



Building our hunting and conservation legacy through habitat, education and advocacy.

WHITETALES

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE MINNESOTA DEER HUNTERS ASSOCIATION



TURNING YOUR SHOTGUN INTO A SLUG GUN

BY JOHN TERTULIANI

VENISON FOR EVERYDAY MEALS

BY WES DAVID

FORKHORN FUN FACTS

DECODING WHITETAIL MUMBO JUMBO

BY TERRY T. CLAPP



FALL 2017

Elk Restoration Project

*Continues In Northeastern
Minnesota*

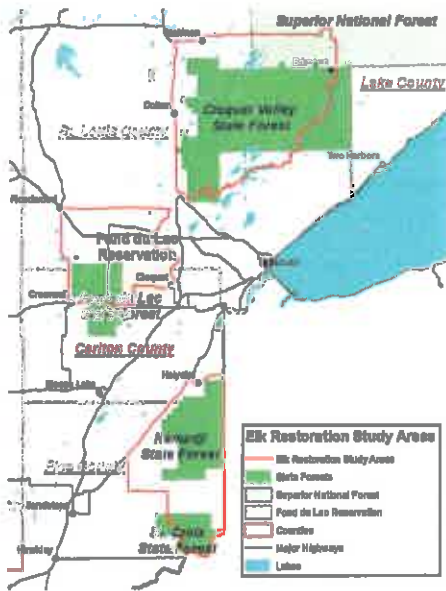
BY JOE ALBERT



Several years back, I stood in one of the food lines at the Minnesota State Fair. A sign in the hut in front of me indicated elk burgers were on the menu, and it was my intent to buy one. The two women ahead of me had seen the sign, too, and were wondering among themselves why a stand that advertised food from animals found in Minnesota would be selling elk burgers. With two kids tugging on my arms, I didn't take the time to explain that there are elk in Minnesota – albeit in a very small portion of the northwestern part of the state – but their exchange made me think about the fact that many Minnesotans likely have no idea their state is home to elk.

As recently as the middle of the 1800s, in fact, elk ranged across much of Minnesota. According to a draft of the MN DNR's 2016 elk management plan, people saw "herds of a thousand or more" elk in southern Minnesota as late as 1841. The big animals lived in about three-quarters of the state at the time, while the northeastern corner of Minnesota was home to woodland caribou. As overharvest from hunting and settlement occurred, the elk range shifted consistently northward and by 1890 they were relegated to a portion of the northwest. Efforts to protect and restore elk were undertaken and today there are three small but wild herds in northwestern Minnesota.

That could change, though, as a result of a project funded by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. The project, which includes the Fond du Lac



Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and University of Minnesota, is exploring the potential for restoring elk to parts of eastern Minnesota in portions of Carlton, Pine and St. Louis counties. Already, researchers and wildlife

managers are making headway.

"I'm very satisfied with how things are going. We are where I wanted to be at this point. We've got field work starting on both aspects of our feasibility study and we have enough funding to do what we want to do," said Mike Schrage, wildlife biologist for the Fond du Lac Band. "This is a big, complex idea and we have to do our homework. That's what we're doing right now. We're going to have to be patient and work through our checklist of things to do."

So far, researchers have identified three areas within the three counties to study in detail (see map). They've worked with area Department of Natural Resources wildlife staff as well as county land managers to get a sense of places where there's limited agriculture and roads, but good amounts of public land and timber harvest. During the summer, researchers spent time at each of the three sites conducting vegetation surveys and working to determine whether they had sufficient habitat suitable for elk. Later this summer, a survey was to be sent to landowners and others in the three areas to get a better understanding of public opinion and the potential for acceptance of elk on the landscape. They've been controversial in the northwestern part of the state because of their propensity for causing problems related to depredation – and the State Legislature as





a result has limited the extent to which herds can increase in Beltrami, Kittson, Marshall and Roseau counties – but researchers note there's far less agricultural land in the northeastern part of the state being studied. In the aforementioned four northwestern counties, the Legislature has said the DNR can't manage for higher elk populations until the state Department of Agriculture has shown that elk depredation hasn't increased for two years.

The Minnesota DNR isn't a partner in the project, but is supportive, according to Dave Schad, the agency's deputy commissioner. "We've said that we would help out and would provide whatever support we can," he said. "It's in the original elk range, and we would like to see if there are places there where elk might do well, where conflicts (with farmers) wouldn't exist, and where they might be welcomed by local folks."

Elk on the ground

Officials believe elk may be socially acceptable in the northeastern part of the state because there is less agricultural land and more forested areas where elk wouldn't frequently be in contact with people. Schrage, for his part, has discussed the potential for elk reintroduction with biologists in the dozen or so other states and provinces where reintroduction efforts have been successful. Such efforts have been particularly successful in Kentucky, where,

like Minnesota, elk largely were eliminated from the state by the later part of the 1800s. Reintroduction in Kentucky has focused on the southeastern part of the state, which is primarily forest but also includes grassland and little in the way of agriculture. The state brought in more than 1,500 elk from other states between 1997 and 2003 and today it's home to more than 10,000 of them.



Close to Minnesota, both Michigan and Wisconsin have undertaken successful elk reintroductions. Keys in both states have been the availability of young aspen – 0- to 10-year-old cuts, Schrage said.

While there seems to be little concern about the ability of elk to coexist with other animals, there are things to think

about. Brainworm is one example. "It does not appear they are near as susceptible to brainworm as moose are, but it will be a source of mortality in elk if we ever put them here," Schrage said. "But based on what other Eastern states are experiencing, it's not going to be anywhere near as significant as it is with our moose herd."

Predation is another factor. "We need to recognize we have an abundant predator population – wolves and bears – in eastern Minnesota and we are not going to get away with starting a herd with 25 elk," Schrage said. "I think we'll need to look at starting with 200 to 300 elk as a founding herd. We'll need to put out a sizeable number of elk on the ground to produce enough calves and get ahead of the predation that's going to happen."

While progress is being made, Schrage all along has said it likely would be a decade before elk are on the ground. The project is now two or three years in. Yet, he remains pleased with what's been accomplished so far and optimistic about the future of elk in northeastern Minnesota and beyond.

"I think if elk do well and we are willing to let the herd grow, there's a potential someday to have elk all across the forested area of northern Minnesota," Schrage said. "That's where we have the space available in the state for large animals like elk. There's no reason they couldn't be from Grand Marais to past Bemidji someday." 