



# TAKING AIM AT DEPREDEATION

**Montana's new liberalized elk and deer season is designed to help landowners and hunters**

BY TOM DICKSON

**F**WP officials are hoping a new liberalized five-week season that begins this fall in areas with overabundant elk will provide more opportunities for hunters while reducing elk numbers and associated depredation problems for landowners.

"Many landowners are having some real difficulties," says Gary Hammond, supervisor of FWP's south-central region. "In some areas, there are too many elk feeding on haystacks in winter, early-season grasses in spring,

*Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.*

and standing crops in summer and fall." Hammond adds that overabundant elk on a few winter ranges are damaging grassland and woody shrub habitat.

Though Montana's elk harvest has nearly tripled since the mid-1970s, it hasn't been enough to reduce elk populations in many hunting districts. FWP has substantially increased the number of antlerless permits and special late and early seasons. But that hasn't been sufficient to keep elk numbers from growing in many areas.

Adding to the problem: Reduced access on public and private land for public hunting has

made it harder for hunters to harvest elk.

Currently, 50 percent of Montana's elk management units exceed their target elk populations; more than 70 percent of units with special seasons have too many elk.

Over the past three decades, FWP has been relatively conservative in its use of either-sex seasons to manage elk. "But now we are obligated to try something different," Hammond says.

In February, the FWP Commission eliminated most special seasons and reaffirmed its commitment to using the five-week season as the main tool for man-

aging elk populations.

Montana's recently revised elk management plan, which guides elk management decisions, set population objectives for areas throughout Montana. The objectives factor in landowner tolerance, hunter requests, and biological data. The plan notes that existing seasons, including late and early special hunts, have failed to lower elk numbers to population objectives.

"We've had so many special seasons that elk could move around and escape hunters," Hammond explains. "When one season opened, another right next door closed, and the elk moved





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**TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING** Frustrated that elk numbers continue to climb in many areas, the FWP Commission decided to eliminate most special early and late seasons and increase antlerless elk hunting opportunities during the five-week season.

tem, there still may be some late-season hunting. Hammond says the FWP Commission has the authority to extend the general five-week season in certain hunting districts when harvests are too low. Also, FWP will offer early-season backcountry hunts, as well as some late-season hunts aimed at reducing migratory elk populations.

In addition, FWP officials say they are prepared to use game

this proposal doesn't prevent landowners from fee hunting," Hammond says. "But it's no longer the case that someone can sell bull hunting privileges, not allow public access, and then expect FWP to provide a late-season damage hunt to knock down cow elk numbers."

Hammond says the new format provides landowners with the public hunting "management tools" they need to manage elk at

## "We're committed to having a more proactive and streamlined system of addressing game damage problems."

from one area to another."

Hammond adds that elk also congregate on private land that is off-limits to public hunting.

"By eliminating most special seasons, which hunters told us were way too complex, we can apply more uniform pressure during the five-week season," he says. "That will distribute elk more widely and allow hunters to reach them more effectively."

Though the liberalized season is designed to increase cow harvest, another benefit may be to provide hunters with more access to bulls. Many hunters complain that too many landowners allow access during the regular season

only to those willing to pay for bulls. Local hunters are allowed in only during late seasons to remove cow elk for population control.

This often doesn't work because the elk move to districts without late-season hunts. Also, it bothers many hunters that they never have access to bulls.

"One of the chief complaints from hunters as we revised our elk management plan was the equity issue," says Hammond. "Hunters believe it's unfair they don't have more opportunities to hunt bull elk."

Though the five-week season remains the core of FWP's new elk and deer management sys-

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