



R2 WILDLIFE BULLETIN

Annual State of the Elk

SPECIAL REPORT
AUGUST 2026



Elk in HD270.



Elk in HD210. Photo by Kirstie Yeager.

If there's one guarantee in life and in wildlife biology, it's that no two years are alike—each year brings new challenges that require flexibility and adaptation. Elk are no different—each year they must navigate a landscape altered by wildfires, windstorms, drought, and floods. Sometimes these alterations are subtle; sometimes, not so much.

We bipeds, too, must adapt to change. Mild winters usually mean good things for big game but may also mean hastened green-up and a rather more hectic flight schedule. (We will FIGHT EACH OTHER for access to the limited number of helicopters and pilots available to us...) Mild winters also tend to yield higher elk populations, which can be a boon to hunters but a headache for producers.

Staffing changes are another inescapable reality in any profession, and this year Region 2 has undergone some significant ones.

This year's State of the Elk looks a bit different from previous years. You may remember from last year's issue that we created a new management area, carved out of portions of the Upper Clark Fork and Blackfoot. Our first biologist for this area, Thomas Sutton, began his duties shortly after 2025 spring surveys concluded, so we presented the data as we had previously. This current issue presents data separately for all 5

management areas for the first time.

We also lost a couple of our biologists in spring 2026: Lee Tafelmeyer left the Blackfoot to pursue an opportunity in Wyoming, and Ryan Klimstra left the Missoula area for Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The Missoula position has been filled by Sam Martinez (previous Libby area biologist) and we are working to fill the Blackfoot position. We thank Kara Clarke for filling in to get these surveys completed, and Alicia Wallingford for helping compile the data.

(Kara has filled in in this capacity many times before, and she also has now moved on to pursue her master's degree in Wyoming. Good luck, Kara, and thank you!)

In the meantime, Kirstie, Thomas, and I are eager to share our survey data with you—counting wildlife from the air is a challenging but enjoyable job duty that many of us look forward to every year. Our surveys help inform future hunting regulations and quotas, give us an idea of how the habitat looks and how it's affecting elk distribution and movement patterns, and just give us an excellent bird's-eye view and deeper connection to the incredible landscapes that we help steward, which we couldn't get any other way.

*-Rebecca Mowry
Editor, I guess?*

Lower Clark Fork

Sam Martinez
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***Sam Martinez was hired as the new Missoula area wildlife biologist in summer 2026, replacing Ryan Klimstra, who departed in the spring. Surveys were completed by Region 2 Access Resource Specialist Kara Clarke, and the survey narrative below was provided by Alicia Wallingford, who filled in as the Missoula area biologist temporarily.*

Due to financial constraints, HDs in the Lower Clark Fork are surveyed on an alternating schedule. This spring, only HD201 was completely surveyed. Certain herds in HDs 200 and 202 were counted this year, but these counts are incomplete and not used for trend.

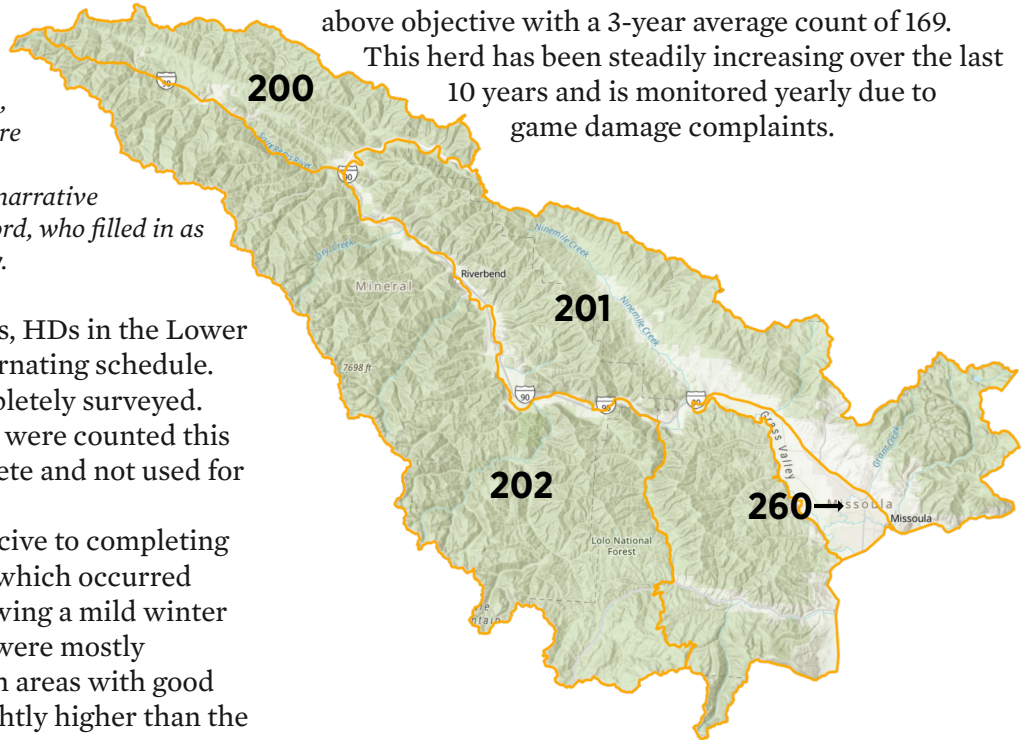
Spring weather was conducive to completing flights during optimum green-up, which occurred earlier than normal this year following a mild winter with little lasting snow cover. Elk were mostly congregated in low-elevation, open areas with good detection. The total count was slightly higher than the last complete survey in 2024, but the three-year average is still within the goal range.

The calf: cow ratio this year is indicative of a productive elk population, and has increased from 2024. The bull: cow ratio was lower than 2024, but is meeting our goal of at least 10 bulls for every 100 cows.

The North Hills-Evaro herd in HD201 increased by over 60 elk this year, which is the fourth year in a row of a sizeable increase. This herd has a history of rapidly increasing and causing trouble for local producers, and has been managed in the past with liberalized cow harvest on private lands.

In HD202, the elk between Cougar Creek and Quartz Creek are surveyed every year. This population has a sub-objective of 50 to 100 elk and is currently

above objective with a 3-year average count of 169. This herd has been steadily increasing over the last 10 years and is monitored yearly due to game damage complaints.

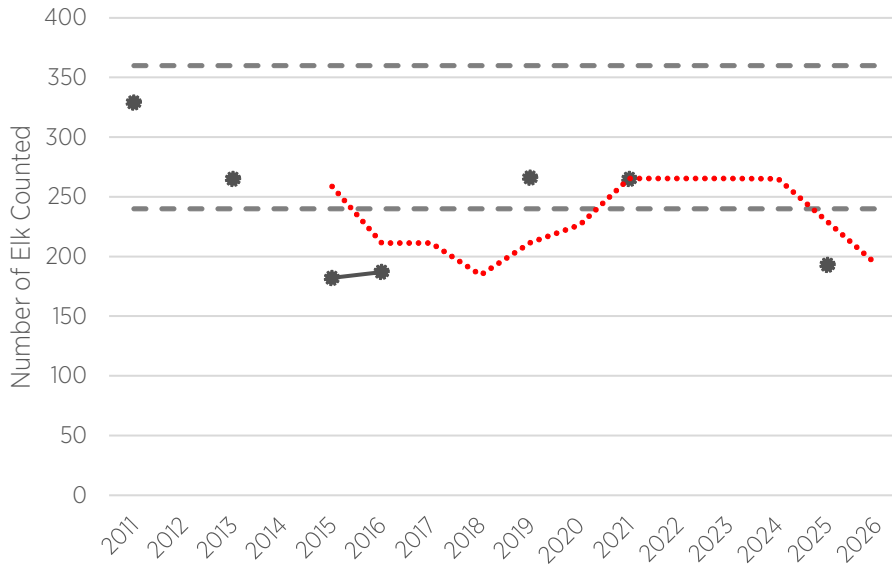


HD	2026 Count	Calf:Cow	Bull:Cow	Most recent previous count	3-year avg	Goal	Status
200	NA	NA	NA	193 (2025)	193*	240-360	Below
201	2355	0.40	0.11	2109 (2024)	2210	1600-2400	Within
202	NA	NA	NA	602 (2025)	602**	400-600	Above

*HD200 objectives based on 5-year average. The only complete survey in the last 5 years was in 2025.

** HD202 was not fully surveyed this year. The 3-year average includes only the 2025 survey.

HD200

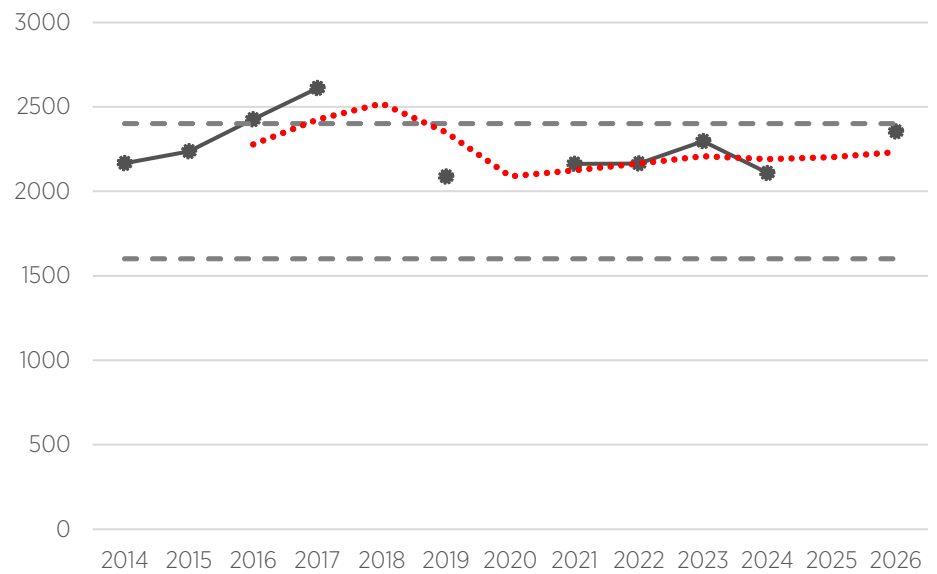


Observed population charts on this and subsequent pages: Dotted red line indicates 3-year average count, and dashed black lines indicate the population goal range.

