

A large bull elk with impressive, dark, velvet-covered antlers is shown in profile, facing right. The elk has thick, brown fur and is standing in a natural, wooded environment with green foliage in the background. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the elk's coat and the structure of its antlers.

West Virginia

Elk Manag

The opportunity to see elk, especially bull elk, seems to be a popular idea among the state's citizens.

Photo by Terry L Spivey,
Terry Spivey Photography, Bugwood.org

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By Gary Foster

The sound of a bull elk “bugling” or the sight of a majestic bull and cow elk grazing on a high mountain meadow are common images that most folks associate with the western United States and the rugged Rocky Mountains. However, what many people might not realize is that wild elk also occur in several eastern states, including the southern portion of West Virginia.

Historically, elk were common inhabitants across North America and populated the majority of the lower 48 states. During colonial times, the Eastern elk dotted the landscape east of the Mississippi River, including the area which is known today as West Virginia. Eastern elk provided an important source for food, shelter and clothing for American Indians and the early European settlers. Evidence of elk and their distribution throughout the state is illustrated by the widespread use of the word “elk” in place names, such as Elk River, Elk Fork Lake, Elkview and Elk Creek. Elk herds were found in the Ohio and Kanawha River valleys, but the largest elk populations occurred in the state’s high mountain regions.

Elk numbers declined in West Virginia, as well as in the eastern United States, throughout the 1800s as

the area was exploited and became home to European settlers. Subsistence hunting, market hunting and wide-scale timbering all contributed to the decline of the elk population throughout the eastern United States. Historical records indicate elk disappeared from West Virginia during the latter half of the 1800s. The last known occurrences in the Mountain State were reported from the headwaters of the Tygart Valley and Greenbrier rivers around 1875.

In 1972, the then West Virginia Department of Natural Resources conducted its first elk reintroduction feasibility study. In 2005, the Division of Natural Resources, with funding provided by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, completed another study which evaluated habitat potential and the social feasibility of restoring elk to the landscape in West Virginia. The 2005 feasibility study identified areas in West Virginia which could support elk from a habitat (biological) standpoint, as well as from a sociological perspective. Cultural or sociological

Two generations of elk resting in snow at the WV State Wildlife Center.

Courtesy of © Steven Wayne Rotsch



The Southern Coal Fields Region (shaded area) was chosen as the most suitable elk restoration area in West Virginia.

considerations (potential for human/wildlife conflicts for example) must always be given serious consideration when evaluating any type of reintroduction program and when setting population objectives for large wildlife species such as deer and bear.

The feasibility study completed in 2005 identified several multi-county regions in West Virginia which could support elk based upon habitat conditions. The Southern Coal Fields Region, however, was selected as the most suitable restoration area due to its close proximity to Kentucky’s elk restoration area and its potential for a passive management approach, as well as its relatively low potential for human/elk conflicts. One downside to this area is the lack of public land. Residents in this region were polled as part of the feasibility study. The poll indicated that 75 percent of respondents had a positive attitude regarding the restoration of elk in the southern counties, especially as it relates to elk viewing, hunting and the aesthetic pleasure of knowing elk could again be a part of our state’s wildlife resources.

Elk are a gregarious species that thrive on openland habitat, grazing on grasses, forbs and other herbaceous vegetation. As a result of seasonal shifts in food availability, however, elk will also browse on twigs and woody vegetation and consume hard mast such

as acorns to meet their nutritional needs. Male elk are called bulls, with adults on average weighing upwards of 700 pounds. Females, called cows, are smaller, with adults reaching weights of 500 pounds or more. The mating season or “rut” occurs in late September and early October. Cow elk typically give birth in late spring to a single calf which weighs approximately 35 pounds at birth. For the past several decades, elk have received “protected status” in the state. There is no hunting season in West Virginia for this species.

Since the early 1900s, numerous eastern states, including Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina and West Virginia have made attempts to relocate elk from wild elk populations located in the western states. The majority of the reintroductions conducted in the early 1900s were unsuccessful. The most successful venture has been the reintroduction of elk into the southwestern coal fields region of Kentucky during the period between 1997 and 2002. A total of 1,550 elk were released at eight different



Courtesy of John Flesher

An old surface mine in Mingo County illustrates potential elk habitat.

sites in a 16-county restoration zone. This project was funded with \$4 million from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and nearly \$1 million from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, mostly in personnel costs. Kentucky currently supports the largest elk herd in the eastern United States, with an estimated population of 11,000 animals.

The successful reintroduction of elk in Kentucky and the subsequent migration of elk into West Virginia have elevated the need to develop an effective, science-based elk management plan for West Virginia. The DNR Wildlife Resources Section recently implemented its agency's "West Virginia Elk Management Plan (2011-2015)" which outlines the DNR's goals and objectives related to the management of the elk resource in West Virginia.

The cornerstone of the plan is the designation of a seven-county area located in the Southern Coal Fields Region of the state as West Virginia's Elk Management Area. McDowell, Logan, Wyoming, Mingo and the southern portions of Boone, Lincoln and Wayne counties comprise the elk management area. This

region is characterized by heavily forested rugged mountains and reclaimed grassland areas which are primarily associated with coal mining operations. An objective of the plan is for elk to naturally populate the elk management area through a passive management approach (natural movement of wild elk from Kentucky). DNR personnel will monitor the population and manage it accordingly for recreational opportunities. Because of the increased potential for crop and personal property damage outside of the designated management area, subsequent legislation will be promulgated to allow management to prevent elk from becoming established outside of the desired area.

During the fall of 2010, a draft of the West Virginia Elk Management Plan was placed on the DNR website (www.wvdnr.gov). In addition, a public news release was disseminated to media outlets across the state requesting public feedback on the agency's Elk Management Plan. Although the response rate was light, 94 percent of respondents favored the idea of elk being restored to West Virginia.

Wildlife Resources Section personnel are in the process of developing monitoring protocol to evaluate the current status and distribution of the elk herd in West Virginia, as well as developing a GIS database of the large corporate landholders in the elk management area. Hunters and the general public can support the elk management effort by reporting elk sightings to either the DNR District Office in Beckley (304-256-6947) or the McClintic DNR Office (304-675-0871).

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