

# LIVING UP TO ITS NAME

How **controversial hunting regulations** restored big bulls to the Elkhorn Mountains **BY LEE LAMB**

**J**ust a generation ago, a hunter would have been hard-pressed to find a mature male elk in the Elkhorn Mountains. “When I first started hunting there, I’d never see a branch-antlered bull,” says Bruce Rehwinkel, a Townsend resident who has hunted the mountain range for nearly 30 years. “Just about everything that had an antler on it got shot.”

That made sense. Hunting District 380 is less than an hour’s drive from Helena, Butte, and Bozeman and contains abundant elk that roam throughout an accessible national forest. For years, a hunter with a general elk license could legally shoot any antlered bull there. Few male elk survived the hunting season.

That began to change in 1987. Concerned about the low number of branch-antlered bulls, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks established a “spike season” in the Elkhorns. Any hunter can shoot a yearling (spike) bull, but to shoot a mature bull or a cow a hunter must apply for a special permit. The regulation allows more bulls to

grow older and produce larger antlers. Today the Elkhorns are world renowned for trophy elk, and the population contains a biologically healthy mix of young, middle-aged, and old males. “We’ve got every age class in the bull population up to 15 years old,” says Tom Carlsen, FWP management biologist for the Elkhorns.

Each year more than 7,000 hunters put in for the 110 coveted Elkhorns bull tags—known as “either-sex permits”—making the odds of hunting the famous trophy bulls

slim. But Carlsen says the vast majority of elk hunters in the Elkhorns support the harvest regulations. “Even if

most years they can’t hunt for those big bulls, they can go out and see them and maybe shoot a spike. For those hunters, it’s a thrill just to be in the Elkhorns and see the mature animals,” he says. “And then, if they’re lucky, they’ll someday draw that bull permit.”

**L**ike an island, the isolated 300,000-acre Elkhorn Range rises from the surrounding valley floor to more than 9,000 feet. The mix of alpine lakes, forests, meadows, aspen groves, granite outcrops, creeks, and juniper shrublands provides a wildlife haven. Species diversity ranges from mountain wildlife like bighorn sheep and cougars to prairie mainstays such as antelope and long-billed curlews. Humans have had a presence in the Elkhorns for thousands of years. But not until Europeans arrived in the

**ELK PARADISE** Rising like a great forested island in a valley sea, the Elkhorn Range south of Helena has become famous over the past two decades for mature elk (right). The herd, which numbers roughly 2,000, contains bulls as old as 15 years—unheard of in a population within an hour’s drive of three major Montana cities.



KENTON ROWE

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mid-1800s with the onset of hardrock mining and livestock grazing did wildlife populations decline. As elsewhere in the West, the range's elk herd quickly diminished under pressures of market and subsistence hunting.

In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt designated the Elkhorn Mountains as a permanent forest reserve to protect it for wildlife and public use. Two years later, it became part of the national forest system. In 1939, wildlife biologists captured 34 elk in Yellowstone National Park and released them into the southern Elkhorns to help reestablish the population, which by then had nearly disappeared. By the early 1960s, the herd had grown to 400, and over the next two decades that number more than doubled.

Despite the growing population, all was not well with the Elkhorns elk herd. Relentless hunting pressure on antlered elk made the ratio of bulls to cows extremely low. "This is how bad things were," says Carlsen. "Of 1,000 elk we identified by aerial surveys in 1985, only nine were bulls, and they were all yearlings." Males made up less than 1 percent of the Elkhorns population. Healthy elk populations have at least 10 males for every 100 females.