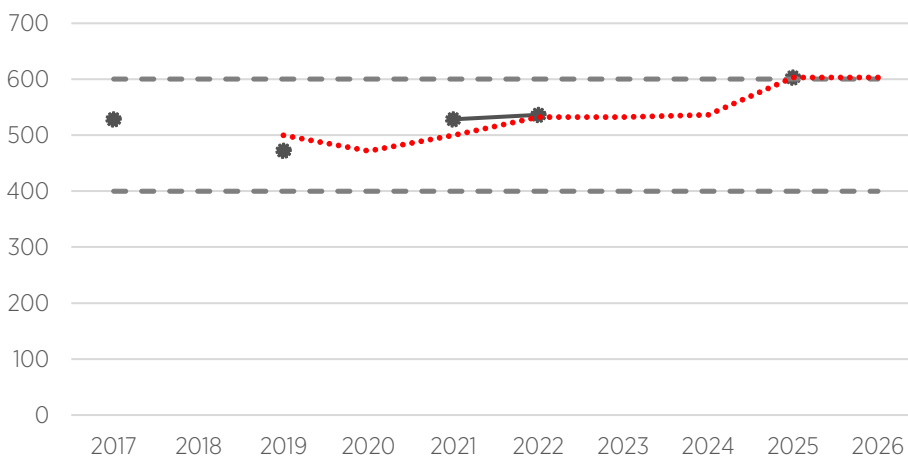


HD201 elk. Photo by Kara Clarke.

HD201



HD202



Date ranges vary due to historic boundary changes or creation of new HDs.

Anaconda-Philipsburg

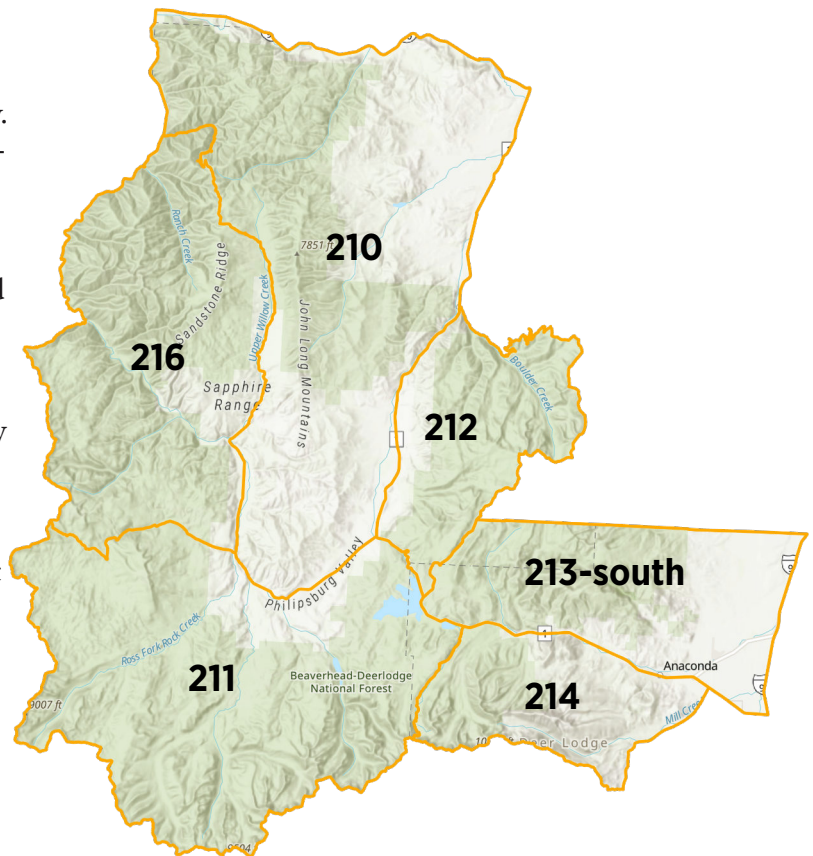
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In 2026, all hunt districts (HDs) in the Anaconda and Philipsburg areas were aerially surveyed during the winter. Survey conditions were good despite the mild winter with little snow. Counts were likely average unlike the higher-than-average counts observed in most districts in 2025. Bulls tend to be more difficult to find as they often remain in the timber in smaller bachelor groups. Thus, bull to cow ratios generally tend to be biased low compared to calf to cow ratios.

Elk from multiple HDs (211, 212, 216, and the southern end of 210) congregate on winter range in the southern end of the Philipsburg Valley and as such, are managed with a single population objective (range 1,040 – 1,560). This population is considerably over objective and has been steadily increasing with a 2026 count of 3,015. Low harvest success on all elk B licenses issued across these HDs along with mild winters and high calf survival have likely contributed to population growth. Working ranches continue to see significant impacts to haystacks and standing crops. As a result, the private land elk B license quota has been increased greatly to mitigate damage and bring the population towards the objective range.

Other elk populations in the area are relatively stable. The three-year average counts for HDs 210-North and 214 are within the objective range.

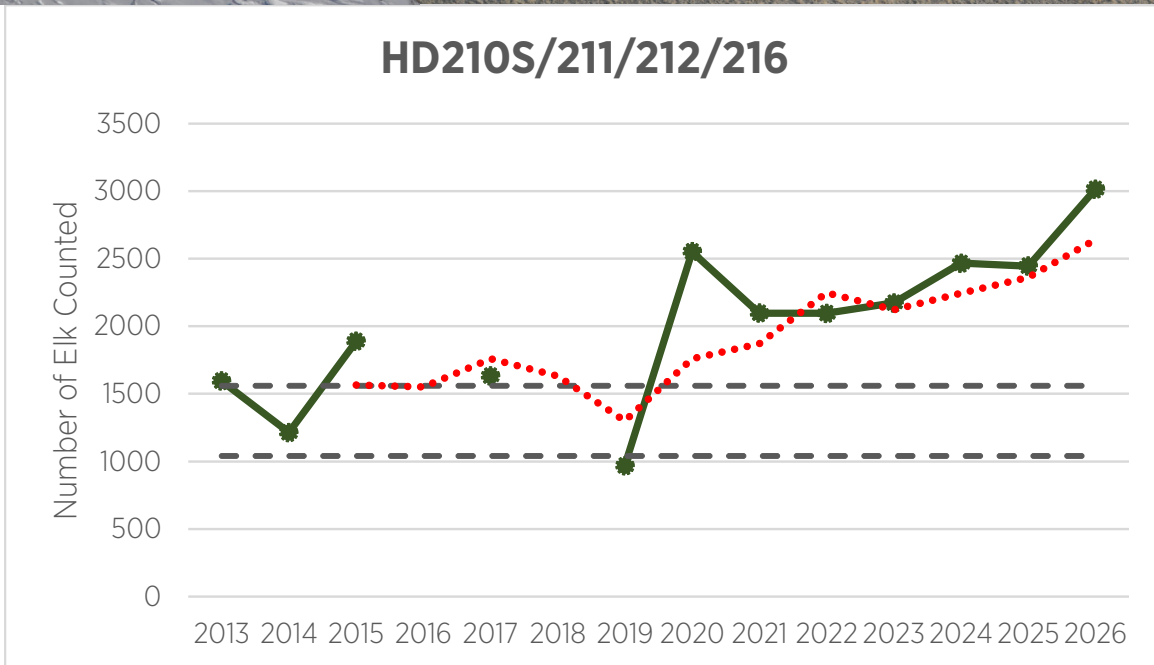
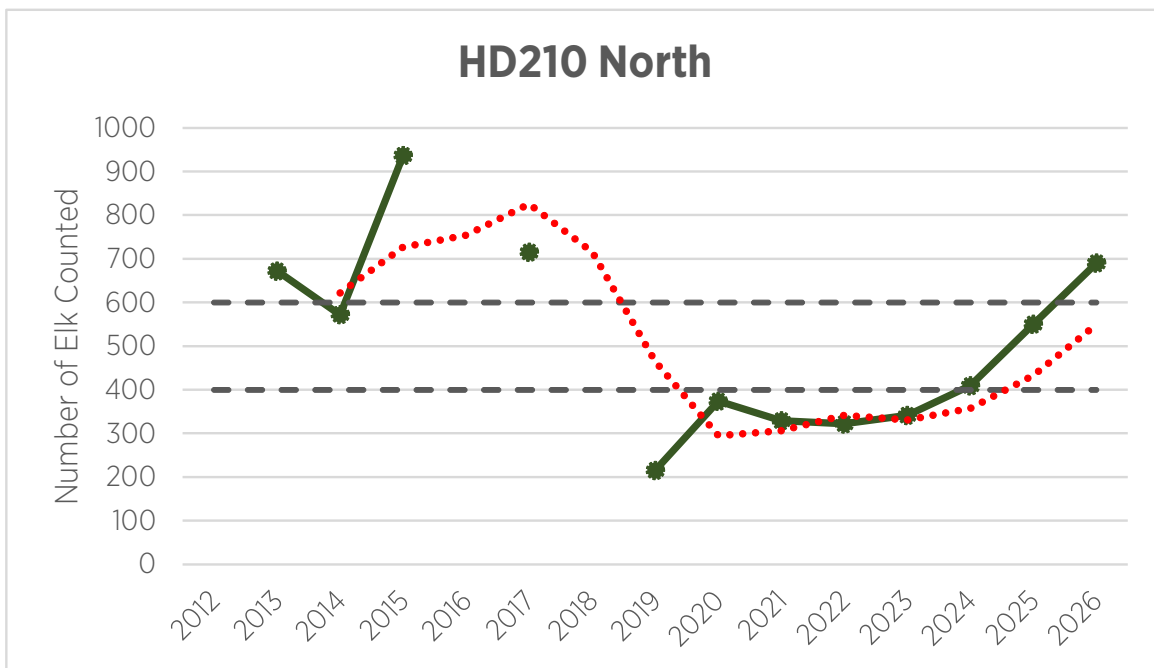
Sex and age ratios were also observed. All sex ratio (bull to cow) objectives for these HDs were set at ≥ 10 bulls per 100 cows in the new Elk Management Plan (2023). The three-year average observed sex ratios

