Timeline (1864-1923)

Until 1864	Jackson Hole virtually uninhabited except for periodic beaver trappers.
1866	Law enacted prohibiting the seasonal sale of elk meat.
1871	Closed game seasons enacted.
1872	Yellowstone NP established.
1884	First homesteaders on National Elk Refuge.
1886	All peace officers can enforce game laws.
1889	Population of Jackson Hole is 65.
1890-1900	Conversion of elk range for livestock and sale of game meat prohibited.
1880's	A series of severe winters happens.
1897	10,000 elk starve in winter.
1898	The Miller House construction finished.
1902	D.C. Nowlin appointed 2nd game warden Jackson.
1904	Hunters kill elk for ivories.
1905	Teton Game Reserve established.
1906	Public suggests permanent elk refuge.
1908	Robert Miller becomes first superintendent of Teton National Forest.
1910	Law prohibits killing elk for teeth. State appropriates $5,000 for hay for elk.
1911	2,500 elk starve. Congress appropriates $20,000 to feed and investigate elk situation. E.A. Preble and D.C Nowlin study elk situation.
1912	August 10, 1912, Congress appropriates $45,000 to purchase elk winter range and appoint D.C. Nowlin as first refuge manager.
1914	Miller property (1,240+ acres) purchased for Refuge. Miller house becomes first refuge office, called "The Government Ranch" by locals.
1916	Refuge grows to 2,760 acres
1918	Forest lands east of the refuge designated as big game winter range.
1923	Almer Nelson refuge manager for 33 years.

Timeline (1925-Future)

1925	Izaak Walton League purchase of 1,760 acres for refuge total acreage 4,500 acres.
1928	Olaus Murie studies elk on refuge.
1935-36	16,400 acres of private land become refuge with an act of Congress ($6 million fund). 3,783 acres of public domain lands added.
1938	Four trumpeter swan cygnets from Red Rocks Lakes NWR transplanted to NER.
1943	Hunting started on National Elk Refuge.
1944	15,000 elk in Jackson Hole herd.
1945	Elk exhibition pasture constructed on Refuge.
1953	First antler arch built on Town Square.
1957	Boy scouts collect antlers on refuge.
1965	First sleigh rides on east side of Refuge.
1975	Feed switched from baled hay to alfalfa pellets.
1990's	Ecological elk studies — herd and population dynamics, radio telemetry and diseases.
1994	Sleigh rides move to west side of Refuge.
1998	Lawsuit to stop bison hunting on Grand Teton National park and the National Elk Refuge won by Fund for Animals.
1997	Refuge operates Jackson Hole and Greater Yellowstone Visitor Center in partnership with the Grand Teton Natural History Association, Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, Bridger Teton National Forest, Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming Game & Fish Departments and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.
1998	Beginning of 10-year planning process and drafting of Environmental Impact Statement to determine 15 year management plan for Jackson Hole Bison and Elk.
2003	National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Celebration. The National Elk Refuge is one of over 550 in the National Wildlife Refuge System.
2007	Ten Year Anniversary of Visitor Center Partnership.
2012	Centennial of the National Elk Refuge.

For more information contact:
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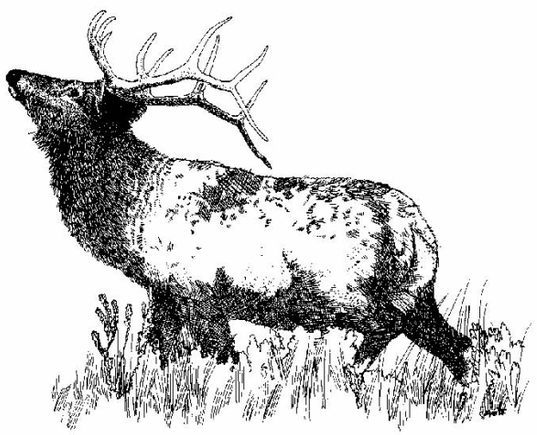
U.S. Fish &Wildlife Service

National Elk Refuge History

A Legacy of Wildlife Conservation



Human History

Following the removal of beaver by trappers by 1840, Jackson Hole was virtually uninhabited by settlers until 1884. Native Americans summered here until 1865.

Jackson, early 1900's

Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1958.0225.001

When Wyoming became a state in 1890, only 64 people lived in Jackson Hole. By the early 1900s, homesteaders flooded the valley and converted the land to livestock range. On the present day, Refuge over 100 homesteads were founded.

Elk in Trouble

Although an estimated 10 million elk roamed North America when Europeans arrived, elk numbers dwindled to less than 50,000 by the early 1900s. Most of those remaining were concentrated in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Although opinions differ as to whether most of the Jackson elk herd wintered in the valley or moved to areas with less snow and forage, it is accepted that by the late 1800s human settlement and conversion of winter range to use by domestic livestock shortened movements and caused elk to remain in Jackson Hole.

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

Competition between starving elk and livestock for haystacks, combined with excessive hunting, trapping of elk for shipments to the east, and poaching (including "tusk" hunting) also influenced elk numbers and movements.

Severe winters in the late 1800s and early 1900s increased depredation losses and mortality. In 1909 the people of Jackson appealed to the government for help, and the Wyoming legislature appropriated money for elk feed.

Refuge Establishment

A report by biologist E. A. Preble led to the establishment of the National Elk Refuge in 1912. That year, the first winter census showed about 20,000 elk residing in Jackson Hole and the Hoback River drainage.

The feeding program successfully stabilized the herd by the 1930s. The creation of Grand Teton National Park in 1929, as well as its expansion in 1950, consolidated and protected elk summer ranges within this area.

Refuge Expansion

After the initial biological reports, $45,000 was appropriated on August 10, 1912 for the purchase of elk winter range. D.C. Nowlin became the first manager of the National Elk Refuge following his retirement as state game warden.

By 1916, from a combination of public lands and private lands, 2,760 acres comprised the National Elk Refuge. For more than ten years, no additions were made to the refuge. In 1918, the adjacent U.S. Forest Service lands were classified as big game winter range and livestock grazing was restricted. In 1927 Congress accepted title to 1,760 acres acquired and donated by the Izaak Walton League of America, expanding the refuge to 4,520 acres.

In a 1935 Act known as the "Six Million Dollar Fund," Congress designated money for purchase of wildlife lands throughout the United States. 16,400 acres of private lands were acquired for the National Elk Refuge through the fund. Also, 3,783 acres of public domain lands were added by Presidential Executive orders in 1935 and 1936.

Today the Refuge consists of nearly 25,000 acres devoted to elk winter range, representing the last remaining elk winter range in Jackson Hole.

Cooperative Management

A Presidential Commission on the Conservation of the Elk of Jackson Hole was established from 1927 and through 1935. The commission developed the following 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."

In 1958, the Jackson Hole Cooperative Elk Studies Group formed, composed of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. The principal purpose of this group was to coordinate plans, programs, and studies to provide an exchange of ideas, information, and personnel to study the elk herd and its habitat. All four agencies have legal responsibilities for management of the elk herd and its habitat.

Today this historically important elk herd is still managed cooperatively among federal and state agencies. As we look to the future, cooperation and partnership is crucial for the conservation the Jackson Hole elk herd and all its remaining winter habitat.

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

Photo courtesy of the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum 1958.2611.001