**"Males made up less than 1 percent of the population."**

Concerned that there might not be enough mature males in HD 380 to breed with cows, FWP adjusted hunting regulations to increase bull numbers and help bulls live longer. Under the spike season, any archery or firearms hunter with a general elk license may shoot a spike as long as its antlers don't branch. If branched, the point must be less than 4 inches long as measured from the main antler beam. "About 20 percent of yearling bulls have a 4-inch or longer branch, so they are protected," says Carlsen. "Those are the more robust yearlings that live to be 2½-year-olds." Hunters who want to shoot a mature bull must enter a drawing each summer for an either-sex permit, which allows them to shoot a branch-

*Writer Lee Lamb grew up in the foothills of the Elkhorns. She now splits her time between Polson and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.*



**FORTUNATE FEW** Growing one of the nation's top trophy elk herds comes with a cost: Only a handful of lucky hunters draw a permit to hunt the mature bulls each year.

antlered bull or an antlerless elk. Hunters can also apply for a B license, which allows them to harvest an antlerless (cow or calf) elk.

As FWP biologists expected, hunters were slow to accept the new regulation. Check station surveys the first year showed only 25 percent in favor. But three years later, 75 percent of Elkhorns hunters supported the spike season. "We knew it would take several years to build up the different age classes of bulls. We started off pretty conservatively in issuing permits, only about 35 a year," Carlsen says. "But after only a couple of years we were seeing 4-, 5-, and a few 6-year-old bulls, and hunters started to come around."

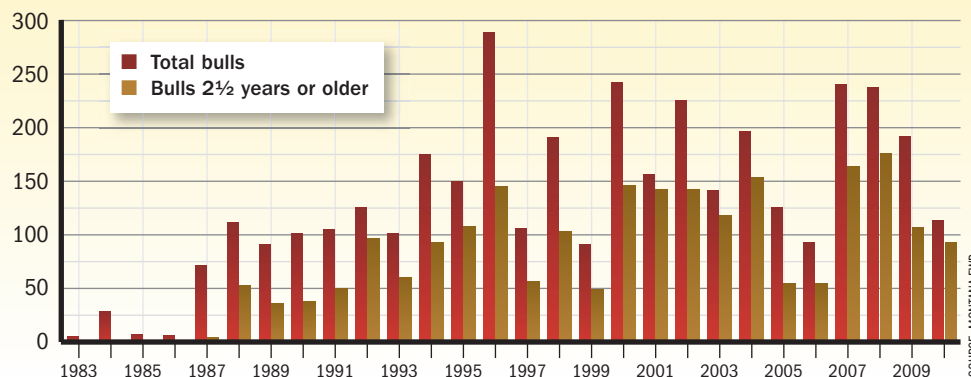
Support for the Elkhorns spike season

has remained high as elk continue to mature. Carlsen says the average age of bulls harvested by hunters has increased from 1½ years old to 6½ years old today.

Hunters are also seeing more elk. The herd has grown to more than 2,000 animals thanks to more breeding bulls and harvest restrictions on cow elk. FWP's elk management plan for the Elkhorns, revised in 2005, calls for being able to observe 1,700 to 2,300 elk in the population following the hunting season. It also stipulates a ratio of 15 bulls per 100 cows on the winter range and an average age of harvested mature bulls between 5½ and 6½ years old. Carlsen says these objectives, along with the percentage of yearling bulls that survive hunting season and winter each year, determine the number of either-

### Bulls in Hunting District 380, 1983-2010

By limiting the harvest of mature bulls starting in 1987, FWP vastly increased the overall number of males in the herd and the number of bulls 2½ years and older.



sex permits issued annually.

