



Rocky Mountain Elk, Travis Zaffarano

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK (*Cervus canadensis nelsoni*)

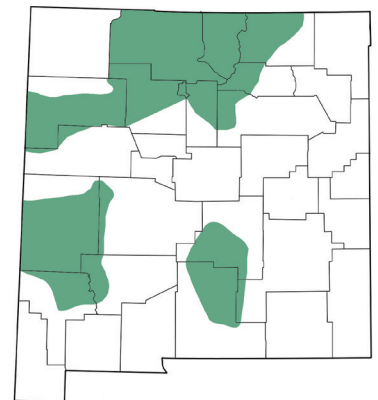
Elk are the second largest member of the deer family (Cervidae), ranging from 800-1100lbs for mature bulls, and from 500-660lbs for adult cows.

RETURN OF AN ICONIC SPECIES

The Rocky Mountain Elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) is one of four existing subspecies of elk within the United States, and is the largest mammal in New Mexico. Considered to be one of the most coveted big game animals within the state, their existence within New Mexico is the result of extensive reintroduction efforts after native populations were extirpated by the early 1900's. Both Rocky Mountain Elk and the now extinct Merriam's Elk (*C. e.*

merriami) historically inhabited the mountainous regions of the state and were an important cultural icon to many southwestern tribes across their range. Merriam's elk were known to populate the southern mountains of both New Mexico and Arizona before European settlement. However, unregulated harvest as well as changes that arose from the novel presence of sheep and cattle on the landscape contributed to their sharp decline in the late 1800's. By 1900, elk were not being reported in the

► Continued



Elk territories in New Mexico



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Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations

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southern mountains, and the last known elk in the northern reaches of the state was reported in 1909.

Shortly after elk were gone from the state, reintroduction of the species began in 1911. It was then that the Bartlett Ranch (Vermejo Park) purchased 15 Rocky Mountain elk and the state of New Mexico imported 12 elk from Colorado to re-establish small populations in the northern mountains. Several other reintroduction efforts took place after the Pittman Robertson Act was passed in 1938 which provided funds to the state from excise taxes placed on sporting equipment such as firearms and ammunition. This legislative act is still enacted to this day and provides an essential funding source for state wildlife management agencies throughout the U.S. Some of the early funds were used to continue reintroduction of elk into New Mexico, and between 1954 to 1967 the Department of Game and Fish (est. 1912) transplanted 638 elk into the state. Since then, elk have flourished in many of their historic ranges within the mountainous regions, and are estimated to range from 81,100 to 105,700 (2018 data) across New Mexico.

DESCRIPTION

Elk are the second largest member of the deer family (*Cervidae*), ranging from 800-1100lbs for mature bulls, and from 500-660lbs for adult cows. With a total body length between 80-100 inches and front shoulder height between 55-60 inches, they are of formidable size, second only to moose (*Alces alces*) in the deer family. The Native American name for elk is “*Wapati*”, which is used to describe their characteristic “white rump”. They are typically tawny brown, or light tan in color, with a mane of darker, longer hair from the front



Rocky Mountain cow and calf, Travis Zaffarano

shoulders forward. Only male (bull) elk have antlers, which are grown in late spring and summer and shed every year before being replaced. Antlers begin to grow at year one and continue throughout the bull’s lifespan, with maximum antler size typically seen in 7-8-year-old bulls. Antlers average 6 tines each with a length up to 40-45 inches and can weigh 15-20lbs each. Antler size can vary from one bull to the next, and is influenced by factors such as age, spring forage quality, and nutritional condition of bulls at a young age. Their large antlers are used primarily for establishing dominance over rival males during the rut (breeding season) but are also useful for defense against predators. Average lifespans for elk differ, with cows typically living longer (15-18 years) than bulls (10-13 years).

ECOLOGY

Elk in New Mexico are often associated with forested mountain and foothill ecosystems with a mix of open meadows and cover. They are commonly found in aspen and pine forests as well as pinon and juniper uplands. Elk are strict herbivores whose diet consist primarily of grasses and forbs. They are typically found foraging during the early morning and twilight hours

in open meadows. During the day, elk often seek cover in the thick timber; resting in shaded, cool areas where they can escape mid-day temperatures and are less likely to be discovered by predators. Some elk in northern New Mexico migrate between high elevation habitats in the summer months and low elevation habitats in winter when snow accumulates in the mountains, making it more difficult to forage. Breeding season for elk occurs in mid-late fall when mature bull elk can be heard bugling and are often seen with antlers locked together in sparring bouts. Bull elk spar with rival males to establish dominance in the herd which ensures breeding with a harem of breeding age cow elk. In this way, not all bulls will mate each year and one bull typically breeds with several cows. With spring comes a surge of newly born elk calves. Peak calving for most elk is near June 1st when spring vegetation is highly nutritious. Newborn calves average 30-35lbs at birth and have speckled coats to aid in camouflage, their primary defense against predators during the first week of life. Common predators of elk calves include coyotes, black bears, and mountain lions.

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