

Imagine. . . no roads, no buildings, and no electricity; land as far as the eye can see, jagged mountains on the east and west horizons; and big game dotting the valley floor. The year is 1850, the air is crisp, and snow blankets the valley. Elk surround you, their breath condensing in the air, some are resting, others chewing their cud, and others browsing on nearby shrubs. In a few short years humans will join the elk and the landscape and the elk herd will see great change.

Natives, Trappers, & Homesteaders

Jackson Hole has not always been a place for humans. Animals roamed freely long before humans laid eyes on the grand peaks. Some animals stayed year-round, and others stayed only seasonally for food and lodging. Seasonal human inhabitants were documented years ago. Native Americans followed big game herds into the valley for centuries previous to other humans. Fur trappers arrived following bountiful beaver pelts through 1840. Although there was the occasional European and Native Americans, the landscape remained dominated by four-legged inhabitants.



Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1958.0225.001

It was not until the Homestead Act of 1862 did Jackson Hole's human population begin to grow with permanent settlers. The act deeded 160 acres of *unused land* to any United States citizen over 18 who *improved upon* the acreage. Jackson Hole still remained sparsely populated, regardless of the government invitation. By the early 1900's homesteaders finally discovered the valley and converted wildlife habitat to livestock range. The modern day National Elk Refuge was dotted with over 44 homesteads prior to 1916. With the increase in human activity, the once safe winter range became perilous. This was a common story for elk across North America. As Europeans migrated westward, estimated elk numbers of 10 million dropped to 50,000 by the early 1900s. One of the largest remaining herds wintered in the heart of Jackson Hole. A well-traveled path carved into the

Loss of Home, Less Room to Roam



In the early 1900's thousands of Jackson Hole elk starved.

bottom of the valley from centuries of elk migration was being tilled by homesteaders. The annual fall migration allowed elk to escape severe conditions in the high country. Although debate persists, some historians and biologists agree that the southern third of Jackson Hole was winter range for upwards of 20,000 elk. The town of Jackson blocked 75 % of elk winter range. With the influx of people, livestock competed for food with elk. Elk were also a commodity. Excessive hunting, trapping, and poaching contributed to elk population decline. The herd was starving, one of the last emblems of the Wild West was fading away. It was time to act. In 1909 the citizens of Jackson Hole appealed to the federal government in hopes of providing safe and healthy land on which the elk could winter.

A New Era for the Elk

Combined local uproar and a 1912 biological report led to the establishment of the National Elk Refuge. On August 10, 1912, \$45,000 purchased hay to feed wintering elk. The role of

human inhabitants shifted from adversarial to wildlife stewardship which eventually led to permanent winter habitat conservation. In 1916 the refuge had grown to 2,760 acres through initial land purchases and restored winter habitat started to unfold for the Jackson Elk Herd. In 1918, the United States Forest Service classified surrounding forest lands as *big game winter range* which eliminated winter human use in critical wintering habitat.

In 1927 The Izaak Walton League of America donated 1,760 acres, increasing the refuge to 4,520 acres. The same year concerned scientists and policy makers created the Presidential Commission on the Conservation of the Elk of Jackson Hole. This commission, active until 1935, developed a tenet: "The Jackson Hole Elk Herd is a national resource combining economic, aesthetic, and recreation values in which the state of Wyoming, the federal government, private citizens, civic organizations are actively participating." By the 1930's the elk

The Miller Ranch was the first acquisition of the National Elk Refuge.

Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1958.0211.001



National Elk Refuge

A Legacy of Conservation

herd had recovered, and numbers continued to increase after the creation of Grand Teton National Park which protected 310,000 acres of summer range just north of the National Elk Refuge.



Early photo of winter on the National Elk Refuge.

The “Six Million Dollar Fund” Act of 1935 allocated funds for the purchase of wildlife land throughout the United States. The National Elk Refuge

acquired an additional 16,400 acres of private land and 3,786 acres of public domain lands through Presidential Executive orders in 1935 and 1936. Today, the Refuge consists 24,700 acres and is some of the last remaining elk winter range for the Jackson Hole Elk Herd.

Continuing Civic Action: Making History

Just as, “It takes a village to raise a child,” it takes a village to protect the Jackson Hole elk. In 1958, a cohort, the Jackson Hole Cooperative Elk Studies Group, formed including the Wyoming Game & Fish Department, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service. This group coordinated plans, programs, and studies to provide an exchange of ideas, information, and personnel to study the elk herd and its habits and habitats. This cooperation was necessary because all these entities have some legal responsibilities for the management of the herd and its habitat.

The future of this land, the herd, and the other wildlife that depend

on the refuge rely on our continued cooperation in conservation. The refuge provides winter range for 3,000-10,000 elk annually. It is also home to birds, reptiles, wild canines, bighorn sheep, and many other species.

Like other National Wildlife Refuges, the National Elk Refuge offers wildlife dependent recreation: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography and education. Annually millions of visitors drive by and visit the National Elk Refuge. Regardless of the season, visitors experience continued conservation history.

Summer visitors viewing wildlife.



In the summer visitors may not see elk, but a landscape protected by the citizens and cultivated specifically for the wintering wildlife of this area.

In the winter visitors see thousands of elk the homesteaders competed with and Native American hunted. Although it is not as quiet or as wild as it was, it is a home to the once threatened Jackson Hole elk herd. Debate continues, stakeholders continue to banter, and the future presents many challenges. One truth has



Winter visitors viewing wildlife.

remained constant for the last century: Humans and elk coexist. Each winter elk return to try to survive one more winter, and people enjoy viewing them and hold them high as a prized and proud mascot of Jackson Hole and our wildlife.

Today, the National Elk Refuge is 24,700 acres and supports 5,000-8,000 wintering elk and provides habitat and food for animals like bison, wolves, coyotes, bighorn sheep and several species of migratory birds. The goal of the National Elk Refuge is to protect and promote natural habitat for wildlife and future generations or people.

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