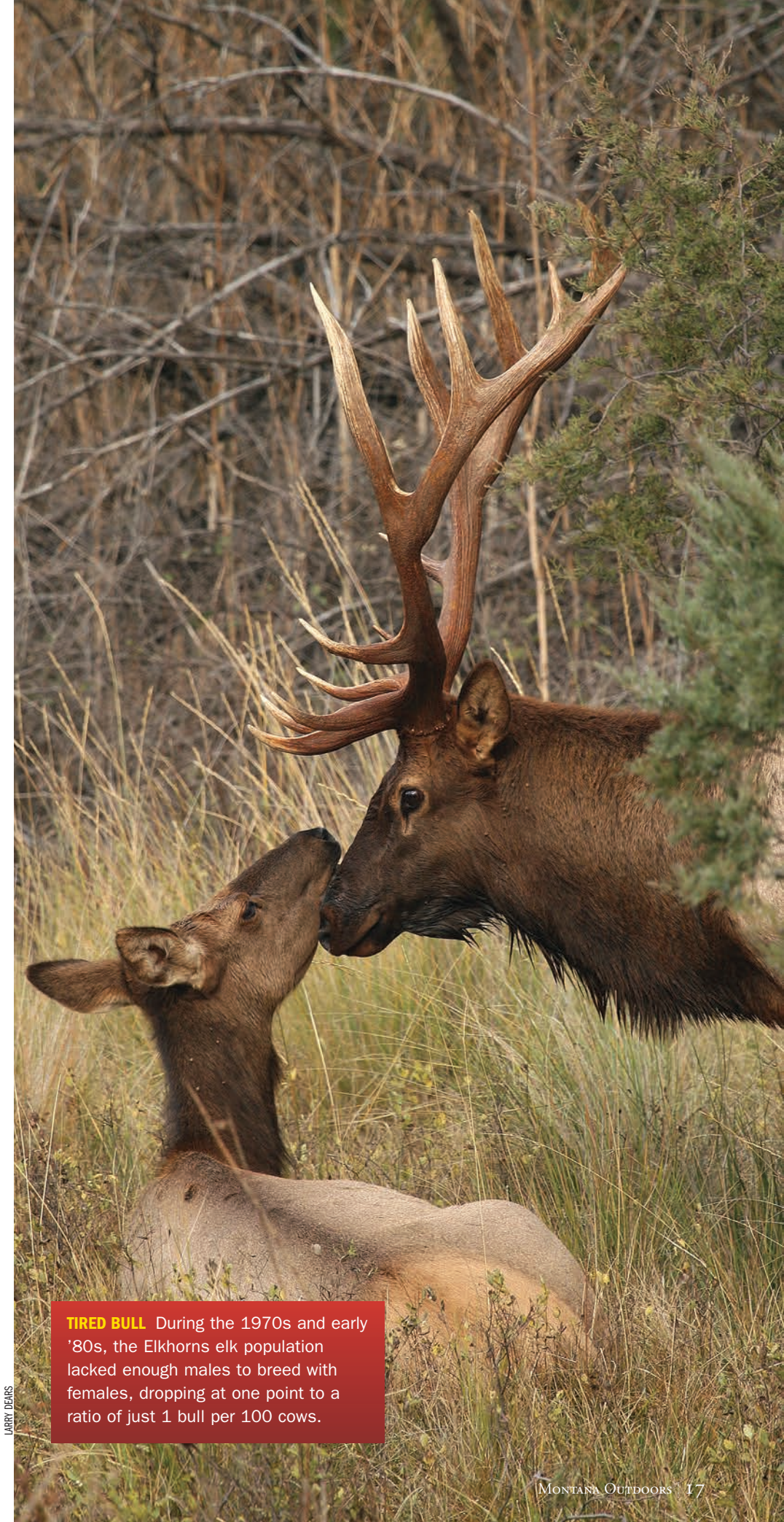
That number has stayed at 110 for the past decade. Because anyone can apply for the either-sex permits, less than 2 percent of the several thousand applicants are drawn. But lucky hunters who win an Elkhorns either-sex permit have a success rate of roughly 70 percent—more than three times the statewide average. "Because they realize it's more or less a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, they generally hunt pretty hard," Carlsen says.

Lifelong elk hunter Al Christophersen of Helena spent months pursuing his trophy bull after drawing a coveted Elkhorns permit in 2002. After scouting that summer, he spent archery season crawling through a gauntlet of

**Elk management in the Elkhorns is made easier thanks to abundant public hunting access, including 100,000 acres in Block Management.**

downed logs and doghair lodgepole pines playing cat and mouse with bugling bulls. After following many dead-end trails, Christophersen eventually shot a massive 6x6 bull during the final days of the season. "I've been a meat hunter my whole life," he says, "but when you've got one of those permits in your pocket, you tend to zone out the cows, the spikes, and even the raghorn bulls. I passed up 15 bulls that season, waiting for that 'special one.' And when I finally found him, it took three more days of hunting before I tagged him. He was 8½ years old, a tribute to elk management in the Elkhorns."

