

THE BULLETIN

PENNSYLVANIA'S ELK NEWSLETTER

October 2024



PENNSYLVANIA
GAME COMMISSION



THE BULLetin

The Bulletin is the Game Commission's periodic update on all things elk. Our hope with this newsletter is to share current and interesting information on elk biology, behavior, and management in Pennsylvania. Each issue will cover a variety of elk-related topics, but we plan to keep the sub-sections similar from issue to issue. Under "*Just the Numbers*," we'll provide up-to-date data on things like the overall population, the number of hunting licenses released, and estimates of people engaged in elk viewing, just to name a few. For more detail on how those data are collected and used, check out the "Deep Dive" section where we provide a more detailed explanation of some specific topics. In each issue, we'll provide a seasonal recap ("*Summer Recap*") with summaries of pertinent events/activities, and we have to share at least a short blurb on elk biology under the "*Biology Lesson*." Finally, we'll close out each issue with what to expect in the next issue under "Coming Up."

Happy reading!



SUMMER RECAP

CALVING SEASON

While there is no official research projects related to calf survival ongoing at the moment, we still capture a small sample of individuals to monitor the general health of the population. Just like human babies are weighed and measured at birth, we weigh, estimate age, and ear tag the few calves we can get hands on. We captured four calves, three females and one male with an average weight of 45 pounds and an average age of 5 days old.



ELK EXPO

The weather was perfect on Saturday, July 27 for the first day of the annual Elk Expo held at the Elk Country Visitor Center in Benezette. Several hundred vendors were set up, and several thousand visitors attended the event. The main event for the Game Commission is the annual elk license drawing where we randomly select the individuals who will get to hunt elk in Pennsylvania. This year, 140 lucky individuals were selected to participate in the 2024 elk hunting season. A total of 55,778 applicants submitted 109,780 applications with 39% applying for one season, 19% applying for two seasons, and 42% applying for all three seasons (archery, general, and late). At least one person from all 50 states applied as well as Washington, D.C. and Puerto Rico, and we also saw applicants from Canada, Australia, and Bahrain.

The following day, July 28 was the drawing for the special conservation license administered by the Keystone Elk Country Alliance. Over 19,000 tickets for this raffle-style drawing were sold generating \$355,650. The lucky winner was from Latrobe, Pennsylvania.

DID YOU KNOW....

Elk hunting licenses are awarded via lottery. People interested in hunting elk in Pennsylvania must apply to enter the lottery. Applications can be purchased from early February through the middle of June and cost around \$12. If you are interested in applying, check out the [HuntFishPA website](https://www.huntfishpa.com).



JUST THE NUMBERS

HABITAT MANAGEMENT:

Late spring through summer is the time for making and maintaining elk habitat.

ACRES MOWED	1588
ACRES PLANTED	280
ACRES LIMED (increases soil pH)	98
ACRES FERTILIZED	326
ACRES BURNED (RX FIRE)	324

UPCOMING HUNTING SEASONS:

2024 Hunting Licenses/Season Dates (p. 55 Pennsylvania Hunting & Trapping Digest).

SEASON	SEASON DATES	BULL LICENSES	COW LICENSES	TOTAL
ARCHERY	Sept. 14-28	16	11	27
GENERAL	Nov. 4-9	30	38	68
LATE	Dec. 28-Jan. 4, 2025	19	26	45



DEEP DIVE: ELK FOOD

Just like people, elk need a few basic things to survive and reproduce — food, water, cover for security, and space. But unlike people, they must find these things in the natural environment. In this issue we're going to focus on food...

What is food for elk? Elk are herbivores and primarily grazers, meaning they'll seek out grasses, forbs, and legumes over most other forms of forage. The collective term for this type of vegetation is herbaceous. In contrast, deer are primarily browsers, seeking the twigs, leaves, buds, and young shoots of woody plants like trees and shrubs. The different preferences allow both species to share the same environment with minimal competition (the fancy term for this is "niche partitioning"). All that said, elk will readily browse, particularly in winter, and deer will graze, so there is still some overlap in the two species dietary preferences.

Back to elk specifically, most of the habitat work we do revolves around maintaining herbaceous grasslands to provide forage (food) for elk.

Maintaining these habitats means we strive to keep them as herbaceous grasslands and prevent the natural succession to shrubs, then young trees that will overtime grow into a mature forest. That is done by either mowing or burning. Mowing is just what it sounds

like — pulling a large brush hog with a tractor and mowing down the vegetation. This 1) keeps woody vegetation from encroaching on what we want to maintain as herbaceous grasslands and 2) it stimulates the existing grasses/forbs to push up new growth which is more tender (palatable) and nutritious for elk. Burning is the use of prescribed fire, meaning it is intentional, controlled, and safe. Prescribed fire, however, is seasonal and can only be used in late winter/early spring or late fall before it starts snowing. With burning, the above-ground grasses/vegetation are consumed, but the roots remain, which again stimulates new growth and, like mowing, prevents woody encroachment effectively keep a field filled with herbaceous plants... still a field.

In addition to yearly mowing every few years (3-5), we'll replant a given field and add lime (much of the soil in Pennsylvania is acidic, and lime increases the pH, making it more neutral and better for growing grasses/forbs). We also add fertilizer to specific areas based on periodic soil testing.

Most of northcentral Pennsylvania is mature forest, and while elk will utilize forest for security cover, the primary thing we need to maintain (and increase) is foraging habitat. This is a foundational part of our elk management plan and remains a priority.

BIOLOGY LESSON #1

THE ELK RUT

The rut or breeding season occurs in the months of September and October with over 70% of the cows bred by Oct. 15. Changes in elk behavior and physiology are driven by photoperiod or day length. As summer winds down and the days get shorter, testosterone levels increase, causing both bulls and cows to focus on breeding. As we pass the winter solstice (Dec. 21) and the days begin to get longer again, testosterone levels drop significantly, reaching an all-time low around the middle of March, which causes bulls to “shed” their antlers.



COMING UP...

In the next issue of the Bulletin, we'll provide a summary of the elk hunting seasons: archery, general, and late, including success rates and highlights from the check station. Reminder: all hunter-harvested elk must be taken to the elk check station within 24 hours of harvest. The check station is open to the public, and if you're interested in seeing this firsthand, we'd recommend the general season (Nov. 4-9) at the Elk Country Visitor Center in Benezette. Hours are 10 a.m.- 6 p.m. every day of the season.

We'll also cover some highlights from the rut and the elk viewing season. As always, a sincere thank you for your interest in Pennsylvania's elk and your passion for wildlife and wild places.