



Black River Elk Range Herd Update

June 2017-December 2017

Introduction:

After two successful years of releases during the Black River Elk Range reintroduction effort, the founding herd has now been established and are continuing to settle into the Black River country. In total, 73 elk were released in Jackson County over the two-year project (23 in 2015 and 50 in 2016), including 42 cows and 16 bulls from the Kentucky capture efforts, and 15 calves born in the Wisconsin quarantine pen. The reintroduction efforts have now shifted to the Clam Lake Elk Range, where project goals include translocation of up to 75 elk over the remaining time frame of the project.

Herd Update:

At the conclusion of the 2017 calving season, we estimate proximately 15-17 calves were born to the 29 cows present in the herd during the calving period. UP to 20 calves were expected based on the number of breeding age cows, average pregnancy rates, and whether or not those cows were located with bulls during the previous breeding season. Thus, the number of calves estimated to have been born was slightly lower than expected. Several likely factors may have contributed to this lower than expected productivity. Those factors include a lack of mature, experienced bulls that are most efficient at breeding, isolated cows that were not bred, and disjunct herds where breeding activity may have been disrupted or sporadic. Pregnancy rates are expected to increase with bull maturity and herd cohesiveness, resulting in a higher herd productivity in future years.

Of the calves anticipated to have been born, 12 have been verified through our radio-collaring efforts, citizen reports, or through our observations. Elk management staff and a large group of volunteers were able to locate 9 calves during the radio-collaring efforts and successfully radio collared 7 of those calves, including four bulls and three cows. Calves were collared from May 23-July 13, with the last calf estimated to have been born on August 3. This translates to these cows having been bred from mid-September through early December. Of the calves collared, the average birth weight was an incredible 42 pounds and the calves were in great physical health, indicating good health for the cows as well. Survival of these calves had been excellent so far, with 6/7 remaining alive. One collared calf died of unknown reasons. Several additional uncollared calf mortalities are suspected.

There have been seven confirmed mortalities during the second half of 2017. The causes of mortality include meningeal worm infection (n=1), bacterial infection (n=2), vehicle collision (n=2), euthanasia (n=1), and unknown (n=1). The meat from several of the mortalities was donated to the Jackson County food pantry after CWD tests were complete. The current herd is estimated to number 54-58.

Elk Movements:

Currently, the herd is split into one main cow/calf group (~25 animals), two smaller cow/calf groups (5-8 animals each), and several bachelor groups of bulls. Although we continue to see some elk move through the elk range or into adjacent areas, the larger groups have begun to settle into predictable patterns of movement and are utilizing more regular home ranges. Bull movements tend to be unpredictable and sporadic, however, they have demonstrated the ability to navigate back to the cow/calf group for the duration of the breeding season. Outside of the breeding season, it is common

for the majority of the bulls to move away from the cow/calf groups and be located on their own from December-August.

During the fall of 2017, multiple single cows remained separated from the herd and were located outside of the existing elk range. In an effort to return these cows to the elk range and reunite them with the herd, plans were put into place to construct a small holding pen on the Jackson County Forest and to trap and hold these cows together prior to release. A two-acre acclimation pen was constructed through a joint effort between Jackson County Forestry and Parks and DNR staff in October 2017. Staff were able to successfully capture three target cows in early January, which will be released after a brief holding period.

Habitat Management:

Spring, summer, and fall are prime time for elk habitat management projects and local elk project staff were hard at work in 2017. Jackson County Forestry and Parks installed four new forest openings, totaling over 20 acres, in prime elk country. These openings are slated for planting in the spring of 2018 and in addition to providing ample forage for the elk, will also make for excellent viewing areas down the road. DNR staff continued to inventory, map, and manage scattered forest openings across the Black River State Forest as part of a long-term inventory and management project aimed at improving the quantity and quality of forage across the forest. At the conclusion of most timber harvests on the forest, DNR staff also plant a wildlife friendly mix on logging roads and log landing to help stabilize the soil and provide highly desirable wildlife food. Several burn units on the Dike 17 wildlife area were prepped for burning during the spring of 2018 if appropriate weather conditions present themselves. DNR and County staff also spent a considerable amount of time controlling invasive during the summer of 2017.

Outreach:

Interest in the Jackson County elk reintroduction remains high, and as such, requests for information and presentations are numerous. Staff participated in several high school educational field trips, presented at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve for their "Driftless Dialogue" series, assisted RMEF in preparation for their habitat council tour in 2018, held booths at both the Jackson and Clark county fair to highlight the elk reintroduction, attended numerous rod and gun club events to discuss elk management, and addressed numerous media inquiries.

Compiled by Scott Roepke, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources