

ELK in New Mexico

BRINGING BACK THE ELK

The elk of North America, and their close relative the red deer of Europe, inspire the human imagination with an intensity rarely fostered by other wild animals. Nearly the largest member of the deer family, the elk is far more graceful than the bigger moose. Crowned by heavy, sweeping antlers, elk racks are cherished decorations from the castles of Europe to the cabins of La Cueva, New Mexico.

Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) exist in New Mexico because the state and private individuals made persistent efforts to restore the animals between 1910 and 1966. Although a private ranch started the reintroduction, Territorial Game Warden Thomas Gable made the first public releases in 1911, distributing 12 animals to three spots in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

Restoration was necessary because relentless hunting pressure occurring late in the 19th century extirpated this grand animal from New Mexico. The meat of elk is as fine as beef, and they were killed to feed the waves of soldiers, miners and ranchers who contributed to the occupation of this state after the Civil War. The slaughter resulted in the extinction of the Merriam's subspecies of elk and the extirpation of the Rocky Mountain subspecies. Today, Rocky Mountain elk once again are abundant in Northern New Mexico, and they grace the valleys and mountains of the southern half of the state where once the Merriam's roamed.

LIFE HISTORY

Elk calves are born in late May and June, and weigh 30 to 40 pounds. They are camouflaged by white-spotted coats until August, and have virtually no scent. Lying perfectly still near fallen logs, in tall grass or other vegetation also helps them avoid predators.

Breeding usually occurs in September, although it's been recorded as early as Aug. 24 and as late as Nov. 5. Bull elk announce the oncoming rut by bugling, a thrilling mix of high-pitched whistles and deep grunts. Dominant herd bulls gather harems of as many cows as they can protect from weaker satellite bulls. The harem bulls are so obsessed with breeding they typically neglect eating during the rut, but their need to restore their depleted body fat before winter turns their attention to feeding immediately after the breeding season.

Deepening snows in the mountains force elk to migrate to lower elevations where forage can be found. One elk study found some animals from southern Colorado spend the winter near San Antonio Mountain, NM.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Of an elk's four habitat requirements — food, water, space and cover — food and cover are most significant in determining where elk are found. Grass is a preferred food of elk, however they can thrive on forbs and woody browse as well. Cover is the animals' lifeline. Large and mobile, elk can move to water at night, but cover provides daytime shade and protection from insects and humans. The mountains of New Mexico, dark cool forests with interspersed large and small meadows, satisfy both major requirements.

Elk have expanded greatly since the last releases of the 1960s. Now they are found in many areas once considered marginal habitats, like the Rio Grande Valley and the Canadian River Drainage.

Some portions of the state where elk are relatively abundant include: The San Juan Mountains near Chama, in Game Management Unit 4; the Jemez and Sierra Nacimiento of Unit 6; Mount Taylor in Unit 9; Gila National Forest in Unit 16; Carson National Forest in Units 52 and 53. One of the state's most popular places for elk viewing and hunting is the Valle Vidal on the Carson National Forest in Unit 55.

Obtaining exact numbers of animals is very difficult. The Department of Game and Fish spends hundreds of thousands of dollars surveying herd numbers from helicopters every winter when sex and age ratios ratios can be observed.



"Of all the big game found in the west the elk stands supreme in a class by himself."

1909-1911 report of
Thomas P. Gable, Game and Fish Warden



HUNTING NEW MEXICO'S ELK

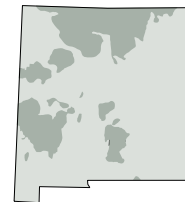
New Mexico has established an excellent reputation for quality elk hunting. Hunting restrictions have allowed bulls to mature, and produce quality racks.

Since 1981, the state's elk have been managed on a unit basis. Licenses are allocated for a specific bag limit, weapons type, time frame and hunting area. In 1981 there were 70 separate hunts; in 1999 there were 142 hunts for those using modern rifles alone. Elk hunts also are offered for the physically challenged, archers, and those who use muzzle-loaders.

Elk hunting is available on public, private and tribal lands in New Mexico. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish does not have jurisdiction for hunting on tribal lands. Licenses for hunting on public lands are distributed through a computerized drawing. The deadline for hunters to apply is usually in late April, and drawing results typically are available by mid-June.

By law, resident elk hunters are guaranteed 78 percent of the available elk licenses. Nonresident hunters who employ outfitters and are guided receive 12 percent of available licenses, and nonresidents who "do it yourself" receive 10 percent of the licenses.

New Mexico allocates landowner authorizations to property owners whose lands are used by elk. Many landowners sell the authorizations, which allows purchasers to buy an elk hunting license without participating in the drawing. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish can supply interested persons with a list of those who receive landowner elk authorizations.



Historical Timeline

Restoration of elk in New Mexico

- 1875** ... A group of 2,000 elk observed in southern New Mexico
- 1880** ... Territorial Legislative Assembly prohibits elk hunting May 1 to Sept. 1
- 1900** ... Extirpated from southern New Mexico
- 1903** ... Declared a game animal
- 1909** ... Extirpated from northern New Mexico
- 1910** ... Bartlett Ranch (Vermejo) stocks 15 elk from Yellowstone
- 1911** ... Territorial Game Warden releases 12 elk in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains
- 1912** ... Elk population estimate was 60
- 1926** ... First elk release in Grant County, 25 animals at GOS Ranch
- 1933** ... First elk hunts on public lands, Pecos area
- 1934** ... Approximately 4,000 elk in the state
- 1939**... Elk released at Mt. Taylor, Philmont Scout Ranch, Tres Piedras and Zuni Mountains
- 1948** ... First release in Jemez Mountains, at Clear Creek
- 1955** ... Total of 140 elk released on public lands, 160 released into Class A parks
- 1956** ... 213 elk released on public lands, 356 released on private lands
- 1958** ... Elk population estimated at 8,000
- 1966** ... Last elk release recorded, Cimarron Canyon Wildlife Area
- 1967** ... Elk population estimated at 12,000
- 1970s** ... Hunting conducted under regional approach
- 1981** ... Unit system adopted to distribute hunting pressure
- 1982** ... Elk population estimate reaches 53,000
- 1994** ... Harvest of elk exceeds 10,000 animals
- 1999** ... Approximately 72,000 elk in New Mexico
- 1999** ... Herd reduction approved for 21 management units statewide



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