedy to avoid getting trampled or gored.



Women's Jump, Photograph Courtesy of Glenbow Museum

Low piles of rocks were set in a V-shape from the edge of the pisskan, toward the prairie. Some of these drive lanes were hundreds of years old, indicating where the ancestors had hunted buffalo.



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps

The men carefully observed how the animals were acting and tried not to panic them before they reached the drive lanes. Sometimes this meant covering a distance of 20 or 30 kilometres. Gradually, the men began showing themselves more fully, eventually stampeding the herd. When the animals began to gallop, the men ran alongside to make sure the animals did not veer away.

Other men panicked the bison as they entered into the drive lanes by standing behind the rocks and waving hides. Soft hides tied to sticks were stuck into these cairns, creating a flag that blew in the wind.

The stampeding animals were unable to stop and tumbled over the cliff. Many died as they hit the ground; others were shot with our arrows and spears.



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps



The buffalo's heavy hide was cut from the carcass. The Blackfoot were careful not to make the hide too thin or to slice holes through them. If we did, the hides would rip when we spread them out and scraped away the hair and fat. Preparing hides was very time consuming. The Blackfoot usually didn't have time to work at this during a pisskan (buffalo jump). Glenbow Archives NA-5425-137



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps



Rattles were made from buffalo bulls' scrotums. Collection of Glenbow Museum



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Buffalo tails were used to swat flies. Some of men used the tails in the sweatlodge to sprinkle water on the hot rocks. Collection of Glenbow Museum



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The buffalo's stomach and bladder were water-tight and made good storage containers.
Collection of Glenbow Museum



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps



Parfleche bags were made from buffalo hide. These containers were used to store food and clothing.
Collection of Glenbow Museum



Pisskan Instructional Unit - Buffalo Jumps



Buffalo meat was cut into thin strips and hung on wooden frames. The sun quickly dried the meat. Glenbow Archives NA-879-5