

Deadlands 1876

BUFFALO HUNTING RULES

Introduction

For the Plains Indian, the buffalo is at the center of life on the prairie, the migrations of the herd being the principle factor in the Indian's nomadic existence. A buffalo hunt is a tremendous experience that involves the whole tribe, from the moment the scouts locate a herd to the flensing of the carcasses. But before we get into the game mechanics of the hunt, let's examine the star of the show:

Buffalo Bull

Agility d8, Smarts d2, Spirit d6, Strength d10, Vigor d10, Parry 7, Toughness 7. Skills: Fighting d10, Intimidation d10, Notice d4. Attack: Ram 1d6+1d10 STR. Special Abilities: Trample (A successful Ram attack on a Shaken or immobile opponent adds 4d6 DAM)

The Plains bison (*Bison bison*) is a relatively peaceful ungulate related to oxen and cattle. An herbivore, the daily life of a buffalo consists of chewing on prairie grass and sedge, digesting and sleeping, then more chewing, followed by more sleeping. When aggravated, however, the male buffalo transforms into a 2000-pound behemoth armed with a set of curving horns used to flip over his opponents, which may then be cheerfully trampled under his thundering hooves.

Once numbering in the millions, the mechanized expansion of whites into the West has narrowed the herds considerably, and by 1876 they've become a rare sight on the great American Plains. So, with that tragic fate in mind, let's discuss how player characters can partake in the near-extinction of this marvelous beast!

Hunting Methods

Indian hunters have developed numerous techniques for hunting buffalo, most of which involve splintering off smaller groups from larger herds containing thousands of animals. When possible, a tribe may deliberately channel buffalo into a corral or "pound," trap them in a killing zone, or even force them to stampede over a cliff via a "buffalo jump!" When such methods are not feasible, hunters have been known to ride for days at the fringes of the herd, slowly cleaving off and isolating smaller groups; others attempt trickery and deception, perhaps dressing up and mimicking the sounds of lost calves in order to lure curious animals away from the herd. Once the Indians are confident they can manage the size of the herd, they move in for the kill.

The Hunt

There are two principle methods of killing buffalo, generally called "approaching" and "running."

Approaching

This method is especially favored by white hunters and smaller groups of Indians, who quietly approach a herd and begin picking off individual animals from a distance. If this is done correctly—by first taking out the “lead” bulls, pacing one’s shots, and making clean kills through the heart or “lights”—the herd can be prevented from spooking, and the confused beasts wander around in stupefaction as their numbers are whittled away by steady gunfire. This is called making a “stand,” and hunters like Kit Carson and William Cody have claimed over a hundred kills in the course of a single day’s shooting.

Running

Of course, the more exciting way to hunt buffalo is to engage in a “running” hunt, galloping madly into the midst of the targeted herd and letting loose with bullets and arrows! Needless to say, the sense of exhilaration is only matched by the danger, and death is not an uncommon outcome to a warrior who is flung from his pony and trampled by the herd. In order to capitalize on the excitement of a buffalo hunt, the Marshal is invited to use this system of rules, which treats the hunt as a mini-game that rewards hunters for the number of buffalo they’ve killed.

Game Mechanics

Buffalo hunting is not as simple matter of riding alongside a bull and shooting it! The warrior must control his pony using only his legs, fire and reload at a full gallop, and avoid being knocked from his mount at all cost. For the sake of simplified gameplay, a buffalo hunt affords a warrior an opportunity to make at least three kills, which may be done using firearms, bows and arrows, or lances. Each of these kills is accomplished during a separate “phase” of the hunt, with each phase divided into “rounds” based on the hunter’s Riding skill. Basically, each phase the hunter makes a Riding roll, the results of which award him a certain number of Action rounds in which to kill buffalo. No Action cards are required, as the buffalo do not counter-attack—unless, of course, a rider is dismounted!

Reloading

Hunters using guns may need to reload at a full gallop. Doing so requires a Shooting roll vs. TN-6. (The Born on Horseback Edge reduces this to TN-4.) A critical failure results in a dropped weapon; a failure deducts one Action round from the following phase; while a success results in a smartly reloaded firearm. Some fascinating notes on the difficulty of using muzzle-loading firearms are found in *The Oregon Trail*, by Francis Parkman:

The chief difficulty in running buffalo, as it seems to me, is that of loading the gun or pistol at full gallop. Many hunters for convenience’s sake carry three or four bullets in the mouth; the powder is poured down the muzzle of the piece, the bullet dropped in after it, the stock struck hard upon the pommel of the saddle, and the work is done. The danger of this method is obvious. Should the blow on the pommel fail to send the bullet home, or should the latter, in the act of aiming, start from its place and roll toward the muzzle, the gun would probably burst in discharging. Many a shattered hand and worse casualties besides have been the result of such an accident. To obviate it, some hunters make use of a ramrod, usually hung by a string from the neck, but this materially increases the difficulty of loading. The bows and arrows which the Indians use in running buffalo have many advantages over fire arms, and even white men occasionally employ them.

