



Elk (*Cervus elaphus manitobensis*)

Considered one of Manitoba's most valued wildlife resources, this species is an integral part of the landscape for the aspen-parkland and mixed prairie-parkland habitats. Elk are valued by many, and provide special enjoyment for viewing and hunting by licenced and rights-based hunters. Because of early and ongoing adaptive management practices, the provincial elk population has increased and expanded in range occupied from an estimated 500 animals in 1914 to the current estimate of 6,500 animals.

Presently, there are 10 identified populations located in the south central third of the province. There are also several satellite herds, which are too small to be considered separate herds. The current distribution of elk inhabit Riding Mountain, Duck Mountain, Porcupine Mountain, Turtle Mountain, Spruce Woods-Shilo, Tiger Hills and north and south Interlake areas. Small satellite herds exist in the, Pine River, Ethelbert, Souris River, Rock Lake, The Pas, Kettle Hills and Vita areas.

Description

Bulls reach full size at 5 years, (prime years span between 4 – 8 years), and cows at 4 years of age. During their first winter, calves are 40 per cent of adult weight, and yearlings are 67 per cent of adult weight. Calves are born late May to early June, their coat is a yellowish-brown with spots to blend in with their environment. Calves shed their spotted coat in September and assume a dark brown juvenile coat. A dark brown head, mane, neck and limbs, a lighter yellowish-brown coloured body and rump patch, and a short tail characterize adult colouration. Theirs coats varies seasonally from grayish in winter to reddish in summer. An elk's winter coat is thick and well insulated, while their summer coat is shorter and less dense. Of the six subspecies of elk believed to have inhabited North America, only four remain, including: the Manitoban Elk (*Cervus elaphus manitobensis*), Roosevelt Elk (*Cervus elaphus roosevelti*), Tule Elk (*Cervuselaphus nannodes*), and Rocky Mountain Elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*). Elk are the second largest species of Cervidae, only moose (*Alces americanus*) are larger.

Biology

Breeding occurs during the rut, which extends from early September to mid-October, peaking around mid-September. Gestation of cow elk is approximately 247-262 days. Pregnant cow elk separate from the herd a few days prior to giving birth to a calf. The cows seek an area that offers cover, security, forage and water. Calves are born between mid-May and mid-June. Calves remain secluded for a period of 10 to 21 days, associating with the cow primarily for nursing. Approximately 30 days after birth, cow-calf groups form nursery herds in which each

calf continues to nurse until September at which time it moults its spotted coat and assumes a dark brown juvenile coat.

Habitat and Range

The majority of the elk habitat is comprised of the northern boreal forest, aspen parkland, bur oak savannah, grasslands, private agricultural lands and eastern deciduous forest. Important tree species include trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), balsam poplar (*Poplar balsamifera*), white birch (*Betula papyrifera*), white spruce (*Picea glauca*), black spruce (*Picea mariana*), bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) and balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*) and tamarack (*Larix laricina*). A range of factors have influenced elk habitat including environmental change, fire disturbance, herbivory and human activity.

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Management

Demand by hunters is far greater than the available elk hunting opportunities. Elk hunting licenses are available only through a limited entry draw system to residents of Manitoba. The seasons include rifle, archery, and landowner-only.

From a management perspective, the best time of year to survey for elk is during winter, when there is snow on the ground and elk are easier to detect.

Early fall, breeding season for elk, is a prime opportunity for public viewing, when bull elk bugle, a whistling sound, to stake out territory and compete for cows.