



ELK IN WYOMING

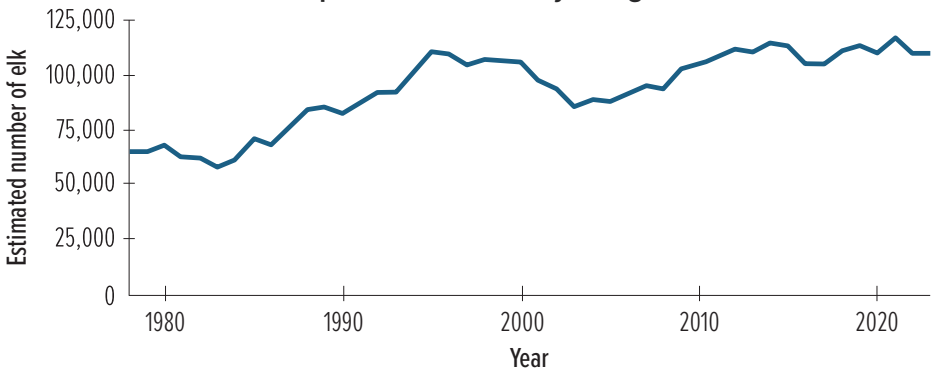


HISTORY OF ELK IN WYOMING

Elk are native to Wyoming. However, by the early 1900s, elk populations in many areas of the state had been extirpated or significantly reduced due to habitat change, unregulated hunting, severe winters and other factors. In 1910, the state, aided by financial and other support from landowners and local conservation groups, began reintroductions of elk into several areas around Wyoming. Elk from Wyoming were also sent to almost every state in the country to repopulate or establish new herds. These releases continued through the 1960s. Today, Wyoming is home to more than 100,000 elk.



Population of elk in Wyoming



CONNECTING TO HEALTHY HABITATS

Habitat

Game and Fish works alongside numerous partners to complete habitat improvement projects on public and private land to support wildlife in Wyoming. Improvement projects can include removing invasive plants such as cheatgrass to support native plant diversity, aspen stand regeneration and prescribed fire. In addition, the Game and Fish Commission owns or manages 48 wildlife habitat management areas throughout the state, most of which provide habitat for elk and other big game.

Movement

Wildlife movement continues to be a priority for Game and Fish. Migration corridors, crossings, fence work, and habitat work all support fish and wildlife movement around the state. Elk and other wildlife must move, sometimes long distances, to access food, water, shelter and other needs. Wildlife biologists monitor some elk herds using GPS or other technology to identify movement barriers and potential risks to seasonally important habitat areas.

In recent years, Game and Fish, the WYldlife Fund, WYDOT and various partners have completed multiple infrastructure projects on major Wyoming highways to facilitate safer wildlife crossings. To date, we have two overpasses, 58 underpasses and four additional projects are underway.

Across the state, unneeded fences are removed, and existing fences are modified to wildlife-friendly standards. Wildlife-friendly fencing allows for easier movement and reduces animal injuries or deaths from entanglement. The department, along with other partnering agencies, organizations and dedicated landowners, are making a difference in fish and wildlife movements for conservation.

For more information on habitat work and how you can get involved, please see the Statewide Habitat Plan on the Game and Fish website's Get Involved page.





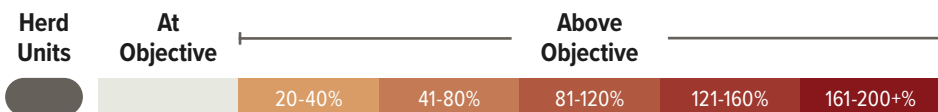
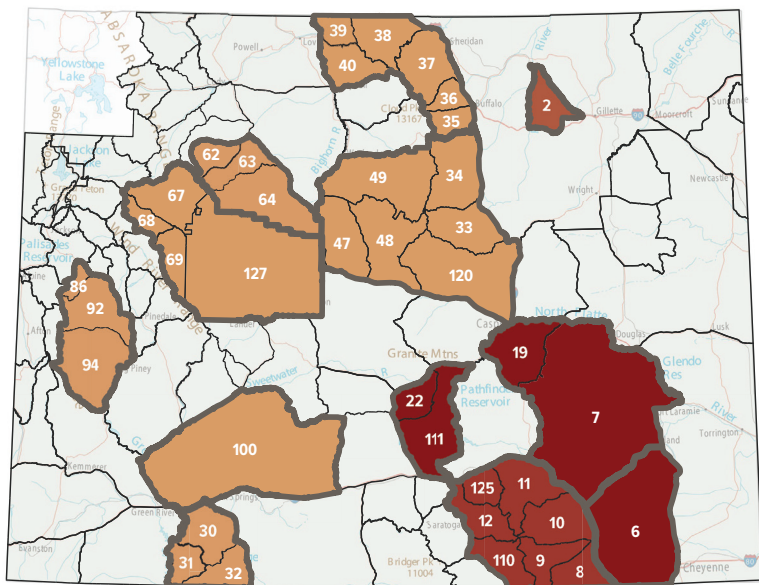
ELK POPULATIONS

Today, elk populations in Wyoming are thriving, providing robust recreational opportunities such as wildlife viewing and hunting.

To manage elk throughout the state, wildlife managers divide elk populations into herd units. A herd unit represents a geographical area where a distinct elk population lives. In most cases, a herd unit encompasses multiple hunt areas.