Of course, by 1876 even Indians had begun to use repeating rifles, but a Winchester still requires a steady hand to reload while galloping on horseback!

Riding

The Riding skill is just as important as Shooting or Archery, and failing a Riding roll during the hunt may result in severe injury. The following “Riding Mishap Table” helps decide the fate of botched Riding rolls, as described in the system outline below.

Riding Mishap Table

01–40	The pony is injured, and all subsequent Riding rolls are made at a –2 penalty during the hunt.
41–65	The rider is flung from the pony for 2d6 DAM. He may attempt to remount at the end of the phase by making a Riding roll vs. TN-6.
66–80	The pony is lamed, and the rider is flung to the ground for 2d6 DAM.
81–90	A bull has run into the pony and killed it! The rider falls for 2d6 DAM, and must fight an enraged bull.
91–98	The pony stumbles over a dead buffalo and the rider is flung into the herd. He is trampled for 6d6 DAM, and must now face an enraged bull.
98–00	The pony stumbles over a dead buffalo and the rider is flung into the herd. He is trampled for 6d6 DAM, and must now face <i>two</i> enraged bulls!

A Buffalo Hunt In Three Phases

Phase 2: The First Kill

This initial phase represents the beginning of the hunt, when the herd has yet to stampede and no buffalo have been killed.

Phase 1 Riding Roll

The hunter must make a standard Riding roll to control his mount. A critical failure results in the rider being forced to roll on the “Riding Mishap” table. A failed roll means the rider has difficulty handling his pony, and no buffalo may be hunted during this first phase. A success permits one Action round, with each raise on the Riding roll adding an additional Action round to the phase. A critical success automatically awards four Action rounds.

Attack Rolls

The hunter may make one attack roll for each Action round he’s earned through his Riding roll. The attack is made vs. TN-4, with the usual –2 penalty applied for shooting from horseback. Given the buffalo’s Toughness, 7 DAM are required to bring the beast down. If the rider has any action rounds remaining after his first kill, he may attack more buffalo at an additional –2 penalty on subsequent attack rolls. (Along with the standard horseback penalty, that’s a –4 penalty, making the effective Target Number 8.)

Phase 2: The Heat of the Hunt

This phase represents the peak of the hunt, which means the herd is at full stampede and the terrain may be fraught with dead carcasses.

Phase 2 Riding Roll

The hunter must now make a Riding roll vs. TN-6 to control his mount. A failure results in the rider being forced to roll on the “Riding Mishap” table, with a critical failure adding a +20 penalty to that roll. A success on the Riding roll permits two Action rounds, with each raise

adding two additional Action rounds to the phase. A critical success automatically awards eight Action rounds.

Attack Rolls

The hunter attacks as before, with one attack allowed for each Action round he’s earned. As Phase 2 represents a longer period of time than Phase 1, there are no extra penalties on attack rolls made for additional buffalos hunted this round. Note that reloading requires a full round, and is subject to the penalties described above under “Reloading.”

Phase 3: End of the Hunt

This phase represents the winding down of the hunt, during which time the ponies have grown tired, the herd has moved away, and there are enough dead buffalo to call the hunt a success.

Phase 3 Riding Roll

The hunter must make a Riding roll vs. TN-8 to control his tiring mount. A critical failure results in the rider being forced to roll on the “Riding Mishap” table. A failed roll means the rider’s horse is exhausted, and no buffalo may be attacked during this final phase. A success permits one Action round, with each raise on the Riding roll adding an additional Action round to the phase. A critical success automatically awards four Action rounds.

Attack Rolls

The hunter attacks as before, with one attack allowed for each Action round he’s earned. If the rider has any Action rounds remaining, he may attack more buffalo at a -4 penalty on his subsequent attack rolls. (This is in addition to the standard -2 horseback penalty, for a total of -6, or an effective Target Number 10.)

Rewards

Aside from the buffalo itself, a successful hunter may receive other, less tangible rewards. These rewards take them form of attribute boosts acquired by eating parts of the carcass, an age-old hunter’s tradition.

