



## In Practice

a publication of Holistic Management International

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### HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT In Practice

(ISSN: 1098-8157) is published six times a year by:  
Holistic Management International  
5941 Jefferson St. NE, Suite B  
Albuquerque, NM 87109  
505/842-5252, fax: 505/843-7900;  
email: hmi@holisticmanagement.org;  
website: www.holisticmanagement.org

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## North Bridger Bison— Montana Raised, Field Harvested, Grassfed Bison

BY ANN ADAMS

**M**att Skoglund worked for the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) for almost 10 years before starting North Bridger Bison. His love of the outdoors and passion for conservation were the catalyst for his work with NRDC, and in his last few years at NRDC he was the director of their Northern Rockies office



Matt and Sarah Skoglund with their children, Greta and Otto.

in Bozeman, Montana. But by 2016, he had begun doing some soul-searching on his future, looking for a career that would allow him to start something on his own, be an entrepreneur, and play an active role in conservation and managing lands for the benefit of the plants, soils, and animals.

By the fall of 2017, after reading Dan O'Brien's *Buffalo for the Broken Heart*, Matt was clear he wanted to give bison ranching a chance—with a focus on field-harvesting the bison on his ranch. With that clarity Matt began his research about bison and consultants who could help him overcome the hurdle of having

no ranching background. It was during that research Matt learned about HMI Certified Educator Roland Kroos. Matt contacted Roland and they met for lunch in Bozeman in January 2018.

"I explained to Roland our situation and our background, and that we were serious," says Matt. "I had never heard of Holistic Management before and I had found Roland using 'bison consulting' in my Google search. When we met, I already knew I needed more education. And at lunch he explained the high level Holistic Management fundamentals. I was working for an environmental group, so reading and hearing about Holistic Management was speaking my language.

"Roland said if I was serious then I should attend his Holistic Management class on a bison ranch. So I went to Roland's March 2018 Holistic Management workshop at the Northstar Bison in Wisconsin and I absolutely loved it—learning about the various pieces of Holistic Management and how to run a holistically-managed ranch. I love these concepts, know how important they are, and find them endlessly fascinating. I could talk grazing, grass, and soil health all day.

"One of the biggest aha moments I had during that course—that I still use and return to often—is the big picture goal setting. We constantly return to the questions of 'why are we doing this,' 'what are our long term goals,' and 'what are our values?' That focus has been really helpful. Now that we are doing it: managing bison, debt, and the business, obviously there is stress so the goal helps us stop and look back to see if we are aligning with our values and goals.

"While I always had a deep love of nature, I had no background in ranching. Just learning about grass, roots, soil, water, and bare ground—the real fundamentals of the science

### FEATURE STORIES

North Bridger Bison— Montana Raised, Field Harvested, Grassfed Bison ANN ADAMS	..... 2
Integrating Permaculture and Related Practices with Holistic Management SUSAN COBINEAU	..... 4
Case Study— The Hibbard Ranch	..... 7

### LAND & LIVESTOCK

Wedge Tent Ranch— Ranching with Nature HEATHER SMITH THOMAS	..... 8
Thousand Hills Ranch— Flexibility is Key to Surviving in Ranching HEATHER SMITH THOMAS	..... 11

### NEWS & NETWORK

Program Roundup	..... 16
From the Board Chair	..... 18
Grapevine	..... 19
Certified Educators	..... 21
Marketplace	..... 22
Development Corner	..... 24

behind how all of these work together—the simplicity of it struck a chord with me, and it has guided me ever since.”

### Making the Dream Real

While the pieces were slowly falling into place, this move was going to be a big leap of faith for Matt and his wife, Sarah, and their two young children, Greta and Otto. “When I came home from the workshop, Sarah and I talked about it a lot. We ultimately decided we wanted to go for it and that it was time to try and find some land,” says Matt. He began work on a business plan and did more research, looking for reasonably priced land, which he knew would be difficult. But by May 2018 they had zeroed in on a great piece of land at a great price near Wilsall in the Shields Valley of Montana north of Bozeman.

Matt asked Roland to walk the land with him before they made an offer. Roland confirmed that the land was solid. There were some signs of overgrazing, but all the pieces were there: the water, grasses, soil, and shrubs. “He referred back to Holistic Management and his workshop and talked about how through our management we’d improve it over time,” says Matt. “When we looked at the land, Roland was pointing out different species of grass. He pointed out areas that had really good ground cover and areas where there was a lot of bare ground and pedestaling (erosion). He showed me the old



*It will take about 24–36 months to get North Bridger Bison’s animals to finishing weight on pasture. They need to feed hay in the winter right now, but their long-term goal is to get to a year-round grazing program.*

plants that had not been grazed. He joked that earthworms are not great high jumpers. We needed bison to create the litter and ground cover from what wasn’t grazed. He helped me develop my eye for looking at the land.

“We got the land under contract shortly thereafter with a September closing date. I worked with Roland over the summer on business planning and herd planning. It was tough to get financing, and Roland was really

helpful to work through those projections. We started fencing right after closing, the bison arrived in January 2019, and we officially opened for business in May 2019.” North Bridger Bison was born.