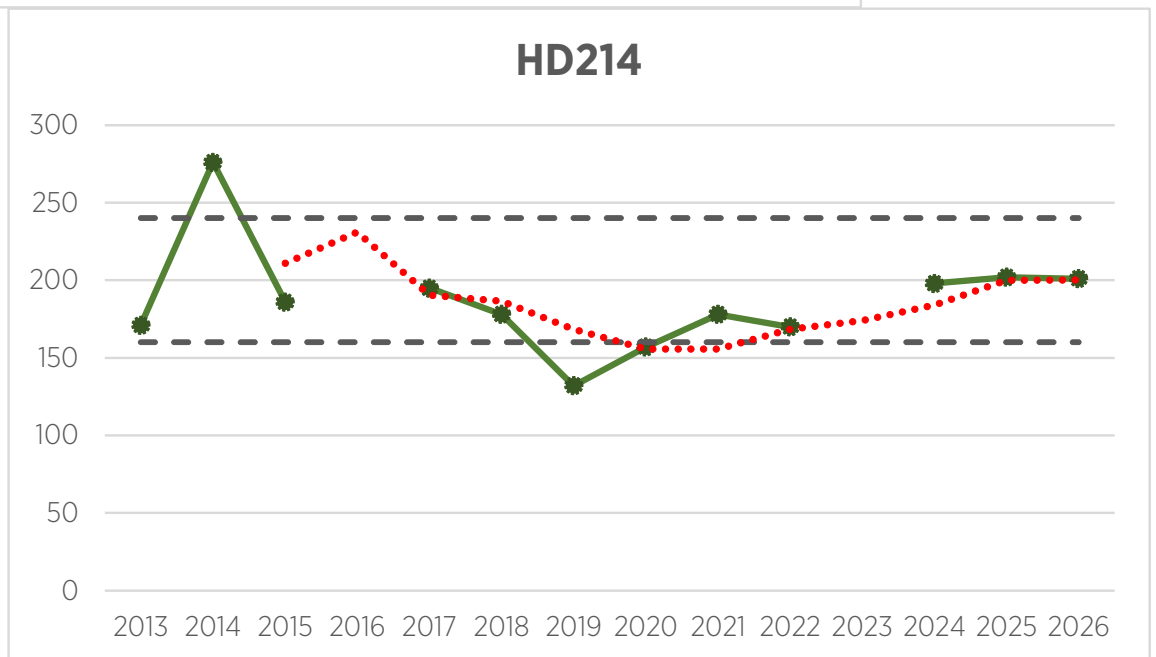
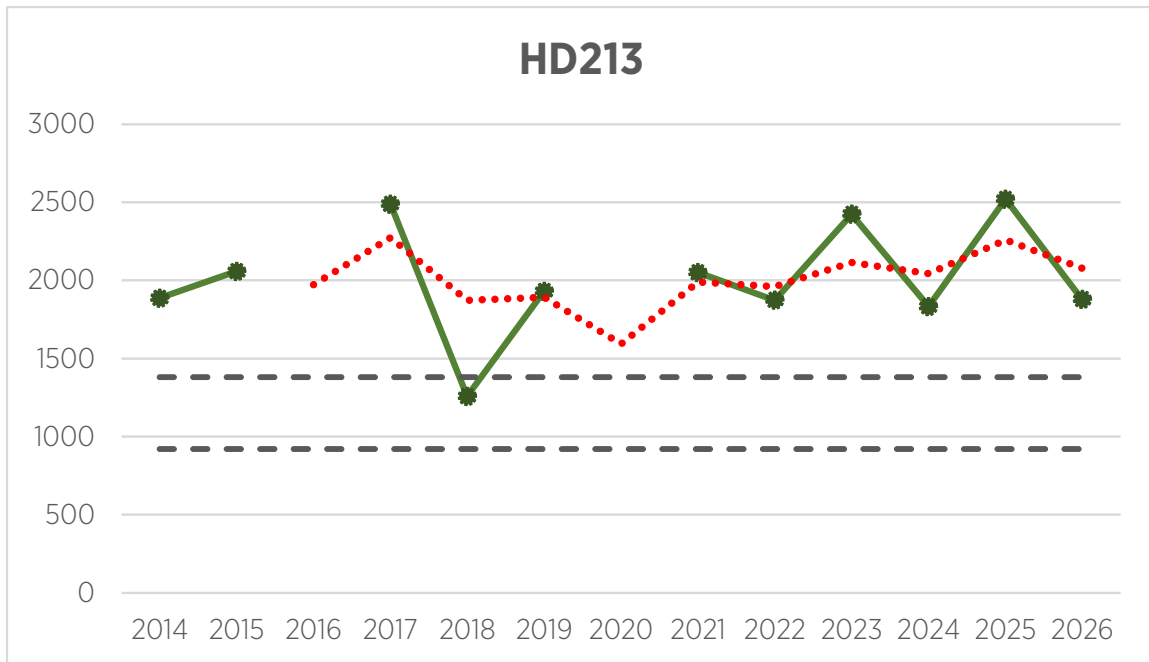


for all HDs were within objective. All age ratio (calf to cow) objectives were set at ≥ 20 calves per 100 cows in the new plan. The three-year average observed age ratios for all HDs were within objective.

***Below: Kirstie Yeager and Thomas Sutton share duties in HD213, but data for that district is presented here.*

HD	2026 Count	Calf:Cow	Bull:Cow	2025 Count	3-year avg	Goal	Status
210N	690	0.50	0.17	550	550	400-600	Within
210S, 211, 212, 216	3015	0.38	0.11	2445	2642	1040-1560	Above
213**	1878	0.25	0.06	2520	2077	920-1380	Above
214	201	0.27	0.06	202	200	160-240	Within





Right: A small group of elk faces off with two bighorn sheep rams on Garrity Mountain WMA west of Anaconda (HD214).



Deer Lodge

Thomas Sutton

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The 2026 winter elk surveys indicate that elk continue to be abundant throughout the Deer Lodge Area. Between late December 2025 and early February 2026, FWP biologists surveyed Hunting Districts 213*, 215, 217, 291, and 293 by helicopter to monitor elk numbers and evaluate the health of local herds. Although snow conditions were generally poorer than the previous winter, which made elk more difficult to locate, most areas showed stable or increasing numbers compared to recent years.

Overall, elk populations remain well above long-term averages in every hunting district surveyed. In four of the five districts, the average number of elk observed over the past three years exceeds the population objectives established for those herds. While a few districts recorded slightly fewer elk than were observed in 2025, these differences were likely the result of limited snow cover rather than actual declines in population size. Mild winters allow many elk, particularly mature bulls, to remain in forested areas at higher elevations where they are more difficult to observe from the air.

The surveys also provide insight into herd productivity by measuring the number of calves and bulls relative to adult cows. Calf production remained generally good across the Deer Lodge area, suggesting that recent reproduction has been sufficient to support continued population growth. Bull ratios remain low, but every district continues to meet the management objective for the minimum number of bulls in the population.

