



It's elk country once more

BLACK RIVER
HERD GETS
SETTLED IN.

With encouragement from biologist Scott Roepke, elk calf #274F leaves a DNR trailer on her way to rejoin the herd in Jackson County.

Story and photos by Ben Gruber

Six inches of fresh, heavy snow covered the gravel town roads and paved state roads as I began an early-morning trek to the Black River State Forest last December. My old Ford truck was locked in four-wheel drive for all 60 miles.

I saw few critters and even fewer signs of humans in the frigid forest and marsh country. With snowshoes, layers of wool hunting clothes and camera at the ready, I could have been in Montana. Except it's pretty flat here in west-central Wisconsin and about 1,000 miles to the Rocky Mountains. This was a different kind of elk country, but elk country nonetheless.

I'd been meaning to make the trip to Jackson County and check in on its newest residents for a while. Only an hour away from my central Wisconsin farmhouse is a herd of elk, introduced in 2015-16 and still exploring their new forest home.

When I contacted Kevin Wallenfang, DNR's state deer and elk ecologist, about trying to get a view of them, he directed me to Scott Roepke, DNR wildlife biologist stationed in Black River Falls. Roepke was accommodating and we set a date, although he cautioned that we might not actually see an elk.

"Meet me at the office in Black River Falls at 8 a.m.," his email said. His agenda called for a drive through the herd's core area, where he would use radiotelemetry equipment to conduct mortality checks.

A shoebox-sized monitor detects radio signals transmitted from collars worn by the elk. Each collar has its own frequen-

cy, a unique signal that identifies an individual elk. An elk's collar also has the ability to identify when it hasn't moved in four hours — when the cadence of the signal changes — indicating a potential mortality.

In inclement weather, Roepke said, elk will often curl up in a tight ball for at least four hours to conserve energy and warmth, which triggers a mortality signal. On cold days, he makes a note of mortality signals and investigates the following day if the elk still hasn't moved.

About 20 miles from the Black River Falls DNR Service Center, I came upon the first roadside sign proudly proclaiming "The Elk Are Back in the Black River Country." Growing up in southwest Wisconsin, I dreamed of hunting elk in the Rocky Mountains, so it was a captivating feeling knowing I was in "elk country." I imagined around the next corner could be a bull elk following his herd.

My pickup truck prevailed over the snowy roads and I arrived at Roepke's office with time to spare. We shook hands and Roepke said he had just gotten off the phone with a concerned landowner reporting a wayward elk calf on his property. Locals have largely been accepting of their new cervid neighbors

and are quick to call when they find them in unexpected locations.

Roepke was able to pull some relevant data and GPS locations from his computer and had a good idea which calf this was. He suspected the calf had somehow gotten separated from the herd and was about 5 miles from its mother. Away from the herd, the calf's chances of survival were questionable. Because it was one of the first elk born in these woods in 150 years, we were going to do our best to reunite the family.

Scott Krultz, a DNR wildlife technician out of the Black River Falls office, was ready to go with a gooseneck stock trailer hooked to his truck. Roepke readied some sedatives in case we managed to get close to the calf. A student from a nearby high school showed up for a job shadow, and the four of us were ready to head out. For freelance writers and high school job-shadowers, the day looked promising.

A quick 15-minute drive to the southeast and Roepke slowed as we neared the area where one group of elk had been spending a lot of time. Elk tracks were visible from the road in the fresh snow; clearly they were grazing here late last night or early this morning. We spotted a lone cow elk, casually grazing on some evergreens near the road.

A few miles further we pulled into the driveway of the person who had reported the calf near their home. They pointed out the direction the calf had last been spotted a few hours earlier. Unfortunately for us, the calf's tracks showed it had headed into some very thick tag alder swamp.

Krultz headed one way to find a safe

place to park the trailer while Roepke and I headed the other way, our eyes peeled for an elk calf. We'd gone less than 100 yards when we spotted the youngster 25 paces off the road. Roepke channeled his inner sniper and snuck a tranquilizer dart through the tag alders, connecting with the calf in one shot. She — Roepke confirmed by her ear tag it was, in fact, the female calf he had suspected — laid down right there and we slid down the steep, snowy ditch bank to her.

Krultz covered her eyes with a hood and held her head gently to maintain an open airway. An ice fishing-type sled was produced, we loaded her in and scrambled up the steep bank, sled and elk in tow.

