

Wild Elk Populations on the Rise in Wisconsin

Molly Willing

Historically elk were once native to the state of Wisconsin. Due to over-hunting and loss of habitat, elk were nearly wiped out of the state over 100 years ago. Today, thanks to careful conservation efforts there are now 164 wild elk back in the state.

Reintroduction of elk back into Wisconsin began with a four-year research project conducted by students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in 1995. Twenty-five elk were



Courtesy: Adrian Wydeven

released into a 700 square mile study area in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest just south of Clam Lake.

Herd growth has been slow at times and there has been no shortage of difficulties, but so far the elk population is steadily growing. Dispersion rates, breeding, and other interactions of the elk have been carefully monitored through the use of radio telemetry since their reintroduction. In 2010 there were 38 new calves born in the Clam Lake herd and overall animal losses have remained at a minimum. Herd size was up 9 animals from the previous year.

Thanks to collaborative efforts from the University of Wisconsin system, U.S. Forest Service, The Department of Natural Resources, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, elk producers, landowners, and involved individuals, the elk reintroduction program has been able to ensure a strong comeback into the state.

The only major threat to the elk population in Wisconsin is the growing wolf numbers also in the state. With over 350 wolves now roaming the same territory as the elk, they are now the leading cause of death in the elk herd. "Pro-elk" efforts are being made to lessen the wolf impact on the wild herds. Fundraising efforts manned by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, are aiming to move some elk from the herd to areas with less of a wolf population. More release sites are currently being planned.

Before an elk population can be released in any specific area, the site must first be approved, an environmental assessment of the land must be done, there has to be approval from the Department of Natural Resources, and public participation is also very important to the success of the release. There is currently a push for the next release to be into the central forest area of the state.

Miles Prasnicki raises a small domesticated elk herd near the small town of Jump River Wisconsin. He is among a group of elk supporters that is lobbying for the release of more elk into the state. "There were once many elk in Wisconsin, so we know there is ample habitat to support them. It is just a matter of choosing just the right part of the state in which to release them. It would be really nice one day to be compared in terms of elk population to states like Colorado or Montana." He is convinced that in years to come the elk population will take off in Wisconsin because of all the excellent conservation efforts done by the state so far.

As of spring 2011, the Clam Lake herd had grown to six times the original herd size in only 16 years since the reintroduction. Although showing a definite growth curve, there was a general concern of continued growth due to the limited range the animals were utilizing. Tracking collars and data showed that the herd was not ranging further than about 10 percent of the 1,112 square miles of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Researchers feel that by relocating a few of the elk, this will create a broader range and stimulate more herd growth within the next couple of years.

In May 2011, 12 young elk were trapped, radio collared, and relocated to an "acclimation pen" 10 miles from the site of the original herd. All of the elk captured were 2-4 years of age. The hope is that the younger elk will adapt more quickly to new surroundings and range further away from the original herd. Since younger elk are also the primary target for wolves, another benefit of the relocation is to eliminate some of the immediate wolf threat.

Prasnicki expands on the impact of the wolves on the herd. "Wolves, chiefly the Timber Wolf have had a massive impact on the elk herd growth in the Chequamegon-Nicolet Forest. Both the elk and the Timber Wolf have been reintroduced to the state within the past twenty years. Since we have been the ones to introduce the two natural predator-prey species, it is up to us to protect the elk in the best way we can without directly interfering with nature."

All involved with the elk reintroduction program are anxiously awaiting the spring 2012 elk calf crop. This will be an important year to see if last year's relocating efforts will have a significant impact on future population in Wisconsin.

PRINTED PUBLICATIONS IN WHICH THIS ARTICLE WOULD APPEAR:

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Wisconsin Sportsman Magazine

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