



An overview of the Jackson County 7-acre acclimation pen where the Kentucky elk were held for health testing until they were approved for release in August.

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From coal mines to jack pines

THE REVITALIZATION OF WISCONSIN'S ELK REINTRODUCTION EFFORT.

Meredith Penthorn

“Here they come!” As the two trucks pulling livestock trailers emerged through the trees over a quarter mile away, the smile on Al Jacobson’s face said it all. After almost 20 years of unwavering advocacy for an elk herd in his home county, Jacobson’s dream was coming true.

“It’s hard to believe it’s really happening,” he said.

The guests of honor, standing up to five feet at the shoulder with sweeping headgear, coarse reddish-brown hair, and an eerie vocalization that will penetrate right down to your soul, would finally set foot in territory that their kind had not occupied for generations. This long-awaited event would mark the next chapter of the elk reintroduction effort in Wisconsin, a cooperative effort that started at the grassroots level by partners like Jacobson who are committed to restoring another member of Wisconsin’s historic wildlife roster to the landscape.

Rebirth of a conservation dream

Long before early European settlers staked claim to the wilderness that would be named Wisconsin, the open savannas and woodlands rang with the

hoof beats and resonant bugles of thousands of elk. Written records and archaeological finds suggest that elk historically occupied at least 50 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.

Once early settlers began to occupy the Wisconsin Territory in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they took advantage of the diverse game species available as an important food source. Eventually, unregulated hunting and the conversion of native prairies and forests to arable land severely depleted many wildlife populations including elk, and by the late 1800s elk populations in Wisconsin had all but vanished. Despite conflicting reports, it is certain that the last of Wisconsin’s native elk had been killed by the 1880s.

Like many states, Wisconsin attempted an elk reintroduction with Yellowstone National Park elk in the early 1900s. A small herd of about 30 animals,

confined to a pen in Vilas County, was eventually released in the 1940s, but post-Depression hard times took their toll on the fledgling population. The last Vilas County elk was reportedly shot in 1948.

For 40 more years, the idea of restoring elk rarely garnered a second thought. But Wisconsin’s conservation ethic was undiminished, and it inspired species restoration efforts for wild turkeys, whooping cranes, peregrine falcons and much more. Eventually, the Wisconsin conservation ethic blossomed again when, at the request of the state legislature, the Department of Natural Resources began exploring the possibilities of reintroducing moose, caribou or elk to Wisconsin. Elk were ultimately selected as the species most likely to thrive if reintroduced, but the project hit a road block when the selected site of Bayfield County received little public support.

The turning point was the creation of the Wisconsin Elk Reintroduction Study Committee, a grassroots group formed to fund-raise and gain public support. Ultimately, a partnership between the Department of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Tribal Nations of Wisconsin, and a variety of governmental and nonprofit organizations launched a feasibility study which entailed releasing and monitoring a small herd of elk in northern Wisconsin. The original plan also outlined a

strategy for reintroducing elk to Jackson County, which was not enacted at that time.

With funding from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and others, the state of Michigan donated 25 wild elk that were released in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, near the small town of Clam Lake in Ashland County in 1995. Subsequent population growth was slow but sufficient enough to firmly establish a small resident elk herd in the Clam Lake region. In 2000, UW-Stevens Point completed its feasibility study, and long-term management responsibilities were accepted by the Department of Natural Resources.

While there have been occasional setbacks over time, the Clam Lake herd has steadily increased to its present-day size of approximately 160 animals after calving in 2015, and ranges across portions of Sawyer, Ashland and Price counties. According to the Cable Area Chamber of Commerce, the presence of the herd provides benefits to local businesses from tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of one or hear a bugle from a rutting September bull.

As the herd continued to grow in the north, public enthusiasm for restoring elk to Jackson County remained strong. The Jackson County Board adopted a resolution to reintroduce elk to the county. A management plan was developed and eventually adopted by the Natural Resources Board in 2001. By that time, Jacobson and other members of a local conservation group were already raising money in hopes of one day helping start a local elk herd. Although the Department of Natural Resources and partners had pursued initiatives to help the Clam Lake herd expand through habitat improvements and assisted dispersal attempts, wildlife managers felt that additional animals would be needed to stimulate population growth and address concerns about low genetic diversity within the herd.

A call for new elk

Fueled by a need for additional elk and growing public interest, a rare opportunity to acquire more elk presented itself. In 2011, the department began amending the original management plan to augment the Clam Lake herd and finally establish the new herd in Jackson County. An association of passionate partners primarily backed by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the Ho-Chunk Nation and the Jackson County Wildlife

Fund, pledged financial support for the estimated \$600,000 reintroduction effort. A strategy for implementing the phases of the reintroduction was mapped. One important question remained: Where would Wisconsin get the elk?

"Our search for more elk began and ended with Kentucky," said Kevin Wallenfang, deer and elk ecologist with the Department of Natural Resources. "They were welcoming to our request and willing to help."

Other states in the eastern half of the country have achieved successful reintroductions thanks to Kentucky. Rightfully so, Kentucky is proud of having more than 10,000 elk that are free of serious diseases such as chronic wasting disease and bovine tuberculosis.