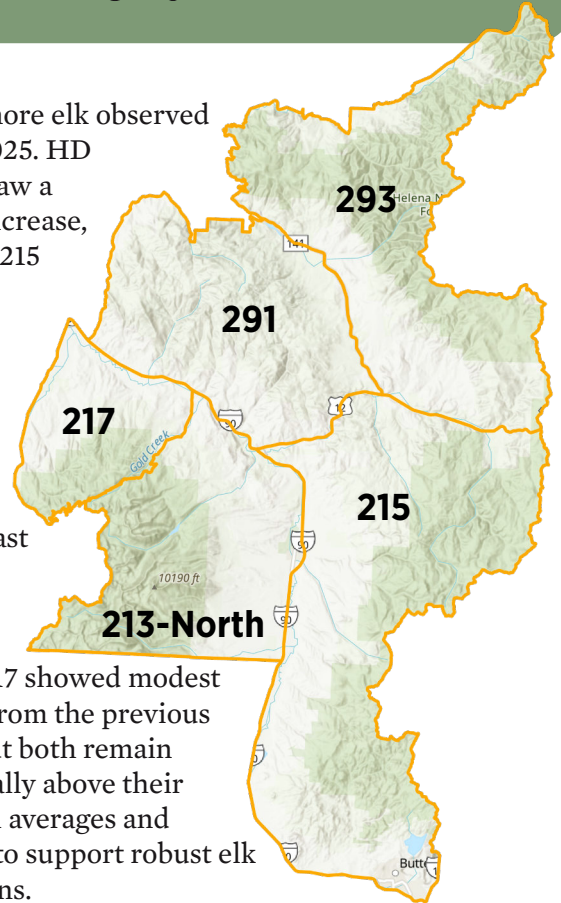
Among the individual hunting districts, HD 291 showed the largest increase, with approximately 30

percent more elk observed than in 2025. HD

293 also saw a notable increase, while HD215 remained relatively stable with nearly the same number of elk as last year.

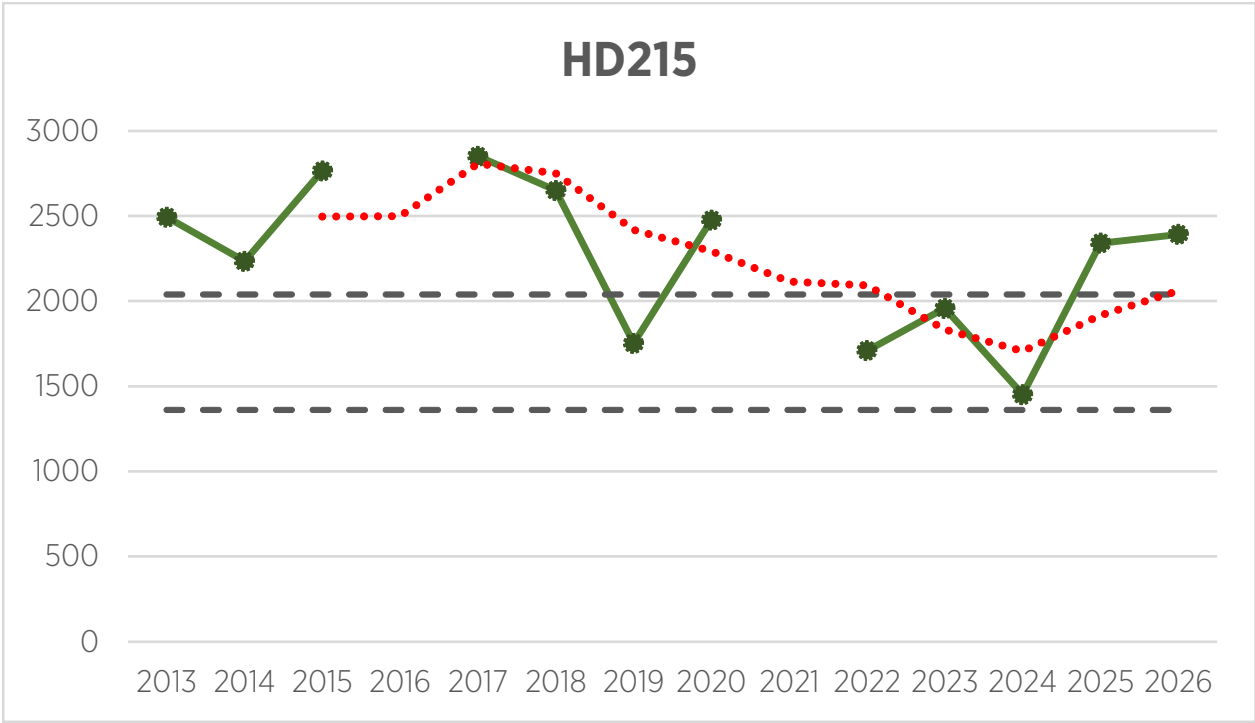
Hunting Districts 213 and 217 showed modest declines from the previous survey, but both remain substantially above their long-term averages and continue to support robust elk populations.

Taken together, the 2026 survey results suggest that elk populations throughout the Deer Lodge Area remain high. This is likely due to a series of relatively mild winters. If these conditions persist, elk numbers are expected to continue increasing in many areas.

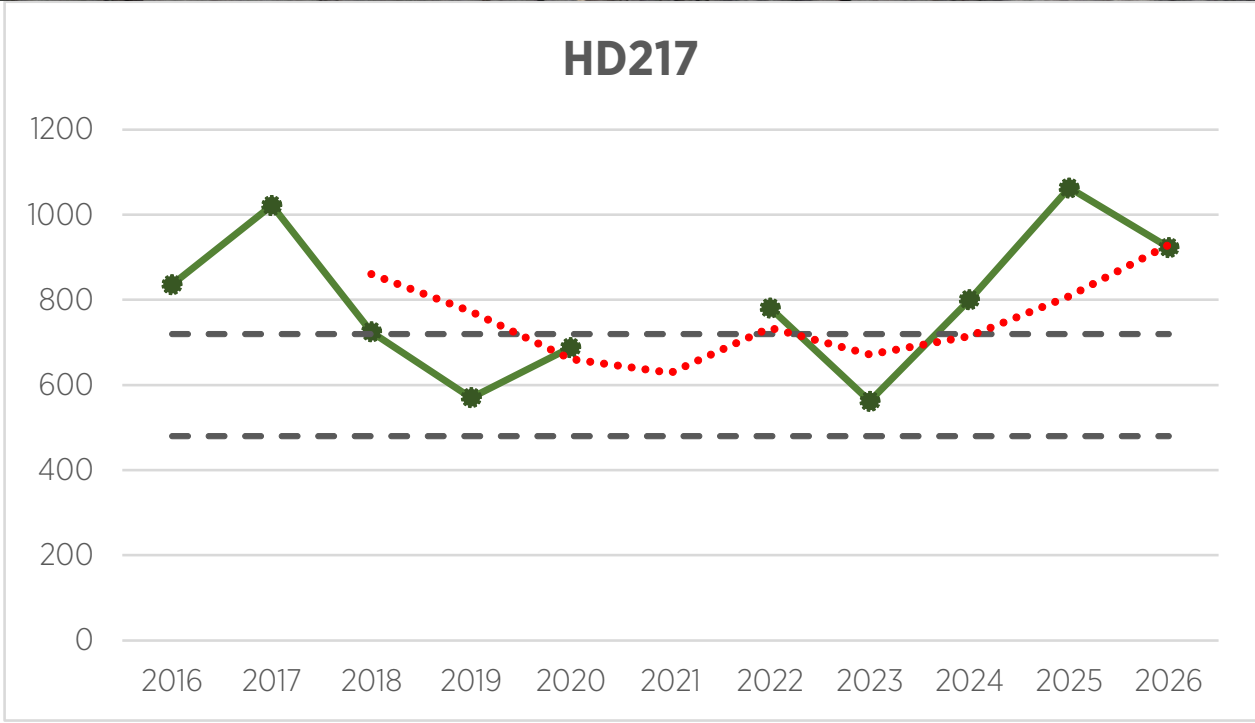


**See Upper Clark Fork section for HD213 data.*

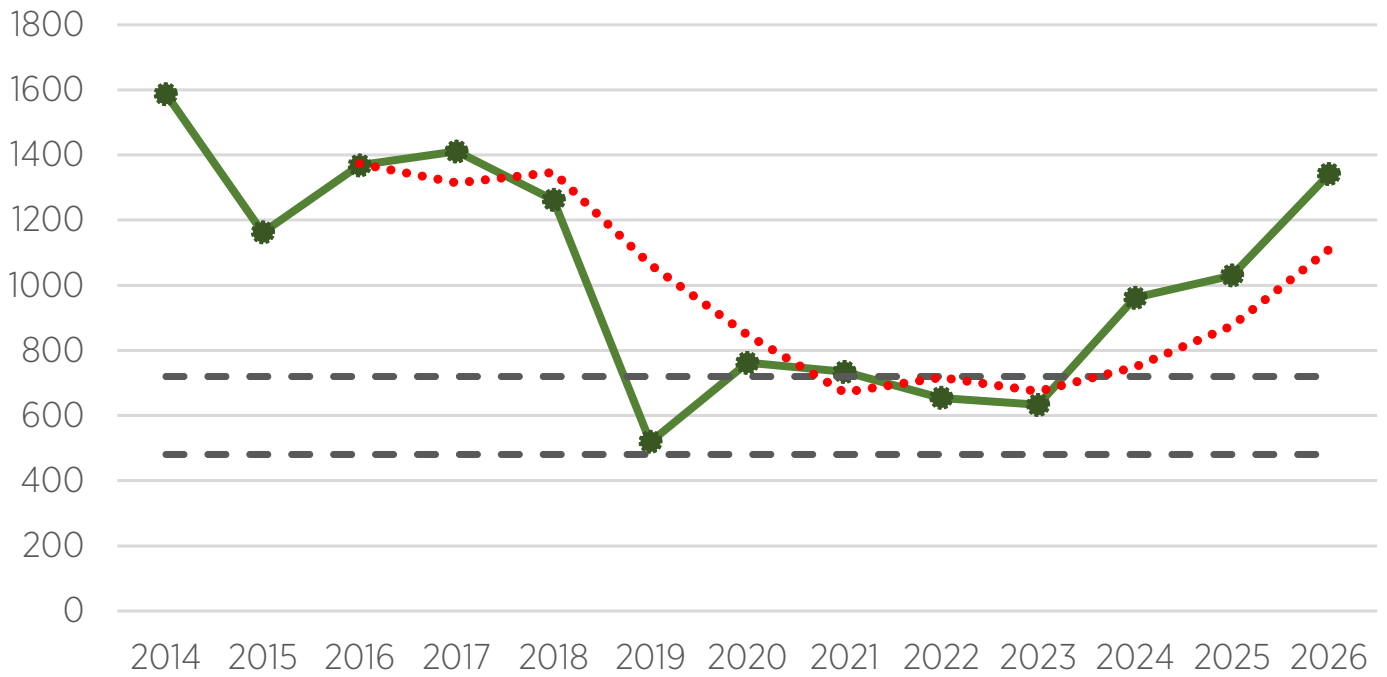
HD	2026 Count	Calf:Cow	Bull:Cow	2025 Count	3-year avg	Goal	Status
215	2392	0.37	0.09	2340	2061	1360-2040	Above
217	923	0.35	0.17	1063	929	480-720	Above
291	1341	0.42	0.26	1030	1111	480-720	Above
293	1096	0.36	0.16	942	1019	600-900	Above



