History and Management of Elk in Wisconsin

Elk were common throughout Wisconsin prior to human settlement, but the last native elk were reportedly killed in 1886 in northwestern Wisconsin. A new effort was made to reintroduce elk in 1914 when elk were released into a Vilas County enclosure, having been brought from Yellowstone National Park. These elk were released to the wild in 1932, however survival was poor due to illegal hunting. The last four elk were reportedly killed by poachers in 1948. The idea of bringing elk back to Wisconsin resurfaced in the 1980s when the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was directed by state legislators to explore the feasibility of restoring elk, caribou and/or moose. The study that resulted suggested elk as the most feasible of these animals to find success due to the vulnerability of moose and caribou to brainworm.

During the winter of 1994-95, 25 elk were captured from Michigan’s lower peninsula. A 10-month quarantine ensued, during which the elk were spent two weeks in an acclimation pen and, on May 17, 1995, were released into the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. After an absence of 110 years, wild elk once again roamed the wild lands of Wisconsin!

Currently, Wisconsin does not have an elk hunting season. From the beginning, hunting has been considered an important management tool. However, hunting seasons will not be considered until it is determined that the herd can support a hunt.

Elk viewing is not confined to the designated areas and routes. Many grassy meadows have been improved for deer, elk and other wildlife that use this type of habitat. People can disturb elk by approaching too closely. Elk should always be appreciated and viewed from a distance. T his will enhance other viewers’ chances to see elk. W hile searching for elk, always respect the animals and private landowners’ rights and privacy.

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Elk can sometimes be viewed along Highway 77 and CTH GG (south to L’Etrille) in the Clam Lake area (southwest and south of Clam Lake, respectively). W ldlife viewing areas have been established through a cooperative effort between the Forest Service and RMEF to view many species of wildlife, including elk, and their location is shown on the map.


25 elk were released into the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.

- Elk were acclimated for 10 months
- Released on May 17, 1995

2002 - 2003 Elk Release

25 elk were released into the Clam Lake area.

- Elk were acclimated for 8 months
- Released on March 15, 2003

Elk Viewing Opportunities

Elk can be seen in many habitats throughout the state. Best viewing times are dawn and dusk. The most popular viewing period is September and October during the mating season when elk are often feeding in openings. Summer observations are possible, but heavy leaf cover makes viewing more difficult. T he map highlights routes with a possibility of sighting elk. W ildlife viewers may access these routes at any point. It is a good idea to use a National Forest map or county maps, along with the map provided, to find your way. Road conditions will vary with the season, so drivers should exercise caution before attempting to drive these routes.

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CAUTION: Logging has been found to be very important in maintaining elk winter and spring food habitats of aspen. However, with this activity comes frequent encounters with logging trucks. W hile driving in the Clam Lake area, be alert for logging truck activity. Only stop on wide road shoulders and be careful if leaving your vehicle. Pull completely off the roadway.

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