

## Wisconsin Elk Update 2007

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**abstract.** Wisconsin began the current Elk Year (17 May 2007 to start of calving season in May of 2008) with an estimated 109 elk. By looking at numbers of potentially pregnant cows (by projecting pregnancy rates per the various age classes of mature cows, ie., 74 percent for 2.5 year olds, 92 percent for prime aged cows, and 54 percent for cows 10 years and older) we estimate 40 calves were born this past calving season, for a total of 149 elk. We've observed 15 elk deaths to date (10 calves, 3 yearling bulls, and one 4-year old cow—6 to bears, 6 to wolves and 3 to vehicles). Those 15 observed mortalities are extrapolated to an additional 6 lost (3 to bears and 3 to wolves) for a total estimated loss of 21 animals, leaving about 128 elk. We still have 2 months before the start of the next calving season, so there will likely be more losses to account for, before the next production cycle. We monitored 28 potentially pregnant cows last calving season. We calf searched 25 of these cows, 33 times, finding 23 calves, resulting in a 92 percent pregnancy rate. This is slightly less than the 93 percent (n=27) observed in 2006, but much better than the 72 percent (n=23) observed in 2005. Of 23 calves found 13 were males and 10 females—a 130 bulls:100 cows born, which was an improvement from the year previous when we observed a 150 bulls:100 cows calf ratio. Calves to 100 cows, by 31 August, were 69 calves in 2007 (n= 18) compared to 74 in 2006 (n=20) and 59 in 2005 (n=12). Calves to 100 cows by 15 May, is currently at 50 calves (still 2.5 months until 15 May) (n=13) compared to 67 (n=18) in 2006 and 35 in 2005 (n=8). Looking at all calf survivorship with cumulative data from 1996 through 2007 of 124 calves we've had 114 survive 4 days (s=0.92), 83 survive to 31 August (s=0.67), and 72 survive to 1 year (s=0.58). This past calving season we weighed 22 calves weighing from 14.5 kg to 20.4 kg, with a mean of 16.7 kg, compared to 10.1 to 19.5 kg in 2006 with a mean of 15.4 kg, and compared to 7.7 kg to 20.9 kg and a mean of 15.9 in 2007. The 4 kg increase in the minimum and the half kg increase in the average compared to the previous year indicated heavier calves and qualitative observations confirmed healthier calves in 2007. We attribute these increased weights and more vigorous calves to better cow health. We believe that this associated better health of cows and calves is primarily attributed with reduced parasite loads due to the virtual disappearance of recreational feeding of elk in the Clam Lake area. Some might assume that the mild winter of 2006/2007 was a primary influence, however, the winter of 2006/2007 wasn't any milder than the winters of 2005/2006 or 2004/2005.

Elk project staff experienced our most successful elk trapping winter yet during the winter of 2007/2008 compared to the previous 6 elk trapping seasons (began elk trapping in January of 2002). From January through February we had 4 captures of a total of 65 elk. We recollared 17 cows and 2 yearling bulls, collared 2 uncollared cows and 3 uncollared calves. Our largest capture was 31 and our smallest 6. We were surprised to capture Cow 26 who had been missing in action since the middle of 1998 when her "break-away" calf collar fell off. Cow 26 was the first Wisconsin elk calf captured and collared during the Clam Lake elk restoration project.

With funding from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation we created 5 acres of high quality forest openings last year within the elk range, bringing our total RMEF funded forest opening creation work to 30 acres to date. We have plans for 2 more projects totaling 6 acres during the summer of 2008. We also have RMEF funding for a pilot forage fertilization project in 2008, that we hope will eventually be expanded to 300 acres of forest openings. With 50 percent cost sharing from RMEF, we installed 3, two mile receiver zones of a special motorist elk crossing warning system along a 6 mile stretch of STH 77 west of Clam Lake. This system is triggered by the 70 plus radio collared elk of the Clam Lake herd. During the first 6 months this system reduced elk vehicle collisions by 60 percent, however, that level of protection has reduced to 40 percent during the last 6 months. Assessment of the warning system's effectiveness continues.

Working with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the US Forest Service we've given input to the Chequamegon/Nicolet National Forest Travel Management Rule, requesting permanent closure to motorized vehicles of 4 trails in high elk use calving and wintering areas, and a permanent seasonal closure during calving season of a trail through a major calving area. These trails were closed under emergency rule during the calving season in 2007 (1 May through 30 June), will be closed under emergency rule in 2008 and are currently being proposed as on-going permanent projects in the draft Travel Management Rule.

Restoration and importation update: The status of our ability to bring animals into the state, and/or move animals within the state in an attempt to reestablish a second herd and increase the genetic diversity of our current herd is still held up by USDA and the Wisconsin Dept. of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). Talks have resumed, but progress is slow as concerns still exist from the captive cervid industry over perceived inequities with the testing and marking requirements of animals being moved into and around the state. The state Department of Natural Resources is trying to make its case that the animals being sought for a reintroduction come from an isolated herd that has not had animals introduced in over 50 years, so, have not been exposed to CWD, TB or Brucellosis. Evidence of such would have shown up in the population through the testing program already in place. So, we are still in a "wait and see" approach. Hopefully with collaboration with other states and continued improvements in live testing will enable Wisconsin to continue to pursue the expansion of its elk herd.

