

Chilly Reception

Though native to northeastern Montana, elk returning to what are now the region's farm fields are being managed as unwelcome intruders

BY ANDREW MCKEAN

THIS JUST ISN'T elk country," says Norm Goosen, who raises wheat and cattle on a family farm 25 miles northwest of Glendive.

For years Goosen had heard neighbors talk about elk roaming the cedar draws and badlands around his Bloomfield farm. But he dismissed the sightings as either wishful thinking or misidentified deer or cows.

Mule deer, pheasants, and sharp-tailed grouse abound on the area's grassy slopes, which rise toward the Big Sheep Mountains. It's not so much a mountain range but a long, rugged sandstone ridge dividing the Yellowstone and Missouri river watersheds in remote eastern Montana.

Then, three years ago, Goosen saw an elk on his property. He'd planted malting barley in a field at the bottom of a timbered coulee. As soon as the first tender sprouts emerged, elk appeared. At first, one or two animals would materialize in the evenings' grainy twilight, feed at dark, then dissolve back into the cover at daylight. As the barley matured, the animals spent more and more time in the thick, green crop.

"That barley was like a magnet," says Goosen. "By the end of the summer, I was seeing five to ten elk in there all the time, even in the middle of the day."

The following year, the rancher lost more than \$3,000 worth of barley to elk depredation, forcing him to plant the high-value crop in another field farther from hiding cover.

Goosen is among the growing number of eastern Montanans seeing elk in their region. Elk populations are growing in Custer National Forest around Ashland and in the pockets of timber between the national forest and I-94. The Bull Mountains herd north of Billings is spilling into nearby agricultural land, and elk from the Missouri River Breaks are venturing farther and farther from their core habitat near the river and Fort Peck Reservoir.

But it's the appearance of elk in the middle of northeastern Montana farmland that has caused the most consternation. In the last few years, elk herds have moved down along tributaries of the Milk and Missouri rivers that originate in Canada. Frenchman Creek, Rock Creek, and the forks of the Poplar River have funneled the large ungulates from Saskatchewan into Montana. A small elk herd has become established in the rugged canyon of Big Muddy Creek between Scobey and Plentywood. And other scattered

herds have been seen in McCone County south of Wolf Point.

Elk, long considered a wildlife species of Montana's rugged mountains, have now become established in the land of winter wheat and prairie dogs. For many landowners, that means unexpected depredation. Yet to hunters and wildlife watchers, the appearance of elk is a bonus in an already wildlife-rich region. For their part, wildlife managers are trying their best to manage a large game animal that seemed to appear from nowhere.

COMING HOME

The return of elk to eastern Montana's plains should not have surprised anyone. The first written accounts made by explorers noted that elk lived across the vast prairie landscape, generally occupying riparian corridors but also browsing upland coulees and brushy draws next to the short-grass prairie grazed by bison and pronghorn. Elk were hunted for food, first by Indians, then fur traders, and then the



“wood hawks,” who cut cottonwoods to fuel Missouri River steamboats. When the first big cattle outfits trailed livestock into Montana following the Civil War, elk were still abundant on the open plains.

As fences and railroads closed the open range at the end of the 1800s, elk were eliminated from certain areas but remained in remote locations across what became eastern Montana. It wasn't until the homestead era in the early 1900s that elk were extirpated from the prairie, pushed west from tillable land into the sanctuary of the Rocky Mountain Front and Yellowstone Park. There the animals found a few remote strongholds where they lived beyond the reach of hunting and human development.

Many people who settled in the elk's prairie habitat didn't stay long. In much of eastern Montana, the frenetic boom of homesteading was followed by the agonizing bust of drought, farm consolidation,

and depopulation. The human population of Dawson County, where Norm Goosen farms, peaked in 1910 at nearly 13,000 people. The 2000 Census recorded just over 9,000 residents there. Other eastern Montana counties have seen similar declines.

In many cases, the departure of farmers has restored wildlife habitat on land that a generation earlier held cattle and crops. The Conservation Reserve Program, started in the late 1980s to return unproductive agricultural land to native grass, has also changed the eastern Montana landscape. Deer, upland birds, and small mammals have benefited from the increasing tracts of prairie.

As the wildlife habitat returned, conservation agencies were establishing elk herds in parts of the region. The Missouri Breaks elk were transplanted from Yellowstone National Park in the early 1950s. Elk were reintroduced into Canada's Cypress Hills in 1938. And an elk herd was established in

North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park, southeast of Sidney, Montana, in 1985.

A wide-ranging, migratory species, elk like to roam. In the autumn of 2002, a bowhunter in the Missouri Breaks south of Saco killed a 2½-year-old bull elk that wore a green ear tag. The animal was traced to Theodore Roosevelt National Park, several hundred miles away, where it had been tagged as a calf two years earlier.

However, when elk find ample forage, few predators, and little human presence, they tend to stay. That's been the case with the Big Sheep elk, the dispersed herd on the upper Milk River northwest of Havre, and elk now found in the spring-wheat belt from Opheim east to Plentywood.

NOT A GOOD MIX

Many people have rejoiced at the return of elk to the prairie, including some ranchers.



"They're nice to have around," says Bernard Pease, whose large-scale wheat farm and cattle operation just north of the Big Sheep Mountains attracts several dozen elk. "The deer and antelope cause a lot more crop damage to our feed and fences than the elk."

But Jim Satterfield, FWP regional supervisor in Glasgow, says elk cause significant problems for many ranchers and farmers.

