



BRINGING THE BUGGLERS BACK

Elk disappeared from West Virginia's woods more than 100 years ago, but they're on the way back.

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In the spring of 1750, a band of speculators from the Loyal Land Company set off from Louisa County, Virginia “to go...Westward in order to discover a proper place for a settlement,” as expedition leader Thomas Walker would record in his journal. The six men and eight horses encountered numerous hardships during the four-month trek, from foul weather, thick woods, and deep rivers to sprained knees and bear bites. But as they followed the rivers and creeks through southwestern Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and what is now West Virginia, Walker and his men also would have been haunted by an otherworldly shriek echoing through the uninhabited hollows.

It is a sound no longer heard in the woods of West Virginia, but it would have been very familiar to Walker and his men as they laid on bedrolls in the misty mornings. It was the sound of elk “bugling” to attract mates or locate one another in the thick hardwood forests. There were more than 10 million elk roaming the United States and Canada before Europeans settled in North America, but that population dwindled over the next several hundred years as the animals were over-hunted and their habitats destroyed by timber companies. By the 1870s they had completely disappeared from West Virginia and much of the eastern seaboard.

Only about one million elk remain in the U.S. and Canada now, according to the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a Montana-based conservation group. But conservationists are working hard to help the species rebound. Restoration efforts in Kentucky and Virginia have already led to growing elk herds in those states and, thanks to a bill passed in this year’s legislative session, West Virginia will soon begin its own restoration project. “This is an effort to bring back that majestic animal to at least a portion of the state, so we can, at some point, see elk self-sustaining in West Virginia. I think there’s an awful lot of interest in that,” says Paul Johansen, acting wildlife resources section chief for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (DNR).

The bill established an elk management area that encompasses Logan, Mingo, McDowell, and Wyoming counties, as well as parts of Boone, Lincoln, and Wayne counties. It also created penalties for elk poachers, who could face fines up to \$10,000 and five years in prison, and set up a fund to reimburse farmers whose property or crops are damaged by the animals. But perhaps most importantly, the law gives DNR the authority to create an elk management plan, issue hunting permits, and create rules to ensure imported elk are healthy and will not spread disease to West Virginia’s existing wildlife populations.

Johansen says the legislation is the green light his agency needed to begin the work they have been wanting to do for years. The state’s old elk restoration plan only created guidelines for dealing with elk that might wander across the border from neighboring states. Johansen says DNR will now begin an “active restoration program.”

The agency has two goals at this point: figuring out where to get the elk and deciding where to put them.



Johansen says DNR is already negotiating with several states to find a starter herd of healthy animals, free of disease and able to produce healthy offspring. “We’re confident if we get the right source of animals, we’re going to be successful.” He hopes to work out an arrangement with Kentucky, because its elk herd has proven extremely healthy. Kentucky has already contributed elk to Missouri and Virginia’s successful restoration projects. “Plus, the fact that they’re neighbors helps,” he says.

Once his agency works out a deal, the animals will be trapped, loaded into cattle trailers, and trucked to West Virginia where they will be held in an enclosed “soft release” setting until they get acclimated to the area. Wildlife biologists will then open the gate and allow the elk to run free. This process will be repeated several times over several years as West Virginia builds its elk population. Tom Toman, director of science and planning for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, says Kentucky originally planned to import 200 elk per year for nine years. But six years in, the state had around 1,500 elk in its woods and decided to stop importing the animals—they didn’t need any more. Nature took its course and the elk population has continued to grow.

DNR is also negotiating with landowners in the management area’s seven designated counties—mostly landholding companies and coal companies—to find a

When elk are reintroduced to an area, adult animals are held in “soft release” areas before being released into the wild to expand the herd on their own.



Although it is still many years away, state biologists hope West Virginia could one day have an elk hunting season.

place to release the elk. Johansen said his agency probably would not drop elk in all the counties in the management zone, but would work to make sure the elk only live in those areas. Biologists plan to keep the animals from reaching areas of the state with more agricultural activity, since elk can wreak havoc on row crops.

Elk could eventually be a boon for West Virginia's southern coalfields as tourists flock to the area to get a glimpse of—or a shot at—the animals, Johansen says. Although it is still many years away, he hopes the state will have an elk hunting season just like it currently has seasons for other big game animals including deer, turkey, and black bear. “Initially it will be a very limited system. It would be a lottery-type draw for delivering permits,” he says. “It will be a very limited resource, and we’re going to have to allocate permits with a fair and equitable system.”

The elk could provide a major tourism draw even before they are ready to be hunted. Toman has already seen it happen in other states. “There’s been some real magic that happens once the elk show up,” he says. Companies have sprung up, offering horseback rides through elk country and helicopter spotting tours. In Pennsylvania shops sell tourists T-shirts and coffee cups. There’s even a diner that calls itself “Home of the Bugle Burger.” “They’re taking advantage of it,” Toman says.

West Virginia has been through this process before. Several decades ago, the woods in the southern part of the

state were basically devoid of deer and turkeys. The state now has large, viable populations of both species thanks to restoration efforts. Still, introducing a new animal into an ecosystem—even an ecosystem the animal used to thrive in—can present problems. Johansen says he will lean on advice from his counterparts in other states. “The wildlife profession is a pretty tight-knit group of folks. We’re going to steal as many good ideas as we can from states like Kentucky or Virginia.”

He has already identified one hurdle the state’s elk project must overcome: The recently passed legislation does not provide funding for the restoration program. Johansen says the project will largely be funded with money from hunting and fishing license fees, but DNR will also seek grants from conservation groups or landholding companies. The agency already secured a \$50,000 seed grant from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in February.

Johansen stresses the state is still a long way from having a self-sustaining elk population. Still, he can’t help but get a little carried away sometimes. “I get so excited thinking about it, I can hardly sit still in my chair,” he says. “There are few things in this world that will make your hair stand up on the back of your neck like hearing an elk bugle.” He hopes soon, for the first time in more than a century, that sound will once again echo through these hills. 🐃