

Clam Lake Elk Herd News



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By Laine Stowell & Matt McKay

Current Status: The first calf found in 2011 was estimated born on May 20th, thus the 2010/2011 elk year ended May 19th. We observed one 2010 calf lost in the first half of May, resulting in an end of Elk Year 2010/2011 population estimate of **151 elk**. At the beginning of Elk Year 2010/2011 we were at 131 elk. This means the Clam Lake herd grew 15 percent during this elk year. We estimate that 33 calves were born this calving season. However, we've already lost 9 of the 22 calves found (41 percent mortality) therefore, we estimate that a total of 14 calves have died thus far. These losses, plus the 2 cows lost leave **169 elk** as of July 20, 2011.

Remember, we still have 10 months where that number will reduce further.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd: UWSP graduate student, Scott Roepke, continues processing genetic samples we've collected for him and those he's received from Michigan. During our 2011 elk calf searching we collected another 22 samples from the new calves captured and radio collared. Scott expects to complete his laboratory work and his thesis by end of January, 2012. This genetic assessment of our Wisconsin elk should indicate whether additional genetic input into the population is desirable.

Currently Dr. Tim Ginnett (Department Chair of the Wildlife Management Department at UWSP) is working with the Clam Lake Elk Project staff and Bethany Blicharz to develop a graduate research project to assess the results of our "assisted dispersal" project. This past winter we moved 12 captured Clam Lake elk, ranging in ages of yearling to 3 year old, to an acclimation pen erected southeast of Moose Lake, in, apparently, an unoccupied area of the Clam Lake Elk Range. Those animals were released on May 18, 2011 and were monitored daily until June 14th and tri-weekly to the end of June. Movements have been closely monitored. These and other collected data will be provided Ms. Blicharz for her study and she will take over summer monitoring of the Moose Lake group and the 2011/2012 "assisted dispersal" release next summer.

Assisted Dispersal Project and 2011 Elk Trapping and Radio Collaring: As mentioned the 12 elk held in the acclimation pen southeast of Moose Lake were released on May 18. Blood tests indicated that 3 year old cows 224 and 228, and 2 year old cow 252, were pregnant.

Pregnant cow 228 had apparently established herself as the "lead cow", indicated by the majority of yearlings staying with her, while cow 224 moved 2.6 miles (2.2 miles straight line distance) to the northwest, having swum the narrows across Moose Lake to the west shore peninsula called "Wolf Island". She stayed in this area for about a week then swam back across said narrows and rejoined F228 and her group. A few days later she reswam the narrows and became inactive on private property where we did not have permission to search. On July 13 we received 2 citizen reports that F224 has been seen nursing a calf on a town road through this area. As of July 18th F224 rejoined F228's nursery group about 3/4 mile west of the release site. We have not confirmed whether the calf was lost, or has accompanied her.

Pregnant Cow 252 traveled 5.6 miles east of the release pen (3.7 miles straight line) to west of Black Lake near the ELF Line on May 19th. She was still in this area on May 20th. Though we had a normal signal for F252 during early afternoon, she was on mortality when she was checked that same evening. On May 21st her signal was again normal, and again normal on May 22nd. On May 23rd her signal returned to mortality and project staff investigated finding wolf sign and the radio collar cached by wolves.

Pregnant cow 228 moved about 3/4 mile west of the release pen, away from the rest of the herd and had her calf (M334) on May 23rd, which we found on May 26th. F228 stayed in this area for almost 2 weeks when she and her calf rejoined other yearling cows in the area. Most of the cows have stayed within 3/4 mile of the acclimation pen since the May 18th release. Up to July 25th eighth of the released animals have stayed within 3/4 mile of the acclimation pen site.

As of July 1st this acclimation pen has been removed and placed into storage, due to the hard work of Matt McKay, Beth Blicharz, Scott Roepke and the help of the Lac Courte Oreilles Youth Conservation Corps. Once the site selection committee chooses the 2012 release location we will erect the acclimation pen at the new site. This site selection committee is comprised of members from the WDNR, GLIFWC and the USFS. Taking committee input GIS experts from GLIWC created several maps showing limiting factors. The site selection committee is using these tools to guide our selection process.