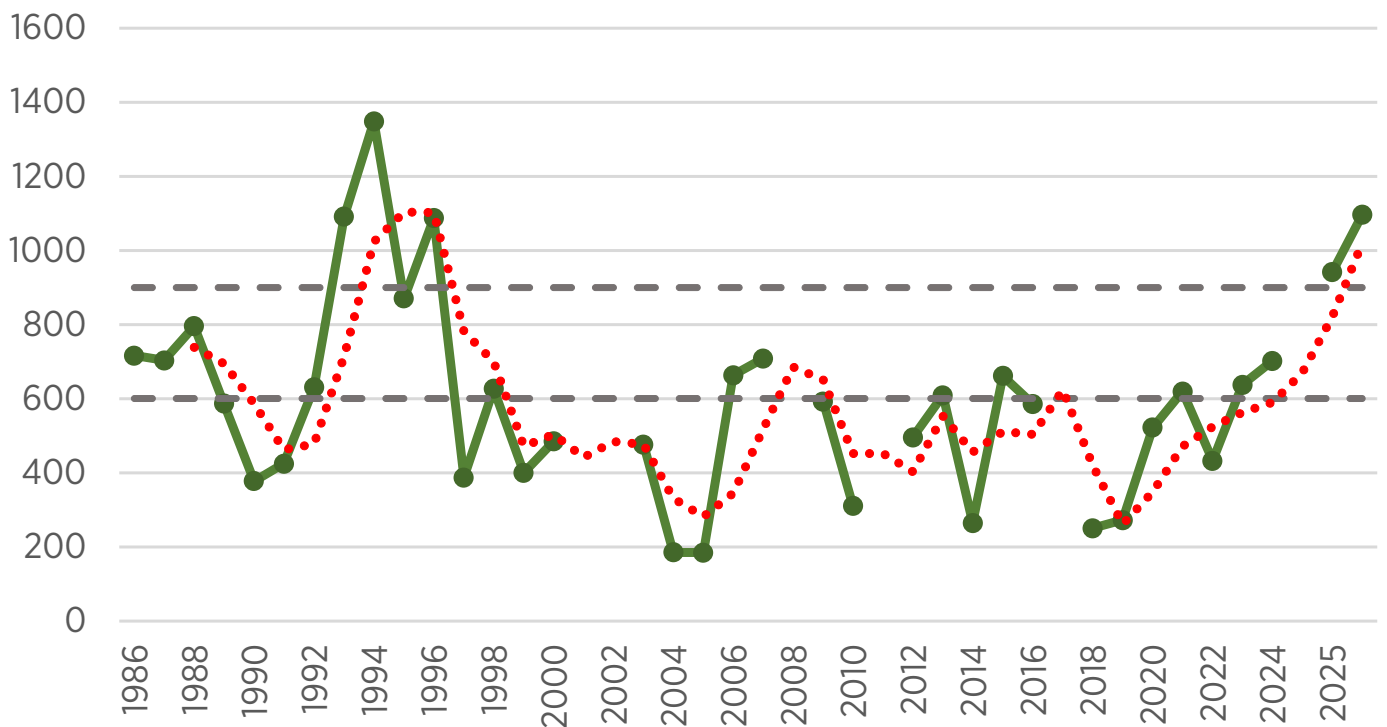
Elk in HD215.



HD291



HD293



Bitterroot

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As with last year, all my surveys were flown in a helicopter. We got a stretch of good weather and were able to fly everything except HD250 back-to-back between March 27 and March 29. A week later, we got another window and I completed HD250 in two flights on April 6. The MPG Ranch survey (HD204) was again flown by Craig Jourdonnais.

With the mild winter and spring, green-up occurred very early and progressed extremely fast. Despite this, we managed to catch most of the elk herds out in the open and found an adequate number of bulls without needing to put in a lot of extra effort for them.

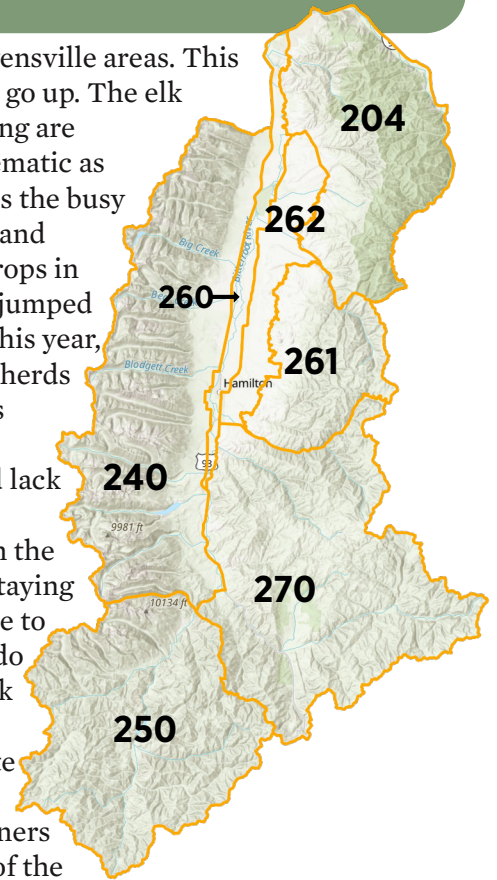
HD250, however, always seems to throw weird survey conditions, and this year it was a lack of green-up at low elevation (despite having peaked already everywhere else in the Bitterroot) while the snow was almost completely gone at higher elevations. We ended with a lower count than last year—but we were finding them much more spread out throughout the HD, as well as in and out of the timber quite often (which makes them much harder to find, much less count accurately). The overall effort to find elk felt intense.

We also found hardly any bull groups, and this is almost certainly related to these survey conditions. With cow/calf groups already high up and spread out, bulls would have been even more so. So take that low reported bull:cow ratio with a hefty grain of salt—again, I have no doubt there are significantly more bulls here, and I'm not sure we could have done anything differently to improve our detection (e.g. with survey timing).

Another item of note is the HD260 elk count, comprised primarily of two resident herds in the

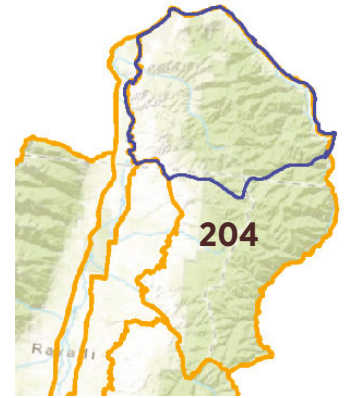
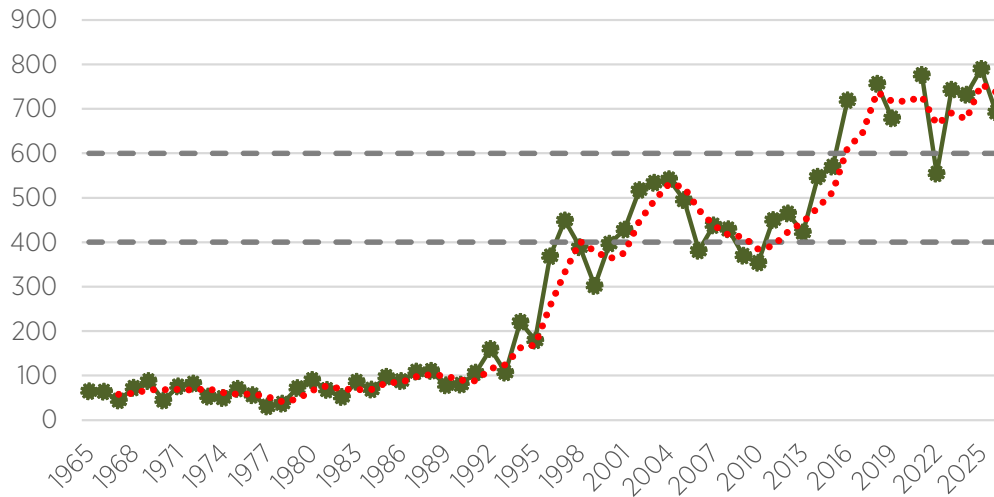
Hamilton and Stevensville areas. This count continues to go up. The elk around Bell Crossing are particularly problematic as they regularly cross the busy Eastside Highway and cause damage to crops in HD262; the count jumped by almost 100 elk this year, likely due to small herds from adjacent HDs "discovering" the irrigated fields and lack of two- and four-legged predators in the riverbottom, and staying there. There is little to nothing FWP can do to manage these elk while they are harbored on private land, but we encourage landowners to take advantage of the 201-01 (valid in HD260) and 262-01 (valid in all HDs on the east side of the valley) over-the-counter B-licenses to harvest cows.

