

History and Management of Elk in Wisconsin



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Elk were common throughout Wisconsin prior to human settlement, but the last native elk were reportedly killed in 1886 in northwestern Wisconsin. An 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.

Opposition from a couple of groups kept a release from occurring at that time. However, thanks to the persistence of the Wisconsin Elk Study Committee, public support for a release gained momentum. By

the early 1990s, the state legislature funded an experimental release in the Clam Lake area of Ashland County, and then-Governor Tommy Thompson provided partial funding for the project in the state budget.

In 1994, a four-year study to be carried out under the direction of Dr. Ray Anderson of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point was approved by the DNR. The study was considered experimental in that if the elk were found to be detrimental to the environment or humans, they would be removed and the project would end. Financial support came primarily from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation through volunteer fundraising efforts and private donations.

During the winter of 1994-95, 25 elk were captured from Michigan's lower peninsula. After extensive health testing and a three month quarantine, elk were brought to Wisconsin in May. They 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!

The core area of the Clam Lake elk range con-

sists of 288 square miles of mixed conifer, upland hardwoods and cedar swamps. The area also contains several hundred acres of openings including the Navy ELF communication line, which runs through the heart of the range. The core range lies entirely within the Great Divide Ranger District of the Chequamegon-Nicolet. Surrounding the core range is another 824 square miles of buffer range. The buffer range is a mix of National forest, county and state forest, and private lands. The goal is to expand the Clam Lake herd to 1400 elk—about 1 to 2 elk per square mile of elk habitat.

Since their initial release, the elk herd has shown excellent progress. The herd has been intensively monitored, providing critical information to help biologists learn more about the herd, and how to manage it in the future. In 2000, the four-year experimental study came to an end. The state's Natural Resources Board declared the study a success; elk would remain in the state and all management responsibilities were turned over to the DNR.

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.

Only through the support and dedication provided by the many RMEF volunteers, willing donors, UW researchers, DNR biologists, Bands of Lake Superior Ojibwa, and the Forest Service was this project possible. The success of the Clam Lake herd has helped build interest in restoring elk to other parts of the state.



Public Viewing Opportunities

Elk can be seen in many habitats throughout their range. 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.

The map highlights routes with a possibility of sighting elk. Wildlife 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.

Elk can sometimes be viewed along Highway 77 and CTH GG (south to Loretta) in the Clam Lake area (southwest and south of Clam Lake, respectively).

Wildlife 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.

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. This will enhance other viewers' chances to see elk. While searching for elk, always respect the animals and private landowners' rights and privacy.

Whenever you choose to look for elk, plan to set aside some time. Remember these are wild animals. They are on their own schedule, coming and going when and where their needs and desires take them.

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. While 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.