Game and Fish manages elk populations primarily through hunting. To manage harvest, wildlife managers set management objectives for each herd unit based on elk ecology, survey results and public input. Objectives are reviewed and potentially adjusted every five years. Populations fluctuate constantly, and a herd unit is considered within objective if it is within 20% of the target. Hunting seasons are set annually to move each herd unit toward its objective.

Population objectives: Average of the last three years (2020-23)



MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES



Access

Securing hunting access to private land is a priority and a critical component in managing elk populations, especially in areas where herds are over objective. Since the early 2000s, Access Yes and other Game and Fish programs have worked to secure access easements and promote landowner involvement in Walk-in Hunting and Hunter Management Area programs. These efforts open new public hunting opportunities, provide monetary payments to participants and help Game and Fish and landowners meet management goals.



Damage to agricultural lands

In some areas of the state, elk cause damage to private agricultural lands. State statute allows landowners experiencing damage and meeting certain criteria to submit a damage claim to receive compensation. Elk damage claims have increased by 42% statewide over the last five years.



Disease

Chronic wasting disease and brucellosis are diseases of concern in Wyoming's elk populations. Brucellosis is a management challenge due to the possible transmission from elk to domestic cattle. Brucellosis has been shown to slightly reduce pregnancy rates but not limit the population size of elk.

In Wyoming, the distribution and prevalence of CWD in elk is less than in deer. Currently, there are no documented population-level impacts in Wyoming elk from CWD. However, research suggests CWD may impact elk populations at prevalence rates of 13% or higher.



Feedgrounds

Game and Fish currently manages 21 elk feedgrounds in northwest Wyoming. Over the years, supplemental winter feeding of elk has grown in complexity. While feedgrounds provide reliable winter nutrition for elk, limit damage to agricultural lands and lessen the potential for commingling of elk and livestock, they also present challenges including disease transmission, habitat management and the overall health of elk populations. The department has developed a plan that was approved by the commission in March 2024, that guides long term management of feedgrounds.



Harvest

Hunting is the main tool for managing elk numbers. Some hunt areas contain primarily private land or land-locked public lands, so issuing more licenses will not necessarily increase harvest. In some cases, more licenses may create increased pressure and crowding on limited public lands without increasing harvest.



THE WORK OF GAME & FISH

Game and Fish works to ensure sustainable elk populations while balancing ecological, agricultural and recreational interests in Wyoming.

Adaptable management

To provide flexibility, elk hunting seasons are evaluated and potentially revised each spring with input from the public. Season structures are developed to provide recreational opportunities, move populations toward objectives and address private land conflicts where possible. For example, in 2024, a Type 8 license for cow/calf elk was offered for the first time to address overpopulation on private land in specific hunt areas. Elk hunters can purchase an unlimited number of Type 8 licenses, and the quota is unlimited. Other season structure changes can include dates and length of season, restrictions on the type of weapon used, antler point restrictions and more.



Monitoring and Research

Aerial and ground surveys are conducted annually to count elk herds. Population and harvest data are published annually in a document called a job completion report. These data are used to set hunting seasons that guide each herd unit toward objective. Also, research efforts track seasonal movements through GPS collaring efforts, monitor elk herd health and disease prevalence and study/ research habitat conditions and forage availability.

Working collaboratively

Wildlife managers work throughout the year to gather public opinion through conversations with landowners and hunters, statewide community meetings during the season-setting process, hunter harvest surveys and field checks.

Game and Fish also works with many partners including nonprofit conservation organizations and state, local and federal agencies. This work involves securing hunting access, managing invasive plants, enhancing habitat and initiating projects such as wildlife-friendly fencing and crossing structures for highways that prevent wildlife-vehicle collisions.



Human conflict resolution

Wildlife managers work with communities and landowners to reduce and prevent conflict with local elk populations. Strategies can include installing exclusionary fencing and using scare devices such as noise makers to protect stored or standing crops. Additionally, Game and Fish works one-on-one with landowners through the Access Yes program to resolve conflicts by creating opportunities for hunters to harvest elk on private lands.

BY THE NUMBERS

77,647 LICENSES

In 2023, 77,647 licenses were sold and 28,353 elk were harvested statewide. 45% of elk harvested were antlerless.

1,254,162 ACRES

As of 2024, the Access Yes program provided elk hunting access to 1,254,162 acres across the state.

480,000 DAYS

Hunters spent more than 480,000 recreation days in the field in the 2023-2024 elk season.

37,318 POUNDS

Since May 2020, hunters have donated 37,318 pounds of elk meat to food pantries statewide through the Food From the Field Program.

22,800 SAMPLES

The Wyoming Game and Fish Wildlife Health Lab has analyzed approximately 22,800 elk blood samples for brucellosis in Wyoming since 1991.

247,114 ACRES

Commission-owned or managed lands provide 247,114 acres of big game habitat for elk.



GET INVOLVED

- Engage in public meetings and the season-setting process.
- Reach out and have conversations with local Game and Fish staff.
- Volunteer or support conservation organizations and projects.
- Install wildlife-friendly fencing on your property.
- Donate to the Food from the Field program.
- Donate to Access Yes.
- Contact your local, regional Game and Fish office to learn how you can get paid for allowing hunters to access your land through the Access Yes program.
- Submit CWD or brucellosis samples when requested to help monitor disease prevalence.
- Follow Game and Fish on social platforms and subscribe to news updates.



Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/elkinwyoming to learn more about elk in Wyoming.