Overall, the calf:cow ratio and bull:cow ratios were good area-wide, again likely owing to the mild fall/winter that contributed to higher overwinter calf/yearling survival and likely lower bull harvest during the 2025 hunting season. Goal statuses presented below are unchanged from last year.

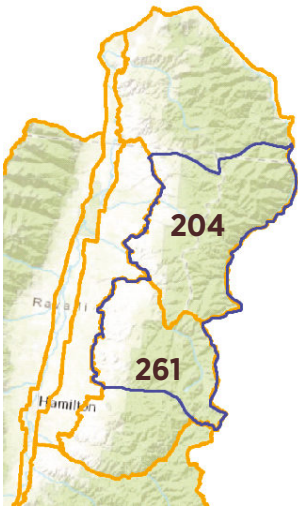
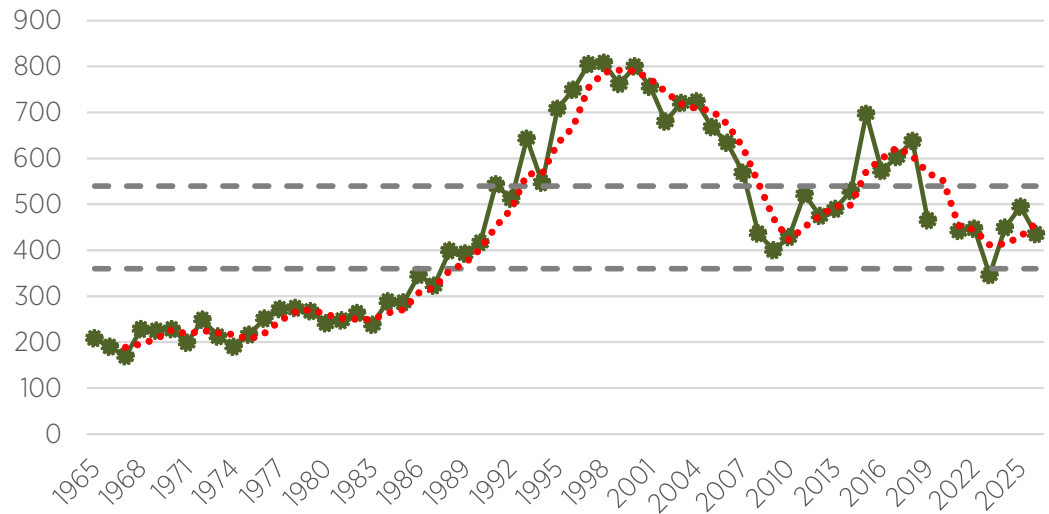


HD		2026 Count	Calf: Cow	Bull: Cow	2025 Count	3-year avg	Goal	Status
Sapphire EMU	204-North	692	0.26	0.35	790	738	400-600	Above
	204S/261N Willow-8 Mile	435	0.29	0.43	495	460	360-540	Within
	261-South	490	0.24	0.26	375	402	300-500	Within
240		767	0.21	0.13	531	675	600-900	Within
250		940	0.32	0.14	1069	1014	800-1200	Within
260		333	0.21	0.07	227	261	0-100	Above
270		4719	0.32	0.17	4231	4372	3600-4400	Within

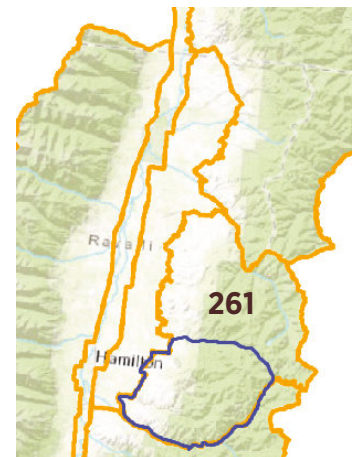
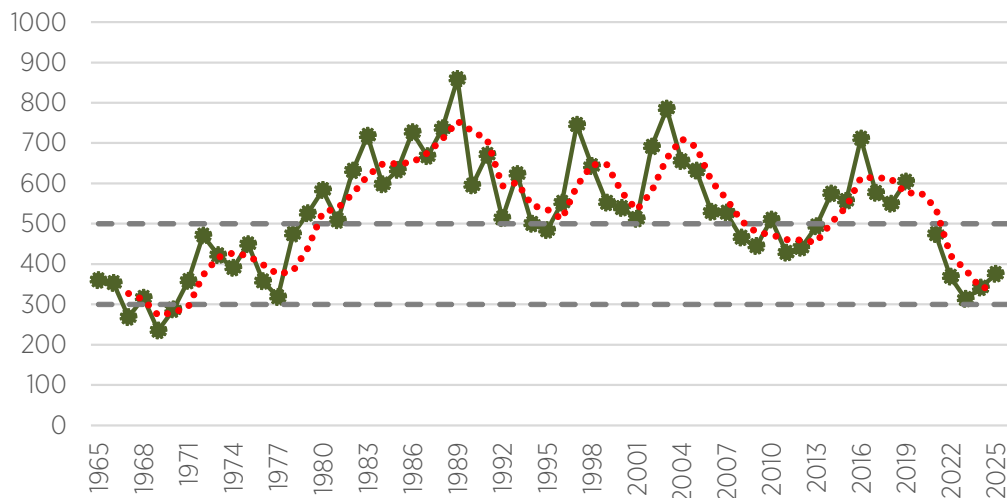
Sapphire EMU: 8-Mile-Turah (204)

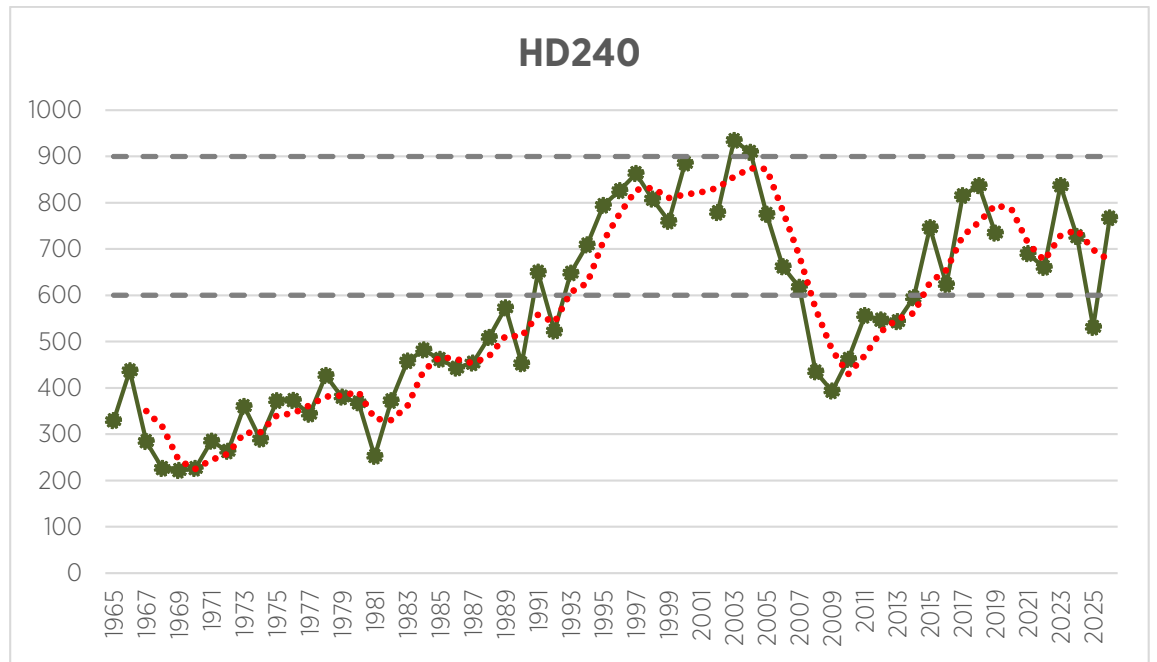


Sapphire EMU: Willow-8Mile (204/261)

