

Wearing Out Their Wel

Are Missoula's North Hills elk too much of a good thing?



Right now, there seems to be no limit to the growth of the North Hills herd. The animals are coming through the winter in great condition, say researchers, with sufficient fat reserves to see them through the stressful calving season. Nor do they seem to be suffering from increased predation by natural enemies, and hunting by humans is very restricted.

By Caroline Kurtz

Like family that lingers a little too long around the holidays, Missoula's North Hills elk herd is wearing out its welcome with some property owners. Too many elk are staying too long at the table, and there is concern that in a few years they might never leave. It's a thorny wildlife management issue.

According to researchers, 25 years ago fewer than 50 elk would come out of the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area around Thanksgiving and spend a few months foraging at lower elevations on National Wildlife Federation and private ranch land east of Grant Creek. In the spring they'd migrate back to their calving grounds and summer range. Over the past couple of decades, though, people who live in the hills just north of Missoula have been seeing elk come down earlier and earlier and leave later and later. And now there are not just a few dozen, but more than 300. And they don't stay east of the creek anymore, but have found their way to the west side and the good grass of the ranches and subdivisions there.

The heavy snows of 1996-97 really pushed this trend, according to Grant Creek homeowner association president Bert Lindler.

"The elk found their way to I-90 and the Goodan-Keil subdivision, where they could starve less quickly," he says. "They survived and have been growing ever since."

According to Lindler, the ranches between Grant and Butler creeks have been bearing the brunt of an increasingly large herd eating up rangeland needed for cattle, trampling fences and generally stressing the ranchers' patience and resources.

"Everyone wants to see elk around, just not at these levels," he says. "We want to find a way for a healthy herd to live with people, but not among them."

To this end, Lindler was instrumental in forming the North Hills Elk Working Group in 2005, which brings together various groups with an interest in elk-people harmony, including ranchers, homeowners, hunters, biologists, state wildlife managers and conservationists.

"We've got great cooperation among all the players," says Shawn Cleveland, a wildlife biology graduate student at the University of Montana. "We'd like to be on the leading edge of this urban wildlife issue, and be able to offer some concrete information and advice to other communities."

come



Photo by Paul Queneau, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Keep them moving
Unlike herds in Estes Park, Colorado and around Banff and Jasper National Parks in Canada, Cleveland says the North Hills herd is not yet at the point of no return, where elk lose their migratory habits and become resident. Resident elk can overburden the ecosystem of their winter range and lead to dangerous animal-human interactions, especially during the calving and rutting seasons.

“We might be O.K. with resident deer,” says Lindler, “but elk are far bigger and more dangerous.”

Typically, elk begin to move back to their summer range in early spring. They calve during June, and cow-calf pairs spend the summer mostly by themselves. Starting around August, they begin to congregate with other moms, babies and young

move to winter range in late fall and spend the winter in a concentrated group, with bulls coming and going on the periphery.

In the case of the North Hills herd, the timing of this cycle has been moved up. Elk now arrive pretty much *en masse* on protected or private land in September, leaving good foraging ground in the Rattlesnake Wilderness a couple of months before snow normally would force them out. Last year, some elk reportedly stayed on winter range until late June.

“Fortunately, so far it doesn’t appear that any calves have been born on the winter range,” says Cleveland, which is good news since elk that calve on winter range tend to become non-migratory.

Where this has happened in Estes Park, outside Denver, the elk have wiped out aspen trees along

“We’d like to be on the leading edge of this urban wildlife issue, and be able to offer some concrete information and advice to other communities.”

adults. At the same time mature bulls begin to spar and define harems for the rut, or mating season, which happens in September. Cows and youngsters

creeks, producing a cascade of negative effects on wildlife that depend on the riparian ecosystem, from beaver to birds to fish. Elk-human encounters reached the point in Banff where a couple hundred elk had to be relocated onto First Nations territory, at great expense and difficulty.

Moving elk outside of Montana is not an option, according to Cleveland, since there are few areas that would accept more elk and because chronic wasting disease has brought about a moratorium on elk relocation. Sterilization, which has had some success in controlling deer populations, is expensive and labor intensive as it has to be repeated every year, and has brought up ethical concerns.

What’s to be done?

State Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologists estimate the herd has been growing by 11 percent a year since 2000, at which rate it is expected to double in less than seven years. In addition to good grazing and less snow to deal with, the elk have little to fear from predators, including hunters. Even after 80 hunters received permits for an early-season hunt in the Rattlesnake Wilderness, established last year specifically to control the herd’s growth, only nine animals were taken – five bulls, three cows and a calf. Wildlife managers says that reducing the number of bulls by a few will have little or no impact on overall population growth; what’s needed is around 40 or 50 cows a year to be harvested for a while.



Photo by Bert Lindler

Traditional barbed-wire fences can be tough on elk, which can get hung up in the wire and die, and elk can be tough on fences, tearing out top wires when they cross. Volunteers (above) have been removing unneeded barbed wire fences in the North Hills and working with ranchers to make fences easier for elk to cross, benefitting the elk and also property owners, who hopefully will have fewer repairs in the spring .