“To get financing I had to put a full business plan together,” says Matt. “It was my first time doing that. My strength was writing the narrative, telling our story, and articulating our goals; those are skills of mine. But running the numbers was my weakness. I needed to be able to determine herd growth and economic return. We were denied financing from the first bank we worked with, but, ultimately, with Roland’s help, we were able to secure financing from a different bank. Working with Roland was extremely helpful in putting together excel spreadsheets on cash flow projections and herd growth.

“Roland has so much experience working with all different kinds of ranches so he was always able to offer good advice and share helpful anecdotes during our meetings. He helped talk me through how to meet our objectives of starting a ranch and building our own branded meat program. He has become a good friend and an invaluable and trusted resource to me as a new rancher. Same with Holistic Management.

“After we closed on the land, the bank said they were not going to give us an operating loan, as they wanted to see that we knew what we were doing from both a ranching and business perspective.

“Fortunately, I had met someone along the way who was interested in being an absentee investor and getting into the bison industry. We were able to put a deal together where we both bought bison, he gave us a loan, and we entered into a custom grazing lease. Again, Roland was

helpful in getting this unique deal across the finish line. The end result is that we’re getting paid to custom graze his animals along with ours in one herd that I’m in charge of. With bred animals we get a certain percentage of the calf crop. With the non-bred animals we get paid a monthly grazing fee. It’s a win-win deal for both of us, and we’ve developed a great working relationship and friendship along the way.”

### Selling The Story

While it’s been a steep learning curve for Matt and Sarah, they’ve been getting great market response to the quality of their bison meat and all of the work that goes into it, particularly the field harvesting. “Harvesting our bison in the field on the ranch is super important to us,” says Matt. “There’s no stress for the bison and no stress in the meat.” After Matt



*Matt Skoglund enjoys the challenges and rewards of ranching as well as the opportunity to directly improve land health and address environmental issues by improving ecosystem function on the almost 1,100 acres they manage.*

harvests an animal, he then field dresses it in another pasture. Then he drives the carcass to a local meat processor, where the meat is then dry-aged for ten days.

“When we deliver or ship a quarter, we include a sprig of sagebrush from the ranch and a tuft of hair from the animal they’ll be eating. Connecting folks to where their food comes from is another big part of our mission,” says Matt. “We are currently only selling quarters direct to customers. But by the end of this winter we are hoping to be able to field-harvest under state inspection with a mobile slaughter trailer, which will allow us to sell individual cuts and packages to restaurants, caterers, etc.”

Matt says that animal health has been good as they focus on their grazing and offer free choice minerals and salt. The hanging weight of their carcasses averages 500–600 pounds. The bison usually calve in mid-April to late May.

“Our current graze periods are about a week to a month, depending on the size of the paddock,” says Matt. “We’ve started from scratch, and we plan to build multiple more paddocks next summer. We had a very wet spring and summer so there was lots of growth this year. We’ve been working to provide long recovery periods, and we’ve mostly been able to do that because we worked on our fencing right from the start. We got half of the property fenced in the fall of 2018. We also got a 10-year grazing lease on a half-section between our two chunks

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

## North Bridger Bison

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

of our property.

"With Roland's help we developed our pasture maps and put together a master fencing plan. When we first got the property, there were only three or four paddocks. Now we are up to 15 paddocks. We have 310 acres leased, and including our property we have access to almost 1,100 acres. Currently we are running about 45 calves, 75 cows, and four bulls.

"To get up and running we bought some



*In addition to their own animals, the Skoglunds are also custom grazing some bison for another owner. All the bison are run as one herd.*

open cows that we've been harvesting, and we even got some surprise calves. We expect it to take us 24–36 months to get the animals to finishing weight on pasture. We are also working with NRCS to try to get some cost-share funding for additional cross fencing because we want to get above 20 paddocks."

While Matt plans to grow the herd over time, they have decided to not increase the herd size by too much too soon. Matt and Roland did a pasture walk in August 2019 and decided they should be investing in the soil and the grasses right now, with dividends in carrying capacity to come later. The Skoglunds also have an Airbnb rental on the ranch, which provides them with helpful supplemental income. With Sarah's interior design background, they did a small renovation of the old ranch house last spring, and the end result is spectacular, as evidenced by the glowing reviews on their Airbnb page.

Matt is quick to credit Roland and make clear that his support was critical for starting their bison ranch and meat business. "None of this would have happened without Roland," says Matt. "This was a huge leap to leave a good job with great benefits and salary. There is no way I would have taken this leap without meeting Roland, attending his workshop, and getting his consulting advice. But we are sure glad we took the leap. I truly love what I do. I love the work,



*Matt was attracted to Holistic Management because of the focus on the triple bottom line. The Skoglunds are interested in not only raising high quality bison, but also improving the land and resources they manage, including improving wildlife habitat.*

and we really believe in what we're building here with North Bridger Bison. We're building something special, and we're in it for the long haul. There is plenty of stress, of course, and we still need to raise some more money, but at the end of the day we are excited about the really positive customer feedback we've been getting—and we just believe really strongly in what we are working to build with our ranch and business."