Rewards Table

1 Kill	The hunter may eat part of the raw liver of his kill. This grants a +1 Vigor Kicker.
2 Kills	Eating part of the liver and the heart grants a +1 Vigor Kicker and a +1 Spirit Kicker.
3 Kills	Eating part of the liver, the heart, and the testicles grants a +1 Vigor Kicker, a +1 Spirit Kicker, and a +1 Strength Kicker.
4 Kills	Eating part of the liver, the heart, and the testicles grants a +1 Vigor Kicker, a +1 Spirit Kicker, and a +1 Strength Kicker. Additionally, the hunter is awarded a d12 Hole Card for the Attribute of his choice: Spirit, Strength, or Vigor.
5 Kills	Eating part of the liver, the heart, and the testicles grants a +1 Vigor Kicker, a +1 Spirit Kicker, and a +1 Strength Kicker. The hunter is awarded a d12 “Hole Card” for the Attribute of his choice: Spirit, Strength, or Vigor. Additionally, a trophy taken from the final animal killed serves as a single-use Fate Chip. (Usually the buffalo’s tail, horns, penis, or tongue.)

Dressing the Kill

The Sioux famously utilized every part of the buffalo, and processing the carcass was the job of the entire tribe. The treated hide was used to make tepees, blankets, robes, shirts, and moccasins; rawhide was used for whips, drums, tethers, toys, and shields; buffalo hair was woven into thread, twine, or rope; horns were used for decoration or crafted into utensils; hooves were fashioned into rattles or used to make glue; uneaten meat was preserved in the form of pemmican; the bones and skull were crafted into tools, needles, and used for ceremonial purposes; and even the animal's brains were mashed into a solution used to cure the buffalo's own hide. Furthermore, the animal's dried dung—known as buffalo chips or *bois de vache*—was used as fuel for camp fires, and occasionally blended with pipe tobacco! One interesting method used by the Sioux to dress a slain animal is given by Wikipedia, based on archaeological studies done at the Olsen-Chubbuck site in Colorado:

The method involves skinning down the back in order to get at the tender meat just beneath the surface, the area known as the “hatched area.” After the removal of the hatched area, the front legs are cut off as well as the shoulder blades. Doing so exposes the hump meat, as well as the meat of the ribs and the bison's inner organs. After everything was exposed, the spine was then severed and the pelvis and hind legs removed. Finally, the neck and head were removed as one. This allowed for the tough meat to be dried and made into pemmican.

A particularly colorful description of skinning a buffalo comes from John Williams' novel *Butcher's Crossing*, where a white hunter named Schneider demonstrates his technique:

He selected a long curving blade and grasped it firmly in his right hand. With his left hand he pushed back the heavy collar of fur around the buffalo's neck; with his other hand he made a small slit in the hide, and drew his knife swiftly from the throat across the belly. The hide parted neatly with a faint ripping sound. With a stubbier knife, he cut around the bag that held the testicles, cut through the cords that held them and the limp penis to the flesh; he separated the testicles, which were the size of small crab-apples, from the other parts of the bag, and tossed them to one side; then he slit the few remaining inches of hide to the anal opening.

“I always save the balls,” he said. “They make mighty good eating, and they put starch in your pecker. Unless they come off an old bull. Then you better just stay away from them.”

With still another knife, Schneider cut around the neck of the animal, beginning at that point where he had made the belly slit and lifting the huge head up and supporting it on one knee so that he could cut completely around the throat. Then he slit around each of the ankles, and ripped down the inside of each leg until his knife met the first cut down the belly. He loosened the skin around each ankle until he could get a handhold on the hide, and then he shucked the hide off the leg until it lay in loose folds upon the side of the buffalo. After he had laid the skin back on each leg, he loosened the hide just above the hump until he could gather a loose handful of it. Upon this, he knotted a thin rope that he got from his saddlebag; the other end he tied to his saddle horn. He got in the saddle, and backed his horse up. The hide peeled off the buffalo as the horse backed; the heavy muscles of the bull quivered and jerked as the hide was shucked off.

“And that's all there is to it,” Schneider said, getting down from his horse. He untied the rope from the bullhide. “Then you spread it out flat on the ground to dry. Fur side up, so it won't dry out too fast.”

Sources & Notes

I am deeply indebted to Francis Parkman, who [narrates several buffalo hunts](#) in *The Oregon Trail*, a wonderful resource that describes Parkman's time traveling with the Oglala in 1846. The film *Dances with Wolves* is known for its [thrilling depiction of a Sioux buffalo hunt](#), which the

commentary track makes even more interesting—apparently, one of the living buffalos used belonged to Neil Young! However, the most intense, unflinching, and gruesome depiction of hunters methodically massacring a herd is surely found in John Williams' [Butcher's Crossing](#), the novel excerpted above. Aside from the ever-reliable Wikipedia, I also leaned on a few useful Web sites, including [The Prairie Edge Trading Company](#), [Texas Beyond History](#), and Candy Moulton's article "[On the Trail with the Buffalo Hunters](#)" from *True West* magazine.

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