



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Rocky Mountain Elk

You must search hard and long for a wildlife species surpassing the magnificence of the Rocky Mountain elk. Springtime velvet grows on the antlers of males, and is later shed to reveal 40 inches of branching tines. Adult bulls may weigh 750 pounds, the cows 500 pounds. In the fall rutting season, bulls bugle when establishing and defining their harems. The piercing high-pitched call, echoing down a mountain ridge, is a wonder to hear.

The elk is New Mexico's largest big game animal and lives in all suitable habitats. Yet by the early 20th century elk had vanished from the state completely, following their disappearance from the plains states to the east.

There were two subspecies of elk in New Mexico before the turn of the century: the Rocky Mountain

(*cervus elaphus nelsoni*) and the Merriam's (*Cervus elaphus merriami*). Biologists had classified the Merriam's elk, which lived in the southern mountains of New Mexico and Arizona, as a separate species. In recent years, however, the debate has been raised whether the Merriam's elk might have been a geographical race of the Rocky Mountain elk, which lived in northern mountains of the state and on up into Canada. This is generally accepted now. In any

event, the Merriam's elk is forever gone.

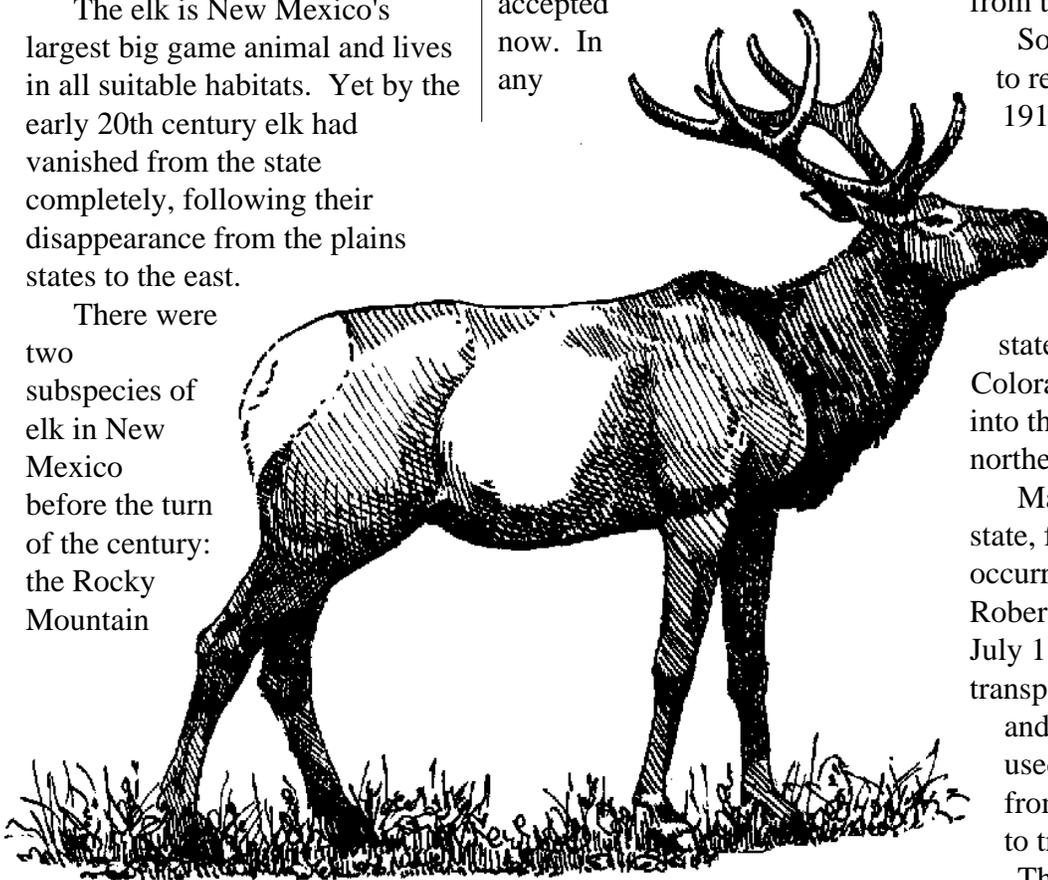
Elk were first protected by closing the summer to hunting starting in 1880. As late as 1875, groups of 2,000 elk were seen in the state. Elk were declared game and thus protected by law in 1903, but this could not save the species from extinction in New Mexico. As more settlers moved in from the East, elk were shot for food, and their habitats were altered by ranching, and by timber and mining operations. Elk were gone from the state by 1909.