"There was no question in our minds as to where we needed to acquire elk," said Tami Ryan, chief of the department's Wildlife Health Section and elk health coordinator for the project. "Kentucky is the gold standard when it comes to finding a state that is certified as 'low risk' for CWD by the U.S.D.A. [United States Department of Agriculture]."

Wallenfang, Ryan and Karen Sexton, wildlife biologist with the Ho-Chunk Nation, traveled south to initiate discussions with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources to determine the terms of an agreement that

would allow for trapping and relocating Cumberland Plateau elk to the Badger State.

The grouse connection

Like Wisconsin, Kentucky had its own reintroduction effort in mind, but it involved a bird that many Wisconsin hunters hold sacred: the ruffed grouse. Wisconsin needed elk and has ample grouse. Kentucky needed grouse and has plenty of elk. It seemed that the stars had aligned perfectly to make this opportunity possible.

In December 2014, Wisconsin and Kentucky finalized their agreement. Instead of actual birds, Kentucky found itself more immediately in need of grouse habitat. Wisconsin offered to assist with technical advice and financial assistance to help create that habitat. In return, Kentucky would supply and assist Wisconsin in trapping elk over a period of three to five years. The agreement specified that Wisconsin could trap up to 50 elk each year until the desired goal of 150 animals was reached.

Gearing up

Even before the final negotiations were complete, DNR staff and their partners were working in overdrive through a detailed task list to set the project in motion. One monumental task involved the



Each elk has been microchipped and has a unique ear tag identifier.

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Many DNR staff and partners worked side by side to make the reintroduction effort possible.

construction of a holding pen in Jackson County that would allow the elk to acclimate to Wisconsin conditions, as well as serve as a quarantine and health screening facility. Following all requirements of the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to import elk into Wisconsin, the final details of the pen were completed just one day prior to the arrival of the elk.

Concurrently, project coordinators rapidly obtained the required equipment for trapping, testing and transporting the elk within a carefully allocated budget consisting of private funds donated by the partner groups. The partnership worked quickly to address hundreds of questions and execute dozens of tasks, large and small, to ensure that the reintroduction would progress as smoothly as possible.

"Even when we continued to say 'we can do that,' there was always the lingering question of 'can we really?'" Wallenfang recalls. "We joked that the invasion of Normandy was less complicated."

The Wisconsin capture team arrived in Kentucky shortly after New Year's Day in 2015. Wisconsin and Kentucky staff immediately began trapping activities at

sites frequented by elk.

Trapping was challenging due to a variety of factors, including limited access to areas of high elk concentrations, a heavy acorn crop that provided an abundant food source and warm conditions that diminished the elk's need to move for food.

Wisconsin team members lived and worked side by side with Kentucky biologists during the entire trapping period, working around the clock to bait sites, erect and check traps and care for captured elk. At the same time, the elk health team prepared to provide 24-hour animal monitoring and caretaking for the captured elk and conduct all required disease screening once trapping was complete.

When trapping had concluded in early February, all captured elk occupied the pen and the quarantine period began. The Wisconsin elk health team worked with Kentucky staff to collect blood and tissue samples to screen for disease, then microchipped and marked each elk with a unique ear tag identifier.

"I was certainly impressed by all the folks from Wisconsin," said Kentucky capture leader John Hast. "We've done

this work for the past few years, but the enthusiasm of the Wisconsin folks lifted our spirits when we were working all night and when things got tough."

Wisconsin staff found the experience equally fulfilling.

"I will take this experience with me for the rest of my career," said Mike Zeckmeister, Wisconsin's capture team leader. "It is the finest example of true cooperation between two different states and partner groups that I've ever seen."

After 45 days, the elk were cleared to leave Kentucky to begin the second phase of quarantine in Jackson County, where the first batch of elk would be released. At last, the elk were beginning the journey to their new home.

Welcome to Wisconsin!

On the crisp morning of March 26, 2015, following a 13-hour drive from the coal fields of Kentucky, the trailers rolled down the gravel road on state land just east of Black River Falls. A small group of partners critical to the effort were on hand to witness the herd's introduction to the jack pines of Wisconsin.

As the elk exploded through the gates of the holding pen and into the shelter of the woods, where they would remain until final release in August (with several calves in tow), the moment had special meaning to those assembled.

"All the time and energy is finally paying off," said Lee Swanson, outgoing chairman of the board for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and also in attendance at this historic event. "This feels like Christmas morning. It's perfect."

A poster child for partnerships

The reintroduction of any species isn't something that can be accomplished alone, and elk are no exception.

"One of the neatest things about this entire project is that there were multiple partners involved, all working for a common goal," Wallenfang said. "Nobody was interested in taking credit or wanting to be the hero. They all just wanted to see it happen, regardless of who did what to make it work."

And this integral partnership has more work to do. In a few short months, trapping is expected to again resume in Kentucky, and a new class of elk will be recruited to further the mission of bringing the sound of fall bugling back to Wisconsin. ❖

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