"The problem with elk is that they're not a neutral presence in this prairie habitat," Satterfield says. "Yes, they were here 200 years ago. But since then, much of the landscape here has been converted to agriculture. And it's the experience of the department, not only in eastern Montana but also in western Montana's foothills and valleys, that elk and agriculture don't easily mix."

Elk tend to target green, succulent vegetation, which means alfalfa or wheat across much of eastern Montana. Also, as Goosen discovered in his barley field, forage that isn't eaten is crushed by bedded elk or ruined by trails and the churning hooves of sparring bulls. With no natural predators, herds can grow quickly.

"Elk management brings a whole spectrum of problems that other animals don't have to the same degree, mostly crop depredation and fence damage," says Harold

Wentland, FWP regional wildlife manager in Glasgow.

Don Burke agrees. A Valley County cattle rancher who also grows hay and wheat in the heart of the Missouri Breaks, Burke is preoccupied with elk and the damage they cause his operation.

"We have to chase elk out of our fields every night," he says, "and there's one bunch that we cannot get out, no matter how hard we try. We spend all our time fixing fence and chasing elk. You don't make any money off them, and they can cost you a bundle in lost crops."

The only efficient way to keep elk from expanding into areas where they'll cause widespread depredation is to reduce the size of herds with public hunting before they have a chance to expand.

HUNTING AS A SOLUTION

Landowners' low tolerance for elk is the main reason FWP held a general elk season last year in much of northeastern Montana. But Pat Gunderson, FWP wildlife biologist in Glasgow, says the hunt was also established to reduce the vulnerability of the region's established elk herds to disease.

"Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is encroaching on Montana," he says. "We have CWD north, east, and south of us in southern Saskatchewan, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The general season can act as a

buffer to minimize disease transmission to our world-class elk herds in the Missouri Breaks and Bear Paws Mountains."

The general elk hunting season structure was as liberal as possible. In much of FWP's Region 6 (northeastern Montana), hunters could harvest any elk in either the six-week archery or five-week rifle seasons and could hunt with a general elk license rather than a special permit drawn in a lottery. (The exception was in the Missouri Breaks and Bear Paws, where the department carefully regulates bull elk harvest to maintain trophy hunting opportunities.)

When the northeastern Montana elk season was proposed in spring 2003, some hunters called it a "unicorn hunt," figuring they had a better chance of harvesting the mythological creature than a prairie elk. FWP conceded that the big animals would be hard to find.

Elk weren't as scarce as unicorns. Last fall, according to FWP estimates, 80 elk were killed during the Region 6 general season. One of the first elk killed during the rifle season, in Rock Creek, was an ear-tagged bull that had escaped from a game farm in Saskatchewan, where CWD has been found in wild and captive elk herds.

"That's a prime example of the season working," says Gunderson. "Without a general season, that hunter probably would not have been able to harvest that animal."

Andrew McKean is an FWP information officer in Glasgow.



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MATT LONG

If it had been carrying CWD, the disease could have spread to Montana elk.”

Not everyone was pleased with the open elk season, however. “People had seen those elk out in our fields all fall,” says Pease, who traditionally allows public hunting on his property. “On opening day, there were nearly 100 vehicles on the roads around my place, people with a new elk tag in their pocket. We don’t have hiding cover like in the mountains, so the elk milled out in the open like cattle in a corral. Those elk didn’t have a chance, so I shut down access.”

Pease supports hunting the prairie elk. In fact, he and his grandson each shot a bull on his property. “What I don’t like is the wide-open season,” he says. “Issue permits and let people hunt the bulls. Manage the population with cow permits. That’s what Fish, Wildlife & Parks does every other place, so why not here?”

Pease believes it is possible to maintain a small herd of elk in open, largely agricultural country, and he vows to shut down hunter access to maintain elk on his property.

That’s a landowner’s right, says Gunderson. But he points out that FWP, as a wildlife management department, has to take a broader view of managing elk in areas where the animals haven’t lived for nearly a century. “We’re trying to keep elk numbers in nontraditional areas as low as

ELK IN THE OPEN Once abundant in Montana’s eastern prairies, elk were pushed into mountains by unregulated hunting and habitat loss during the early 1900s. Now the large ungulates are back, but parts of the native landscape have changed. Native grasslands have become wheat fields or fenced cattle pasture (above left and above). Though hunters (right) are happy to see more big game in the region, many landowners view the new elk as crop- and fence-destroying pests.



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possible,” he says. “Any landowner can limit hunting and create a refuge for elk. The problem is that elk are wide-ranging animals, and they rarely stay on a single property. Then they become a neighbor’s problem. We’re trying to resolve those problems before they get started.”

To that end, FWP is holding another general elk hunting season in 2004 in the same areas of Region 6 as last year.

Despite FWP attempts to increase harvest, elk won’t completely disappear from eastern Montana’s prairies. Though last hunting season chipped away at some elk herds, it educated the survivors, which will be that much harder to kill in the future.

“I expect we will always have elk in these prairie areas,” says Gunderson, “Some will be small herds that become established because of landowner tolerance, and others will be animals from managed herds that migrate through. But it doesn’t seem fair to ask landowners to shoulder the burden of maintaining elk herds at the levels where they’re now at.”

Burke, the Missouri Breaks rancher, says that despite the financial losses elk have caused, he retains a fondness for the stately ungulates.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he says. “I love to watch elk—as long as they’re in somebody else’s field.”