

Researchers finding ample elk habitat in areas near Duluth

By [John Myers](#) on Aug 19, 2017



1/5

FOND DU LAC RESERVATION — On a sunny, mid-August afternoon, Drew Erickson took a quick GPS reading and then bolted into the woods just off Moorehead Road, mosquitoes and swamps be damned.

Erickson, of Grand Rapids, is part of a crew of four wildlife technicians hired by the University of Minnesota who bushwhacked in to survey more than 100 forest plots in Carlton and St. Louis counties this summer to see what food might be available for elk.

The short answer? Lots. Grass and sedges to graze, young aspen and mountain maple to browse and plenty of room to roam.

"They're a pretty adaptive species. They eat a lot of different stuff," said James Forester, the assistant professor in the University of Minnesota's department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology who is overseeing the elk habitat study.

There hasn't been a wild elk in this part of Minnesota for 120 years or more. But the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa has been moving in recent years toward a possible elk reintroduction, restoring the majestic animal to its home range where it once thrived before European settlers wiped them out.

Wildlife and forest resource managers have homed in on three potential elk reintroduction areas — the Cloquet Valley, Nemadji-St.Croix and Fond du Lac state forests. The three areas are comprised mostly of county, state and tribal forest lands with some potential Superior National Forest land in the far north, as well as parcels of private land throughout.

Erickson and his crewmates are surveying not just the types of potential elk food but the density of it, how much biomass is available. They are painstakingly keeping track of each stem and stalk at randomly picked sites, each a circle about 70 feet across, and repeating the count exactly the same way each time.

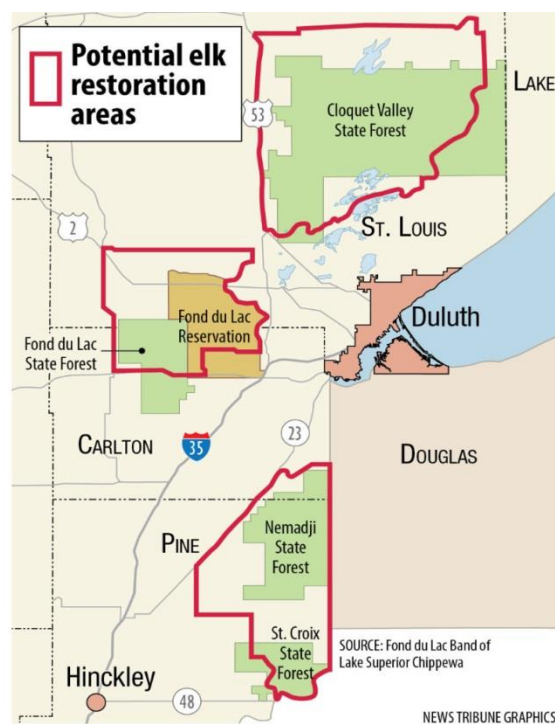
On this particular afternoon, their survey circle was full of big spruce, balsam and maple trees with a thick understory of shrubs and plants, ferns, grasses and sedges — and mosquitoes, making citronella and long sleeves a necessity.

This summer the crew has focused on public land. Next summer a survey crew will get permission to survey privately owned parcels.

What they have found so far was pretty much expected by Forester. He saw the same results when he studied habitat near Clam Lake, Wis. — about 100 miles to the east — where Wisconsin has had a successfully restored elk herd for more than 20 years.

It's a different forest, with more swamps and more conifer trees in Minnesota, but still with plenty of elk food.

"They thrived here before and there's no reason they can't again," Forester said of elk in eastern Minnesota. "Food probably isn't going to be the issue."



Public opinion key

The issue, if there is one for elk restoration, is how and where they will be accepted by people.

In addition to the habitat survey, Forester is working with University of Minnesota adjunct professor David Fulton to survey public opinion on elk restoration.

The project team has been holding informal meetings with landowners and other stakeholders in the region. In coming months 7,500 surveys will be mailed to

landowners and residents across the proposed elk restoration area — namely southern St. Louis, Carlton and far northern Pine counties.

"It's not just a matter of finding what they will eat but where they will go and be accepted, where there will be minimal human/wildlife conflict," Forester said. "These things (elk) move, and they don't always go where you expect them to go. So it pays to make sure we pick the areas where they are most likely to stay out of trouble."

That includes staying out of farmer's hayfields, which could be an issue on some of the small farms located across the potential elk areas.

So far Wisconsin's Clam Lake herd in southern Ashland County has done a good job at staying out of trouble, so much so the state is bringing more elk into the area. But that hasn't been the case in northwestern Minnesota, where two Minnesota elk herds have wandered into farmer's fields and caused extensive damage to row crops, spurring state lawmakers to limit any expansion of elk in that area.

"That's the big reason that this part of (eastern) Minnesota really stands out as a good elk restoration site, because there isn't a lot of that kind of intensive agriculture," Forester said. "There's going to be a lot more benefit here and a lot less conflict."

That benefit should even include a boost in tourism, Forester notes, as people come to see if they can spot an elk and, someday, go elk hunting.

\$1 million and 10 years

The elk restoration studies are funded by a joint state and tribal effort. Gov. Mark Dayton in 2016 signed the bill that allocates \$300,000 for the effort from the state's lottery profits in the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation added \$15,000 with \$32,000 from the Fond du Lac Band.

The final report is due to the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources in June 2019.

Mike Schrage, Fond du Lac wildlife biologist heading the restoration effort, said it may cost another \$1 million to actually bring elk to the region, if that happens — likely more than 200 animals introduced over several years.

The Minnesota DNR and county officials from St. Louis, Pine and Carlton counties already have given their backing for the studies to move forward, as have local hunting and conservation groups. But it may be years before any OK is given for the actual restoration, if it comes at all.

"I tell people that, if all goes well, we're in about year two or three of a 10-year process. It takes a while to work through all the steps, and that's how it should be," Schrage said. "We want to do this right."

Elk, whitetails get along

In addition to Wisconsin, several other eastern states have reintroduced wild elk herds — including Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Kentucky, Virginia, Missouri and Tennessee — and none have reported any negative impact on deer. Kentucky's elk herd is doing so well, at more than 10,000 animals, that they are willing to give up animals to other states. Wisconsin has been adding elk from Kentucky in recent years, and that's a likely source for Minnesota elk, Forester said.

According to elk experts, elk and deer have different diets during the spring, summer and fall. While the diet overlaps during the winter, even then elk and deer generally forage in different areas.

Elk also are more able to withstand higher temperatures than moose, which are dwindling as Minnesota's climate warms. Elk also are much less susceptible to a brain worm carried by deer that, while harmless to deer, is often fatal to moose.

"Kentucky may have more than 11,000 elk now and they have a very healthy population of deer," Schrage said. "We haven't seen anything from any biologist in states with both elk and deer that says elk impact whitetail populations. Michigan has had elk back for 100 years now and you don't hear deer hunters complaining there at all."

Online

The eastern Minnesota elk project now has a website at www.elk.umn.edu and a Facebook page at www.facebook.com/NE.MN.elk.