Elk management in the Elkhorns is made easier thanks to abundant hunting access. Most of the Elkhorn Range is public land (including an 80,000-acre roadless area) cooperatively managed by the Helena and Beaverhead-Deerlodge national forests, the Bureau of Land Management, and FWP. Portions of the foothills and surrounding valley bottoms contain large working ranches—ideal places for elk to hang out when fall snowstorms, or hunters, drive them down from



**TIRED BULL** During the 1970s and early '80s, the Elkhorns elk population lacked enough males to breed with females, dropping at one point to a ratio of just 1 bull per 100 cows.



**PROUD HUNTERS IN HD 380** Over the past two decades, Tom Carlsen, FWP management biologist for the Elkhorns, has collected these and other snapshots of successful bull hunters. Carlsen says mature bulls with antler scores of 340, 350, and higher are not uncommon in the Elkhorns, where bulls average 6½ years old. A typical letter from a hunter who drew an either-sex permit and killed a big bull:

*Thanks FWP!!! All of your efforts in the 380 area made my hunt fantastic! It is one I will never forget. Great work!*  
—Brock Thomas, Belgrade, Montana



**SOMETHING TO BUGLE ABOUT** Mature bulls were rare in the Elkhorns not long ago. Says Tom Carlsen, FWP biologist: “In 1985 we checked on a harvested bull that was four years old, and we all remarked how highly unusual it was to see one even that old.” Today the Elkhorns contain bulls in their mid-teens—ages unobtainable back when any hunter had the opportunity to kill a branch-antlered bull in HD 380.



the mountains. Fortunately for hunters, roughly 20 Elkhorns-area landowners have enrolled a total of 100,000 acres in Montana’s Block Management Program. Through the program, FWP helps landowners manage hunting activity in exchange for providing free public hunting access to their property. “Because these Block Management Areas are pretty well scattered around the mountain range and offer good access, they’ve been real important in helping us manage elk numbers,” Carlsen says.

FWP controls the size of the Elkhorns herd by adjusting the number of cow elk that hunters kill each season. During years when the population gets too low, the department reduces antlerless elk permits. When elk numbers get too high, FWP increases permits. Each year over the past decade, the department has offered from 350 (1989) to 900 (2010) antlerless permits, now known as B licenses.

Though he considers elk management in the Elkhorns a success, Carlsen concedes that FWP took a risk by instituting the spike season. “If it hadn’t worked, we’d have taken some real heat,” he says. Fortunately, the elk population has doubled since 1987 and the proportion of bulls has grown from 1 percent to roughly 11 percent. Some of those bulls are now 13, 14, and older—ages rarely reached in Montana (and in only a few other parts of the West, for that matter). “We even had a 15-year-old bull harvested last fall, the oldest that’s come out of there,” Carlsen says. “That’s the exception, but just the fact that a bull had the chance to live that long is pretty rare.”

FWP monitors elk age in the Elkhorns by asking hunters who shoot a bull to mail in an

incisor, which is then forwarded to a private laboratory in Milltown for aging. After cleaning, sectioning, and staining the tooth, technicians count the dark rings that grow each winter in the cementum (the tissue forming the outer layers of the root)—much like counting growth rings on a tree.

Despite the high number of “old growth” bulls in the Elkhorns, there’s no getting around the fact that only a small number of hunters each year ever have the opportunity to hunt them. More people apply for the HD 380 either-sex permit than any other permit in Montana.

But that in no way lessens Rehwinkel’s enthusiasm for hunting the Elkhorns. “I love the spike season,” says the Townsend hunter. “The first time I saw a 7-point over on Hog Hollow, I couldn’t believe it. I spent the whole day watching him. I’ve never drawn an either-sex permit, and I rarely kill a spike, but I’ve seen a number of pretty nice bulls in a day, and that’s something nice to see.”