

Wisconsin's Elk Reintroduction



Background

Historic records show elk once inhabited at least 50 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. Elk were extirpated from Wisconsin in the mid to late 1800s due to unregulated hunting and a rapid decline in habitat. An attempt to bring elk back to the state occurred in the 1930s, but failed. Today, suitable elk habitat can be found primarily in the northern and central forest regions of the state. Land conversion from prairie to agriculture, coupled with high human occupancy, has resulted in little to no suitable habitat in southern Wisconsin.

Early reintroduction

In 1989, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources was directed by the state legislature to explore the feasibility of successfully reintroducing elk, moose and/or caribou. The resulting study determined that an elk reintroduction effort had the highest potential for success.

In 1993, the Wisconsin state legislature authorized the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point to evaluate the potential for reintroducing elk to the Great Divide District of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest near the town of Clam Lake.

In February 1995, 25 elk were trapped, held in a quarantine facility for 90 days while undergoing rigorous disease testing, and transported to the Clam Lake release site. After being held in a pen for a two week acclimation period, the elk were released May 17, 1995. The herd has been intensively studied and monitored since the release, and has helped guide management decisions.

After the initial reintroduction study was considered a success in May 1999, management responsibility of the herd was transferred to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. At that time, approximately 40 elk were present in the herd.

Current herd

As of summer 2016, elk are grouped in a main herd near Clam Lake and a new herd near Black River Falls. Various herd growth strategies have been used to help the elk occupy their designated 1,600 mi² Clam Lake Elk Range and the 320 mi² Black River Elk Range. Since 1995, the Clam Lake herd has grown at an average rate of 13 percent annually, with a high around 30 percent and a low around -16 percent. The goal is 1,400 elk for the Clam Lake Range and 390 for the Black River Range. Primary causes of mortality in both ranges include predation and vehicle collisions, although several additional causes of death have been recorded. Habitat used by the elk consists of aspen and other young forest growth interspersed with mature forest, forest openings and lowland conifers.



A mature bull elk near Clam Lake. PHOTO: Jeff Morden

In 2012 the Elk Management Plans were updated to focus on continued research and monitoring, assisted dispersal to quality habitat, and the supplemental increase by importation of wild elk from Kentucky.

For more information on elk in Wisconsin, visit dnr.wi.gov, search keyword "elk."

Elk in Jackson County

Following the reintroduction of elk to the Clam Lake area in 1995, the Jackson County board adopted a resolution to support similar efforts on public lands in eastern Jackson County. The department determined that historical and adequate elk habitat existed in the Black River State Forest and surrounding area. After conducting public meetings significant support from the community for an elk reintroduction was received. The Black River Elk Range is approximately 320 square miles, consisting of significant amounts of publicly owned lands and is located in the Central Forest region of eastern Jackson County.



Elk in the Jackson County quarantine pen PHOTO: DNR Staff

Current Reintroduction Efforts

In December 2014, a five-year agreement was reached between Wisconsin and Kentucky that would provide Wisconsin with up to 150 wild elk. Upon finalizing the agreement, both states immediately began plans to trap up to 50 wild Kentucky elk per year for up to five years starting in 2015, with a total capture goal of 150 elk. Once trapping ceases each year, the elk are quarantined for a minimum of 120 days in both Kentucky and Wisconsin and tested for a variety of diseases. When all health requirements are fulfilled, the elk can be released in Wisconsin.

In the summer of 2015, the first group of elk was released in Jackson County. Also in the summer of 2016 another 50 elk were released into Jackson County. The translocation project will now shift to releasing elk in the Clam Lake area in future years.



Recently collared calf from 2016. PHOTO: DNR Staff

The Importance of Partnerships

The current reintroduction effort is a great example of partnership and collaboration in action. Major partners in current reintroduction efforts include the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Ho-Chunk Nation, Bands of the Lake Superior Ojibwa, Jackson County Forest and Parks, U.S. Forest Service, and others. The project is being funded largely with private donations.



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