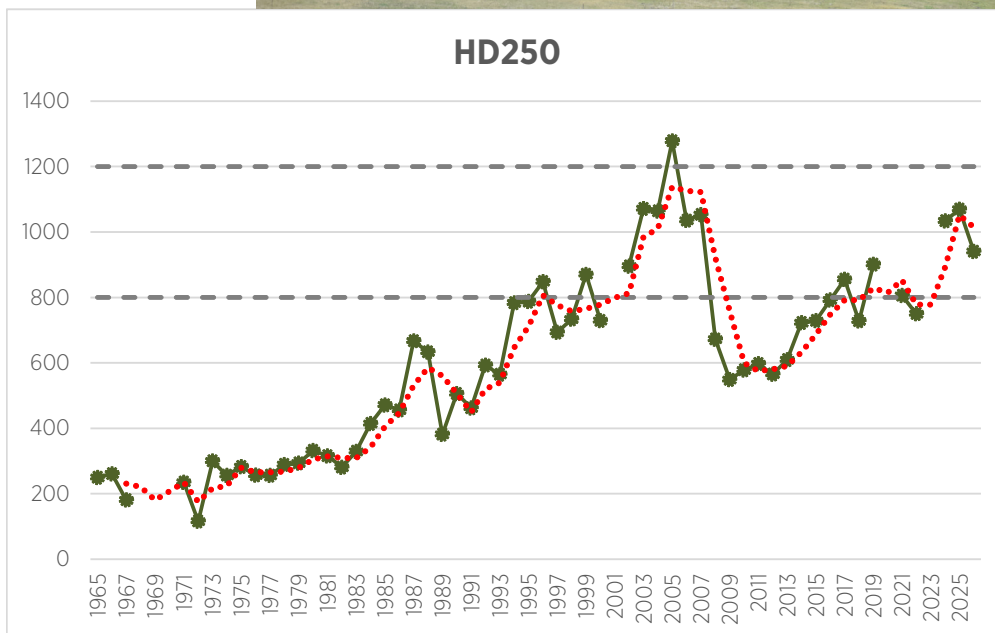


Sapphire EMU: Skalkaho-Willow (261)

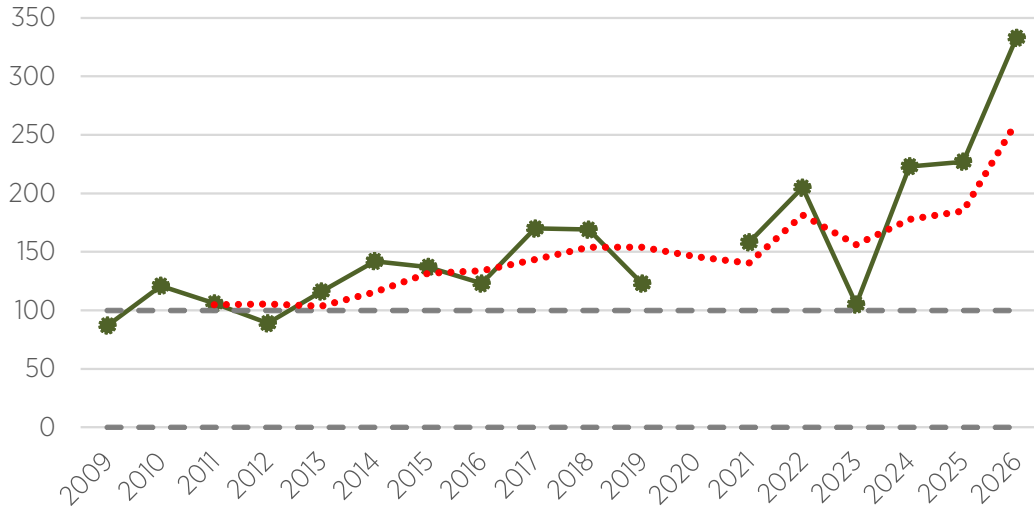




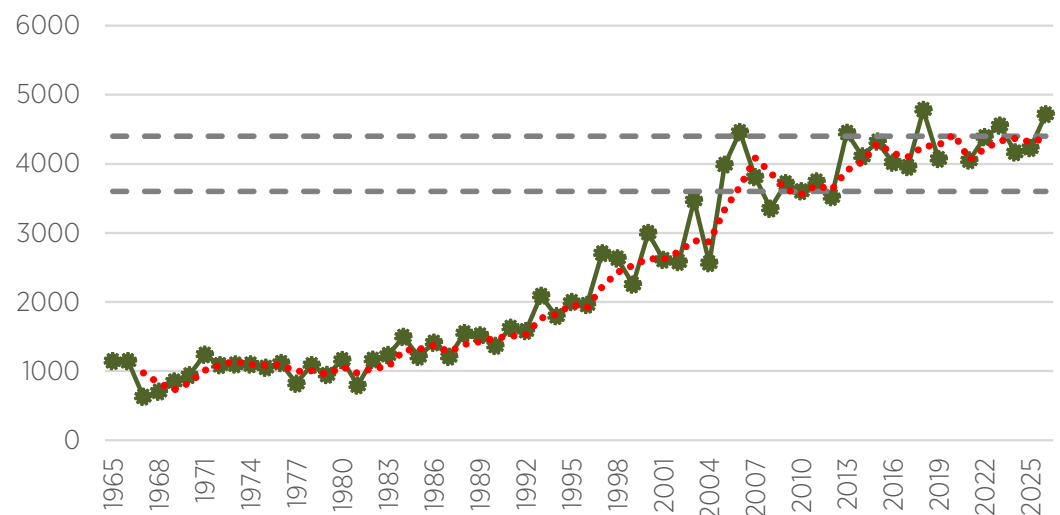
A large herd of elk near Darby in HD240.



HD260 (Hamilton + Stevensville)



HD270



Blackfoot

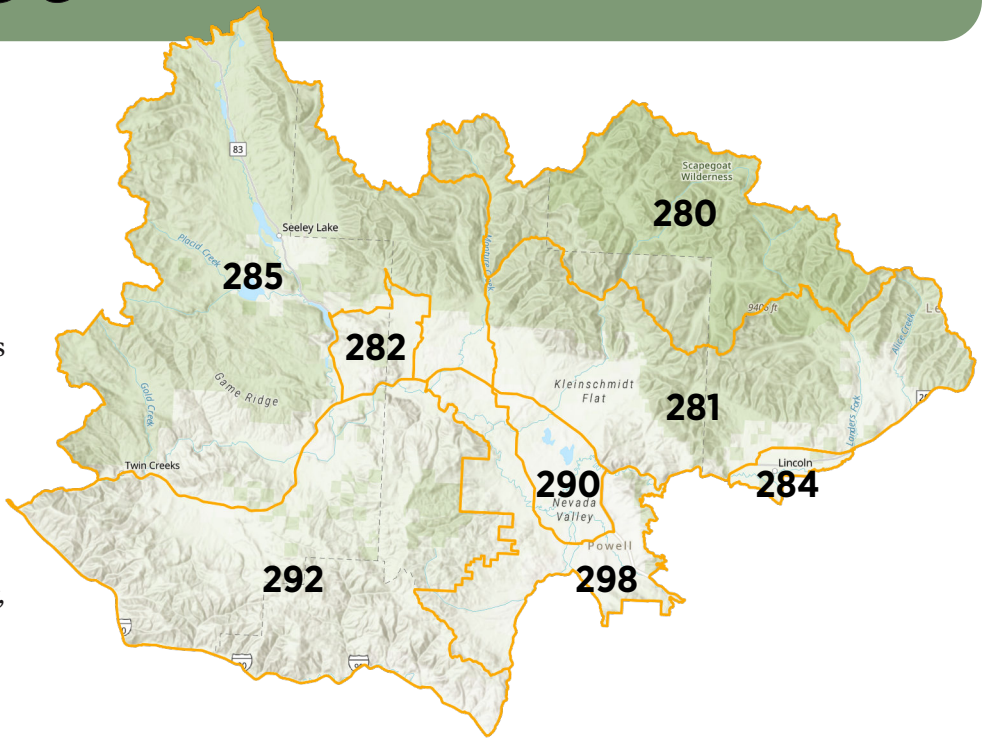
Position vacant

***Lee Tafelmeyer was able to complete his flights prior to his departure. The summary below was provided by Alicia Wallingford based on Lee's notes.*

In the Blackfoot district, some surveys are completed in the winter following hunting season, and others are completed in the spring during green-up.

In 2026, HD282 (Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA) was the district's only winter survey, flown in February. The Blackfoot Valley saw incredibly low snowpack this winter, with most of the winter precipitation coming as rain. The atypical winter conditions resulted in patchy snow for this survey, but elk were still found in their typical locations on the WMA. The total count was relatively high.

Spring surveys in the other HDs were completed between mid-April and early May. Green-up came on early and progressed quickly this year following the mild winter. Helicopter availability and weather limited aerial surveys, and many of the spring surveys occurred on the late end of green-up, when elk are spending less time in the open meadows and more time in the timber, reducing visibility. Total counts in several HDs are lower this year, but that is likely caused by the timing of the surveys rather than an actual decrease in the population.

