

The Return of the Wapiti?

By: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech

Wapiti is the Shawnee name for elk meaning 'white rump'. Elk are members of the deer family. Due to a loss of habitat and unregulated hunting, the Eastern elk (*Cervus elaphus canadensis*), once found in Virginia, became extinct in the late 1800's; however four other subspecies still remain in the United States, including the Rocky Mountain elk (*C. e. nelsonii*).

Over the years, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to reestablish elk in Virginia. Currently, there are between 50-100 Rocky Mountain elk in the Commonwealth – concentrated in the far southwest. These animals wandered over from Kentucky, the state with the largest elk population east of Montana (about 10,000 animals, the result of successful restoration programs). These animals can be hunted during the regular deer season in Virginia.



Photo courtesy of the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries

Last October, the Board of Game & Inland Fisheries directed the Executive Director of the Department of Game & Inland Fisheries (DGIF) to develop an operational plan for elk restoration and management. This plan has been completed and is available from the DGIF website: www.dgif.virginia.gov. The plan presents five management options. The Elk Plan Committee is recommending the Active Restoration option which would introduce 200 elk over a 3 year period, with the goal of having 1200 elk in 12 years. The counties targeted for reintroduction include Buchanan, Dickenson and Wise, on the Cumberland Plateau in far southwest Virginia. These counties were chosen because of their relatively small acreage dedicated to agriculture, proximity to established herds in Kentucky, and the numerous restored surface coal mine sites, which provide suitable habitat. Private forest lands provide essential habitat for the elk as well.

What impact might elk reintroduction have on forest landowners in these three counties? Regionally, elk can provide significant benefits to local economies from hunting and wildlife viewing activities. Elk are also good at maintaining early successional habitats (think grasslands and shrublands), which have been on the decline in Virginia. However, landowners may have some concerns with having elk on their land. In the summer, an elk cow can eat 15 pounds of vegetation each day. This can have a negative impact on hayfields or pastures, and reforestation efforts. Additionally, the bulls can damage timber by rubbing their antlers on trees. Bulls weigh between 700 - 900 pounds, raising concerns about road safety. Additionally, elk can carry and transmit some diseases, such as Chronic Wasting Disease, bovine tuberculosis, and brucellosis.

Elk are able to adapt to forest management practices. Although an active timber harvesting operation may displace the elk, they will return to the site if suitable habitat is restored. Small

clearcuts and selection cuttings can be used to create early successional patches. Additionally, although not currently used much in southwest Virginia, prescribed fire is a widely used tool in elk habitats in the West. Fire helps maintain suitable elk forage.

After 13 years, Kentucky has not reported any significant problems associated with their elk reintroduction program. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources receives approximately 20 elk calls a year, most of which are not associated with a monetary loss. Annually, approximately 20-25 elk cause auto accidents in Kentucky; however, there have been no human fatalities or serious injuries as a result of these accidents (although vehicle damage has been high). North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Tennessee also have elk reintroduction programs underway.

The Elk restoration plan was presented to the Virginia Board of Game & Inland Fisheries in June. The plan is available for public comment through August 1.

Visit: <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/elk/management-plan> to read and comment on the Draft Operational Plan

and:

http://www.fws.gov/digitalmedia/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/natdiglib&CISOPTR=9153&CISOBX=1&REC=2 to hear the bugling of a bull elk.

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