Working against time, Krultz jumped in the sled with the calf, and the rope was secured around the tow hook of Roepke's truck. With the road snow-and-ice covered, he simply backed slowly down the road to where the trailer was parked and pulled the sled right into the trailer, gently rolling the calf out. The DNR staff gave her a quick once-over, determined she appeared

healthy and administered an injection to reverse the sedative.

I was feeling pretty satisfied at my experience thus far — pulling elk calves in sleds behind trucks hadn't been on my radar that morning. Judging by the ear-to-ear grin, there was a high school student who was pretty impressed with his experience, too.

Once the drug wore off and elk calf #274F was able to stand and balance on her own in the trailer, we headed off to the last known location of the rest of the herd, based on what Roepke's telemetry equipment indicated. About a 15-minute drive had us in the general area. We got as close as we could, opened the trailer door, and the calf calmly exited the trailer. After a little persuasion, she headed down the trail in the direction of the herd.

With that mission completed, Krultz headed back to the office with the trailer while Roepke and I continued with the planned mortality checks. These checks are a good way to monitor the herd without being intrusive and the drive allowed us plenty of time to talk elk.

Roepke told me he took this job because of a desire to work with elk. He attended UW-Stevens Point's College of Natural Resources and did his master's work on Wisconsin's Clam Lake elk herd. He's also an avid elk hunter, taking regular trips west to hunt the regal mountain bulls.

He seems content with how the reintroduction efforts in the Black River State Forest are going so far. Public support has been high, with 85 to 90 percent of local folks happy to see the elk back. It's a multi-agency effort with involvement from the Ho-Chunk Nation, the Jackson County Wildlife Fund — a local nonprofit conservation group — and nationally, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

The latest elk being reintroduced in Wisconsin have come from Kentucky. A team from the Wisconsin DNR travels south to assist Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources with the trapping. They erect a round, pen-like trap and bait the elk. Using remote cameras when possible to see when there is a large enough group of elk in the pen,

they trigger a remote gate closer. However, in most cases a trip wire is used.

The work entails sleepless nights, travel on remote mountain roads and sometimes days on end without a capture. In 2016, the capture crews encountered very warm conditions, heavy rain and a record acorn crop, all of which made enticing elk to baited sites difficult.

Now that the elk are back in the wild in Jackson County, Roepke keeps tabs on their whereabouts with GPS and telemetry. Ninety-five percent of the GPS pings come from inside "elk range." If a group wanders too far outside the designated range for too long, DNR staff work to move them back, either via trapping or tranquilizing.



DNR wildlife technician Scott Krultz holds a sedated and masked elk calf in a sled during efforts to relocate the animal.

>>> CLAM LAKE HERD GROWS

The new elk of the Black River State Forest in Jackson County are just part of the population being reintroduced in Wisconsin, a process that is ongoing. In Ashland, Price and Sawyer counties, the Clam Lake herd dates to 1995, when elk were brought from Michigan. In late March, 28 more elk arrived in Sawyer County from Kentucky to make their home in the Flambeau River State Forest.

"The task of actually bringing elk to Jackson County is complete, and we are now shifting our relocation efforts to the northern herd," said Kevin Wallenfang, DNR deer and elk ecologist. "Our hope is to deliver up to 75 elk to the Clam Lake area over two years, but we have an option to return for a fifth year if necessary."

Adding elk from Kentucky to the Clam Lake herd — done in cooperation with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources — is expected to boost herd growth and introduce new genetics. The latest efforts mark the third year in the DNR's current five-year plan to bring elk back to Wisconsin, a program with funding support from partners including the Ho-Chunk Nation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Chippewa tribes and others.

For more on the DNR's elk reintroduction efforts, including a video of the March elk release in the Flambeau River State Forest, visit dnr.wi.gov and search keyword "elk."

At the time of this magazine's publication, the cows should be calving. Roepke, Krultz and other DNR staff work with volunteers to find the newborn calves and fit them with radio collars and ear tags. Throughout the year, crews do habitat work to maintain current open meadows and create new ones through brush clearing and controlled burning, Roepke said.

On that December day, we finished our morning by checking on a few other small elk groups. The telemetry signals didn't give any indications of mortality and we didn't see any more elk. We did, however, see plenty of signs of their presence.

Elk are once again roaming the woods and meadows of central Wisconsin, and that makes me happy. I'll be back in the fall, hoping to hear a rutting bull elk bugle in Wisconsin's central forest. 

Ben Gruber is a freelance writer who calls a small farm in central Wisconsin home. He also is the vice president of Kids and Mentors Outdoors, or KAMO, and can often be found exploring the outdoors with his 3-year-old daughter. He can be reached at bwgruber@gmail.com.