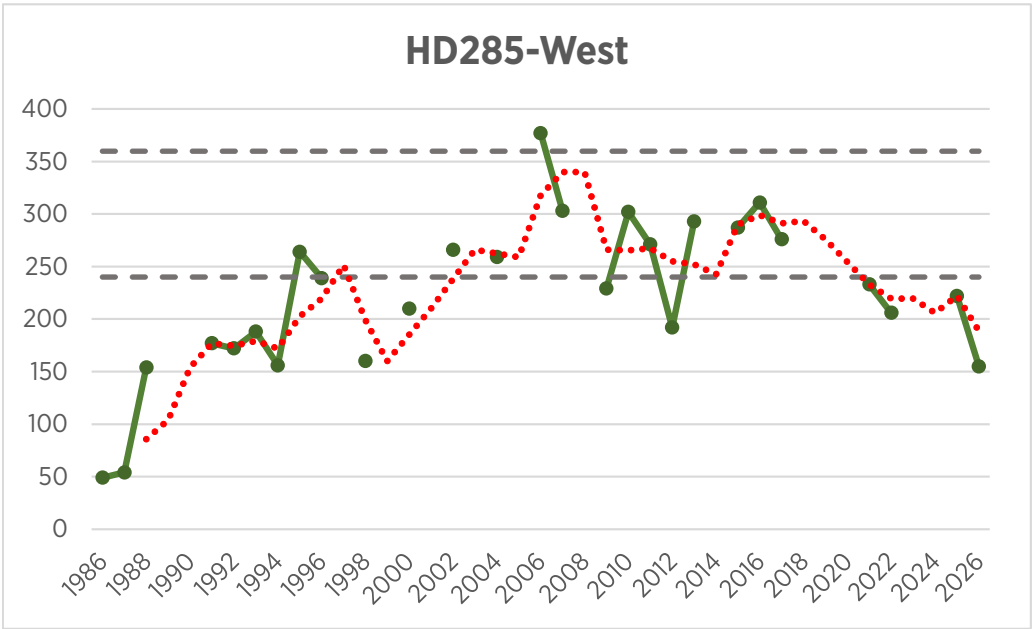
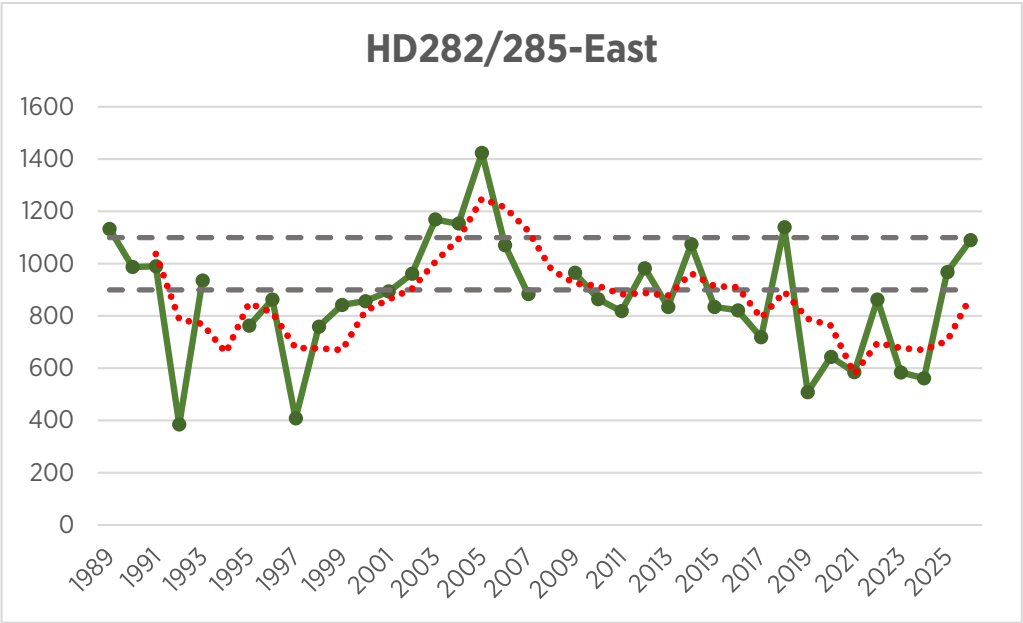
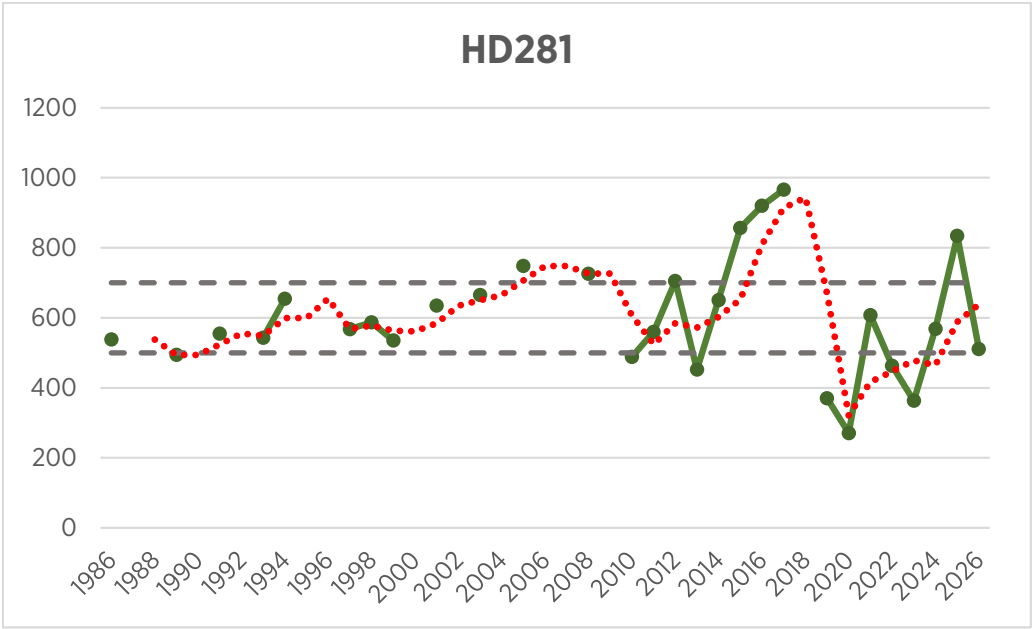


Overall calf: cow ratios are good, indicating high productivity for elk following three consecutive mild winters. Bull: cow ratios are a little lower than last year in several HDs. Late green-up conditions meant that mature bulls were higher up, more dispersed, and more difficult to locate during surveys. These bull: cow ratios are likely not indicative of trend.

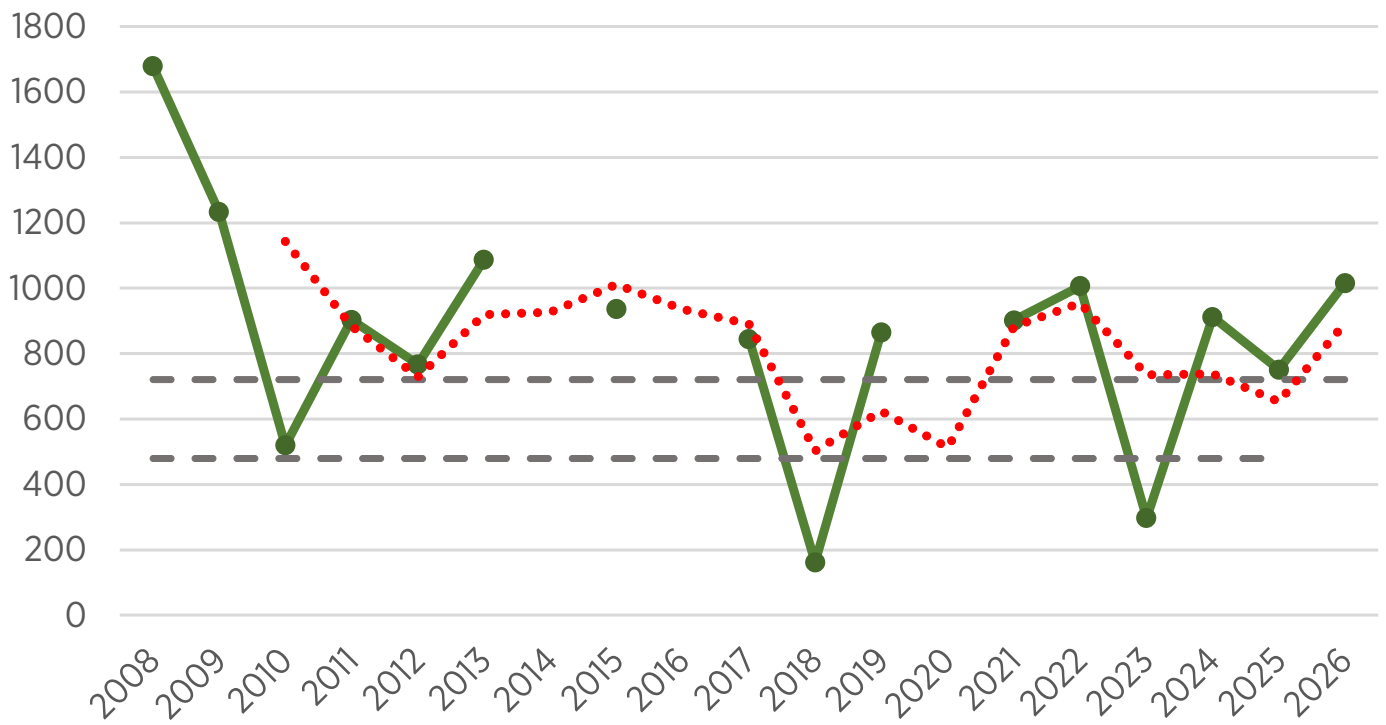
Three-year average counts indicate that only one HD is within the management objective. However, HDs that are currently below objective are making progress towards objective compared to last year's three-year averages. HDs that are above objective suggest a growing population in the last few years.

HD	2026 Count	Calf:Cow	Bull:Cow	2025 Count	3-year avg	Goal	Status
281	511	0.44	0.14	834	638	500-700	Within
282/285E	1090	0.35	0.16	968	873	900-1100	Below
285W	155	0.27	0.09	222	189	240-360	Below
290/298	1016	0.36	0.09	751	893	480-720	Above
292	504	0.31	0.09	838	579	640-960	Below

Note that HD284 is no longer included on this table. In the past, elk survey data for HD284 was presented in combination with HD293, which is now part of the Deer Lodge management area. See Deer Lodge section for this data.



HD290/298



HD292