Photo by Kristi DuBois

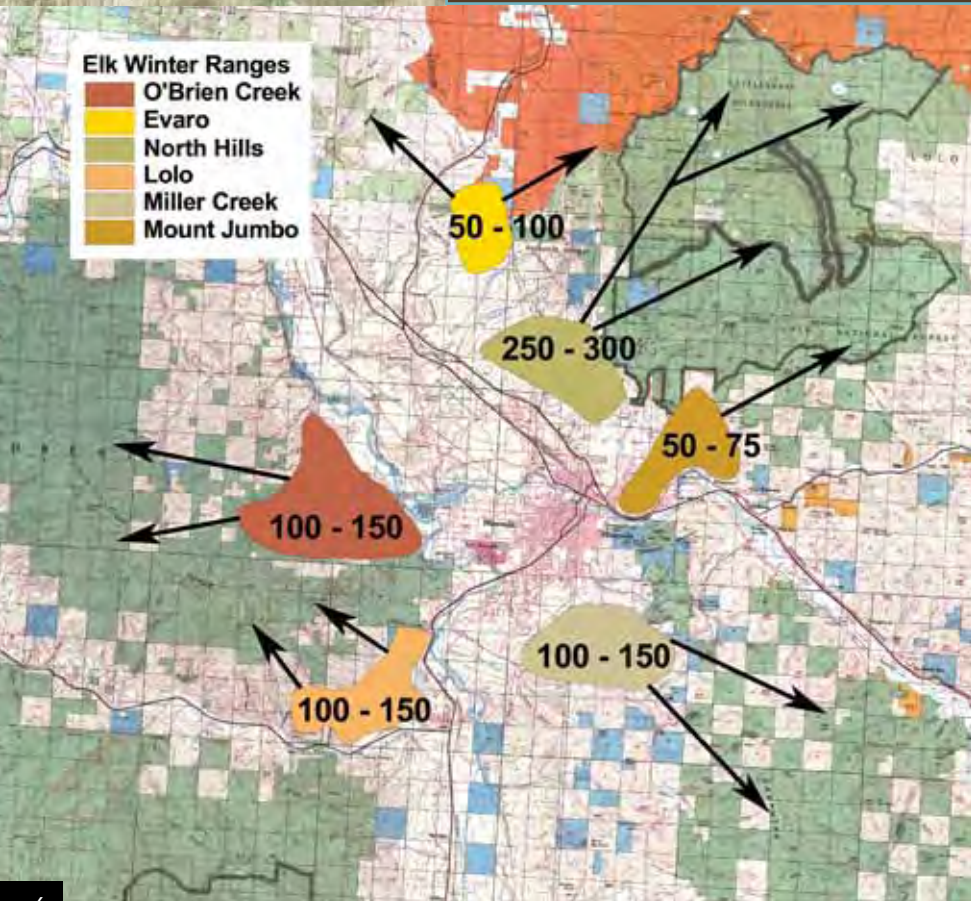
Above: Intrepid Rattlesnake hunter takes a two-wheeled approach.



Left: GPS radio collar records this cow elk's location over time. Collars release and fall off after a while.

Below: Missoula, the hub of five valleys, also is the hub of six elk herds. Winter ranges for these herds ring town in the Miller and O'Brien Creek drainages, in the North Hills, on Mount Jumbo, and in the hills near Evaro and Lolo. Between 50 and 150 animals comprise each herd, except for the North Hills bunch, which exceeds 300 animals.

Photo by Shawn Cleveland



“But, between private property, National Wildlife Federation land and the Rattlesnake Recreation Area, which either allow no hunting or have very restricted access, these elk simply cannot be hunted effectively,” says Cleveland. It’s not safe to shoot in some areas because of homes, ranchers are understandably cautious about whom they choose to let hunt on their land, the National Wildlife Federation property so far does not allow public access and the Rattlesnake Wilderness permits no vehicles beyond a certain point.

Dragging a 300 or 400 pound animal many miles to the trailhead is less than inviting for most people.

“You can definitely get elk up in the Rattlesnake,” says Cleveland, “but it’s not for the faint of heart.” With better promotion, though, he wonders whether such a challenging hunt may gain popularity in time.

Cleveland, Assistant Professor Mark Hebblewhite and FWP biologists Bob Henderson and Mike Thompson are spearheading the latest effort to understand more about where and when these elk move and how the animals respond to the presence of people, hunters in particular.

Last year Cleveland was able to outfit 15 elk with radio collars, eight with GPS units that allow researchers to get a reading on the animals’ precise locations as frequently as every half hour. The seven other animals can be monitored by researchers going out and getting a signal from their VHF radio collars. Cleveland hopes to put VHF collars on 20 more elk, giving him location data on more than 10 percent of the herd, enough to extrapolate to the rest of the population.

“As we get further along in the research, we’ll be able to make better recommendations for hunting,” he says. “Right now there’s pretty low pressure on these elk. We’d also like to do some field tests on how the elk respond to the presence of people in general. How close can you get? How much are they becoming habituated to people? If we can be proactive, maybe we can find ways that elk and people can be good neighbors.”

For a free brochure on “Living with Wildlife: Missoula’s Elk Herds,” contact the Montana Natural History Center, 327-0405. To learn more, go to:

www.fwp.mt.gov
www.mhjf.org/MissoulaElkHerds
www.rmef.org
www.fs.fed.us/r1/lolo