

Return of the Elk

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Elk once numbered in the millions and occupied habitats spanning most of North America. Unfortunately, shrinking habitat and overhunting reduced populations to a few persistent herds in the mountainous West. Had the elk not been remarkably adaptable, it might now be extinct.

The eastern elk (*Cervus elaphus canadensis*) lived in eastern boreal and hardwood forests. This was the subspecies native to Arkansas, though historical records indicate it persisted no later than the 1840s. It is now extinct.

The U.S. Forest Service introduced Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) in Franklin County's Black Mountain Refuge in 1933. Three bulls and eight cows from Wichita National Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma were released. The population grew to 125 by 1948, but by then, wildlife biologists were concerned about the herd's future. The herd increased to an estimated 200 by the mid 1950s and then vanished.

No one knows for sure what caused these elk to disappear. Some speculate that illegal hunting, natural mortality and shrinkage of suitable range through natural ecological succession eventually resulted in their extermination.

In 1981, the Game & Fish Commission, in cooperation with private citizens and the National Park Service, initiated another elk restoration project in the Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas. Between 1981 and 1985, 112 elk from Colorado and Nebraska were released at five sites near Pruitt in Newton County. All release sites were on or adjacent Buffalo National River lands. Some elk were ear-tagged and tested for diseases such as brucellosis and leptospirosis prior to release.

The Game & Fish Commission and Park Service monitor elk using field observations, helicopter counts and, in recent years, thermal infrared sensing equipment. Elk have been reported in Washington, Carroll, Boone, Marion, Newton, Searcy, Stone, Conway, Pope, Van Buren and Faulkner counties, but most of the approximately 350 elk in the Arkansas herd occur along 67 miles of the upper and middle Buffalo National River corridor in Newton and Searcy counties, primarily on National Park Service land.

Arkansas elk range covers approximately 225,000 acres. Gene Rush/Buffalo River Wildlife Management Area, which borders Park Service property along the river, is included in this area, and elk are also found seasonally on surrounding private lands. A small breeding population is thought to be

established on private land in southwest Boone and southeast Carroll counties.

Use by elk of national forest lands along the Richland Creek drainage in Searcy County appears to be seasonal. The few elk seen elsewhere in the state are considered transients.

Each year since 1991, biologists in helicopters have counted elk along the Buffalo River corridor and in some private land areas. Seventy-six elk were counted in 1991, 144 in 1992, 142 in 1993 and 140 in 1994. Calf/cow ratios have ranged from 40 to 49 calves per 100 cows, which suggests adequate reproduction. Bull/cow ratios have ranged from 39 to 54 antlered bulls per 100 cows, which compares favorably with data on established elk herds in some western states.

A thermal infrared sensing project initiated in 1994 provides more precise information on elk numbers and distribution. In February and March 1994, 312 elk were found on national park land, AG&FC land and adjacent private lands along the Buffalo River corridor between Boxley and the Highway 65 bridge at Silver Hill. The survey area included all areas normally surveyed by helicopter and additional private and national forest lands where elk were reported in recent years.

Fifty-five elk deaths were documented between 1981 and 1993. Poaching (32 percent) and disease (31 percent) are primary factors in these losses.

Without suitable habitat, elk would soon disappear from Arkansas. Realizing this, state, federal and private interests have worked together to expand and improve elk habitat along the Buffalo River.

Since 1992, the Game & Fish Commission, cooperating with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, has done extensive habitat improvement work on 17,652-acre Gene Rush/Buffalo River WMA. As a result, elk use of the WMA has increased recently, and more habitat work is planned for the future.

The National Park Service also wants to ensure the future of the elk herd. Their efforts to create and maintain beneficial elk habitat along the Buffalo have included conducting prescribed burns, maintaining hay fields and establishing native grass openings.

Based on available habitat along the middle and lower Buffalo, it seems likely elk will expand their current range toward the mouth of the river. Suitable range also exists on private lands in the region, but private landowners may not tolerate extensive elk use. A few are already complaining.

Interest in Arkansas elk increases each year. More and more Arkansans visit the Buffalo River area to see and photograph these magnificent animals, especially in late September and early October when elk are breeding. The herd will never be large compared to herds in western states, but these elk provide unique wildlife watching opportunities, and those who come to see them provide additional tourist revenue for state and local economies.

An elk program team composed of Game & Fish and National Park Service staff recently drafted an elk management plan. Their recommendations include developing and funding future habitat improvement and research projects, formulating plans for a limited elk hunting program in the future, developing a statewide nuisance elk policy, developing public elk viewing sites and assessing sites for herd expansion onto public lands.

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