2011 Calving Season: We estimate that “green up” occurred as of May 15th. For our purposes “green up” is when new grass in the ditches comprise 75 percent of the cover and 50 percent of the aspens are leafed out. Last year we observed “green up” on April 14th, about a month earlier than normal. We have found over the years, that development of new growth in the current growing season significantly influences the health and success of elk calving, thereby influencing the rate of growth of the Clam Lake herd.

Because of a relatively cool September last fall, with ample rainfall, we expected a shorter calving season. “Green up” has influenced birth initiation in past years. However, parturition isn’t solely dependent on events the previous September. We’ve observed that winter severity, disturbances and timing of “green up” also influence timing of parturition. This year parturition began later, with births spread out, but more being born after the normal median birth date of May 28th than before. The shorter calving season did not occur. There could be unmeasured biological or human factors causing interference in September that is causing delays in conception in September therefore delaying parturition in May. We have a high bull to cow ratio, known bulls to known cows extrapolates to 93 bulls to 100 cows. We’ve experienced a 160 bulls to 100 cow birth ratio (n=227) collectively over the past 16 years. Maybe high bull numbers are causing abnormally high competition, thereby causing some cows to miss conception during their first estrous.

We began daily monitoring of perspective pregnant cows as of May 16th and made our first search on May 19th. We found our first calf on May 21st and our last on June 13th, however, when we ceased calf searching as of June 14th, we still had 5 of the monitored cows that were likely pregnant had not yet given birth. Using known pregnancy rates, parturition rates, observed mortality of known pregnant females, and results of 26 pregnancy tests, we estimate that 33 calves were born. We monitored 39 cows, searched 30 of these cows 45 times finding 22 calves (on average we found 1 calf every 2 searches). We found calves in a single search in 15 cases; found calves in 2 searches in 6 cases, and found 1 calf after 5 searches in 1 case.

Thus far we’ve had 3 calves this year observed to be killed by bears (14 percent of calves found). On average we experience about 20 to 25 percent of calves found are killed by bears each year, with the exception of 2010 where we did not observe any calves killed by bears (likely influenced by the unusually early spring). As of July 25th we’ve observed 9 calf mortalities (41 percent calf mortality so far).

This year we had 179 citizen volunteers donate their time and travel to come help us calf search (some from as far away as Racine, Wisconsin). We are indebted to

the commitment of these sturdy individuals; in particular to the help from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation; Wisconsin Natural Resources Foundation; the Fox River Academy, the Chequamegon Waters, Hayward, and Webster High School students, teachers and chaperones; Hayward, Ladysmith and Spooner WDNR staff; the Lac Courte Oreilles Youth Conservation Corps; and citizen volunteers from the local Hayward, Clam Lake and Moose Lake areas. Special thanks to the private landowners who gave us permission to search on their land. We couldn’t have succeeded without the hard work of staff such as Matt McKay, Beth Blicharz, Scott Roepke, Jeff Morden, and Mike Bulgrin.

Elk Health Issues: During this quarter (from April 1st to June 30th) we lost calf F301 (born in 2010) and cows F252 and F158 (F252 and F158 were verified pregnant). We also lost current year calves F332 (poor doer), M349 (drowning accident), F348 (bear), F340 (unknown non-predator), F337 and M331 (bear), M334 and F335 (wolves), M353 (unknown predator...not bear or wolves).

Population Monitoring and Elk Education: During the last 3 months we made 3,048 telemetry location determinations and 6,946 telemetry mortality checks. During this quarter we gave 15 elk presentations to a total of 201 participants. We also gave 4 print, 1 television and 2 radio interviews.

Partnerships: We provided elk input on USFS conditions on a road permit for logging on private land. We’ve met with Dr. Ginnett to discuss a graduate research project evaluating the “assisted dispersal” project and development of a surveillance camera elk survey.

Upcoming Events: During the next quarter we will continue monitoring the Moose Lake translocated group and the Clam Lake herd, twice weekly. With our partners we will determine site selection of the next “assisted dispersal” release site, and with help from RMEF volunteers we will erect the “acclimation” pen on the selected site. We’ll be presenting those recommendations to the Voigt Task Force on August 4th. We’ll also be working with RMEF on the 2011 Bugle Days event held on September 10 and 11.

For more information on Elk in Wisconsin,

Please Contact:

Laine Stowell
WI DNR

10220 State Hwy 27
Hayward, WI 54843
715-634-9658 x 3527

Or on our Web Site at:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/wildlife/Elk/>