Soon after, however, attempts to reintroduce elk began. In 1910 or 1911, the Bartlett Ranch (Vermejo Park) purchased 15 Rocky Mountain elk to be placed in a large fenced area, and in 1911 the

state purchased 12 elk from Colorado and transplanted them into three different areas of the northern mountains.

Many other transplants into state, federal, and private lands occurred by the time the Pittman-Robertson Act became effective July 1, 1938. Federal funds for transplants were then available, and New Mexico has since used these excise-tax monies from sporting equipment sales to transplant more elk.

The first elk transplant using



Pittman-Robertson funds was in 1954 in the Gila National Forest. The 16 animals came from Yellowstone National Park and the Chama Land and Cattle Company. From 1954 to 1967, the state transplanted 638 elk into New Mexico locations. Elk are now found in most mountainous areas of the state.

Elk are large; the bulls carry huge antlers and their meat is prized by hunters. Full antlers are grown by males at about three years of age, with the spike antlers appearing at one year. Antlers average six times each and are 40 to 45 inches long, weighing up to 15 pounds. Elk are considered to have reached old age at eight to 10 years, but have lived much longer in captivity.

Elk have two pairs of external scent glands – one slightly below the eye and one on the outside of the hind leg. The animal's length is 80 to 100 inches from nose tip to tail tip, and shoulder heights is from 55 to 60 inches.

Cow elk reach breeding age at 27 months, though six to seven years of age is their prime. Bulls begin to bugle and to wallow in mud baths in late August. Cows are gathered into harems as the bulls become aggressive, fighting among themselves for territories and cows. The peak of breeding is usually the middle of September to the middle of October in New Mexico

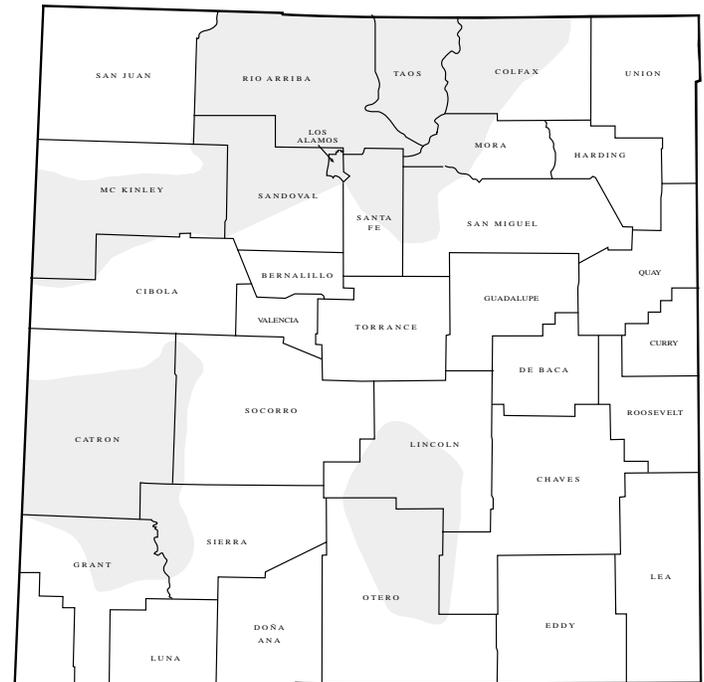
In late May and early June, calves are born, weighing 30 to 40 pounds. At first they are spotted in appearance, and are sometimes found in aspen or open meadows. In mid-August, calves lose their spots and acquire a tawny coat with a light rump patch. Calves may be susceptible to predators

such as coyotes, mountain lions, and bears.

Elk need cover and good habitat to thrive. Much of what they eat is grass, and they typically graze in meadows in the early morning or evening, then spend the rest of the day in timber. This provides a measure of protection from predators, insects, and people. They are capable of astonishing speed in the forest.

With restoration of elk herds has come increased elk hunting. In 1960, for example, about 2,500 licenses were issued. In 1993, the figure was about 21,700. These are licenses for rifle hunters, bow hunters, and muzzle-loader hunters, with separate seasons for each.

A variety of elk calls, ranging from grunt tubes to reeds that mimic the elk's bugle, is used by hunters and photographers. When you get a bull to answer, you are on the right track.



*Shaded areas show elk habitat.*

---

**Wildlife Notes is published by  
the Department of Game and Fish.  
If you are interested in obtaining  
additional copies, please send  
your request to:  
Colleen Welch  
Conservation Education Section  
Department of Game and Fish  
PO Box 25112  
Santa Fe, NM 87504  
(505) 476-8119**

---