



Elk await release from an acclimation pen in West Virginia.

New Herds, New Hunts

Elk restorations soldier on in Appalachia and the North Woods.

In the East and Great Lakes regions, new herds and new hunts seem to be popping up all the time.

In February and March, West Virginia's young elk herd gained 40 individuals donated by the Land Between the Lakes Recreation Area in Kentucky. After time spent in a quarantine pen, biologists released the healthy and disease-free elk onto the Tomblin Wildlife Management Area (WMA) 60 miles south of Charleston. Starting in 2015, West Virginia Division of Natural Resources partnered with the Conservation Fund and RMEF to usher this WMA into existence to host relocated elk. Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) has never been found at the Land Between the Lakes, which is a key concern about moving elk to new areas.

The transplants join a herd of

more than 125 elk already roaming the southern coalfields region of West Virginia.

The Mountain State's foray into elk restoration began in 2016 with 24 Kentucky elk. Prior to this, elk had not roamed the state in over a century, with the last native elk gunned off the landscape by 1875. Their absence left a hole in the hearts of elk enthusiasts who wanted to see them returned to West Virginia.

But that wasn't the only restoration in 2016. Kentucky was also busy sending elk to help create a new herd in central Wisconsin's Black River country. With calf survival nearing 90%, it has since grown to more than 160 animals, allowing Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to announce a hunt this fall.

The DNR approved four bull tags for the Black River Elk Zone's

inaugural hunt. Wisconsin's northern herd of 350-some elk near Clam Lake has been hunted since 2018, with eight to 10 tags available.

Next door in Minnesota, elk have roamed the aspen prairie parklands in the northwest corner of the state for more than a century. Yet an all-new herd may be taking root 250 miles to the east.

For more than a decade, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa in eastern Minnesota has worked to establish a herd on the Fond Du Lac Reservation. In 2023, the Minnesota Legislature threw its support behind the translocation to the tune of \$2.3 million.

Fond du Lac's longtime biologist, Mike Schrage, says this exciting news puts the effort on

track to have the first group of elk relocated to tribal lands in early 2026. Habitat is interspersed with state lands and national forest, and public access for hunting on the reservation is available by permit. The elk would come from Minnesota's other three herds in the northwestern part of the state.

"For our purposes, we wanted to stay in state, partly because it's logistically a lot easier with the paperwork and permitting if you're not crossing state borders," Schrage says. Though the logistical hoops are there to prevent CWD from crossing state borders, it has not been detected in elk in Minnesota. However, it is found in wild deer herds at a rate that

the state deems "relatively rare."

"CWD is primarily, and may be the only reason we aren't considering [an out-of-state source herd] at this time," Schrage says. Regardless, the elk will be quarantined before release onto their new digs, which grow to nearly 200,000 acres once you include neighboring state lands into the mix.

Looking forward, Schrage says the goal is to eventually have hunting open to both tribal members and nonmembers. And the hunting seems to have the potential to be pretty darn good, too. In 2023, a 10x11 bull killed by hunter Gary Przekwas is poised to become the No. 1 nontypical bull harvested in Minnesota

pending upcoming panel scoring by the Boone and Crockett Club. A little less than two weeks after Przekwas killed his record breaker, a 13-year-old hunter took a 390-inch bull from one the northwestern herds.

However, Schrage is quick to point out that while the new herd may have the same genetics as those bulls, they will live in habitats that are different enough that antler growth may not run parallel. Nevertheless, it appears eastern Minnesota is well on its way to establishing an exciting new elk herd.



ELK 101

Why do animals like to eat elk antlers?

If you've ever felt like shed hunting is a foot race to beat toothy critters to the first "brown" shed antlers of the year or watched a dog chew an antler with fervor, you've probably pondered the reason behind animals' affinity for chewing on them.

Turns out, chewing antlers is known as osteophagy (the chewing of bones), which animals engage in for numerous reasons. One is that antlers are like a multivitamin to the animals that consume them. Various studies have found they contain proteins such as collagen, as well as essential minerals including calcium, magnesium, zinc, phosphorous, sodium, potassium, barium, iron, aluminum, strontium and manganese. Chewing a hard antler also provides additional benefits to rodents, whose teeth never stop growing and require abrasive edibles that wear them down to keep them from curling back into their heads. However, they've got plenty of competition out there. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports bears, foxes, opossums and otters have also been known to chew on an antler or two.

Our canine companions enjoy chewing on antlers as well, although it's hard to know whether dogs chew on antlers as a source of those proteins and minerals or just for the pleasure of gnawing on something. Buck Bone Organics, a family-owned antler-chew business based in Bozeman, Montana, sells about 300,000 pounds of wild-sourced antlers each year. CEO Jackie Steigleman says most are elk antlers purchased from shed hunters and commercial antler buyers alike, and



demand for antlers sliced into dog chews has grown rapidly for years.

Unfortunately, if chews, supplements or other products derived from antlers are sourced from game farms, it presents dire disease concerns for wildlife, particularly for spreading Chronic Wasting Disease, which has run rampant through farmed deer and elk and often finds its way into nearby wild herds. So if you do purchase antler products, make sure you know the source.

Steigleman says aside from providing great mental stimulation for dogs, chewing on antlers packs a nutritional punch.

"Like a protein shake for dogs," she says.

—Vivien Felker