

Clam Lake Elk Herd Update (January to December 2018)

Population Status: Demonstrated from winter elk captures and trap cameras, the Clam Lake elk herd experienced excellent calf survivorship during elk year 2017/2018 (July 1 to June 30). Most notable, with a peak of 104 radio collared elk during this elk year, we only lost 2 of those elk to wolf predation. Normally we experience around a dozen or more. A long drawn out spring thaw, with refreezing and rethawing ice, resulted in an atypical number of elk falling through ice and drowning. Elk herd projections in March of approximately 220 elk led to high confidence that the Clam Lake herd would surpass the 200-elk threshold for offering a limited elk hunting season. As a result, Wisconsin held its first management elk hunt in state history in 2018 with a quota of 10 bulls.

Elk Recruitment and Mortality: An estimated 52 calves were born this year, compared to 29 known losses to a variety of causes including wolves (2), bears (2), drowning (5), vehicle collisions (4), entrapment, natural entrapment (1), birthing complications (1), poor condition due to parasites (1), infection (1), unknown causes (3), and hunter harvest (9).

Trail cameras are being used to provide field observations and herd dynamics information. Camera images currently at elk trapping sites indicate fair numbers of calves, with a current calf to cow ratios of about 44 calves to 100 cows. Many of these are young cows who were non-breeders in 2018, but are now maturing and expected to contribute to the calf crop in 2019, putting us on the brink of what we hope will be significant annual herd growth!

Elk Calf Searching: The 2017 elk rut started strong, but hot weather set in on September 10th and caused a little over a week stall in mating activities. This break was demonstrated during the 2018 calving season where search crews had little success in calf searching for about 10 days during what should be peak calf collaring in late May early June. Instead, an estimated 2/3rds of calves were born later than usual, resulting heavy and healthy calves that allow them to avoid capture at about three days old. Even day-old calves were attempting to avoid capture by searchers. So, though the situation was poor for catching calves, it was great for providing healthy, feisty calves, and appears to have resulted in good calf survival. During calving, elk staff monitored 25 cows, searched 23 cows and verified 19 calves born of the 23 searched. Of the 19 calves verified, 10 were captured and collared, while several others outran searchers! But we have recently verifying their survival with visual sightings and trail cameras.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Elk Herd: “Snapshot Wisconsin” volunteers continue collection of data cards and replacement of batteries on the Clam Lake and Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) “Snapshot” camera grids. The DNR’s Office of Applied Science uses this information as part of their elk population modelling for both Clam Lake and Black River Falls elk herds.

During the 2017/2018 winter, elk trapping efforts occurred to place radio collars on uncollared adult elk and to replace radio collars on others. DNR elk staff deployed 26 GPS collars on cows, 7 vhf collars on cows and 4 vhf collars on bulls, and are now helping to monitor and provide location information in our continued education about Wisconsin elk productivity, habitat use, and survivorship. In addition, several collared wolves also contribute to this research and inform us on predator/prey relationships and impacts.

In December, our winter trapping efforts resulted in the deployment of six GPS radio collars. It is hoped that another 28 GPS collars will be deployed during the early months of 2019.

Elk trapping effort would not be as effective if not for the dedicated, experienced help of many DNR wildlife staff that so expertly handle the elk in a safe and low stress manner! Three veterinarians are also critical to the well-being of captured animals. And finally, a great deal of gratitude is due to all those who donated bait, snow plowing and land access during our efforts. To all involved, thank you!

Elk Habitat Improvements: Eighteen acres (12 openings) of high quality clover forage plantings were added to the landscape in 2018, and 202 acres including 61 total openings were mowed to maintain them as wildlife openings on the Flambeau River State Forest (FRSF) and Sawyer County Forest (SCF). Telemetry, observations and trail camera images have verified extensive elk use on these managed acres. During 2018 about 2,000 acres of timber harvests were accomplished on the FRSF, and similar acreages on the Price, Rusk and Sawyer County Forests. And sizeable acres of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest were harvested on the elk range in 2018. The combination of all these efforts continue to build on the inventory of high quality elk forage habitat on the Clam Lake Elk Range.

2018 Rut Conditions and Calving Prospects for 2019: With the exception of a short window (Sept. 12-16), the majority of September had ideal elk breeding conditions with highs ranged from the 40's into the 70's with lows in the upper 30's to low 50's. Thus far 2019 winter severity is very mild, and forecasts for the rest of the winter are for temperatures above normal. As a result, we expect our largest crop of calves yet in 2019!

More Elk Coming: Due to a major economic development project in Kentucky in 2018, Wisconsin elk translocation efforts were put on hold. January 2019 will see Wisconsin staff in Kentucky to capture the final 50 elk (with the vast majority, if not all, being cows) for release in the Clam Lake Elk Range. Confidence is high for the capture of our full allotment of 50 in that we will be utilizing a helicopter contractor. This will increase breeding-age cow numbers and facilitate increased genetic diversity of the Clam Lake Elk Herd.

Partnership Efforts: Department staff worked with RMEF staff to offer the September "Bugle Days" event. Participants were able to see and hear some elk, and about 30 volunteers helped plant clover on six wildlife opens encompassing 10 acres located on the FRSF portion of the elk range. RMEF approved and contributed about \$22,000 in grants for elk habitat work. Friends of Wisconsin Wildlife approved an additional \$10,000.