



A GPS radio collar records the location of this cow elk.

Shawn Cleveland

North Hills Herd: Large and Growing

With one exception, the size of Missoula's elk herds has been stable in recent years. The exception is the North Hills herd, which has about 300 elk and is growing rapidly.

The North Hills herd spends much of the hunting season on public and private lands where access is difficult or restricted. Another factor in the herd's growth is its access to grasslands owned by North Hills ranchers from Rattlesnake to Butler Creeks. The herd feeds well during the winter, but at the expense of grass ranchers intended to feed their cattle. In addition, elk damage the ranchers' fences.

During several winters, damage hunts have discouraged elk use on ranches between Grant and Butler Creeks. An early elk season in the Rattlesnake Wilderness and some adjoining lands was established in 2006 to help control this herd.

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the University of Montana have outfitted elk from the North Hills herd with radio collars to learn more about the herd and its response to management.

The Mount Jumbo Herd: Stable

Conditions are different for the 50 to 75 elk in the Mount Jumbo herd that winters just to the east. Hunters have relatively easy access to the herd and the herd's winter range isn't as large or as productive as that claimed by the North Hills herd. So the Mount Jumbo herd must be managed much more conservatively than the North Hills herd.

The Role of Hunting

Missoula's elk hunters don't have to drive far from home to find places to hunt. The hunters aren't just



Some Rattlesnake hunters use two-wheeled pack stock.

Kristi DuBois

doing themselves a favor when they take an elk home; they're also doing a favor to the herds and their habitat. Other than the occasional bitter winter, hunting is

about the only control on the size of Missoula's elk herds. If elk numbers aren't kept in line with the available habitat, elk can overgraze their ranges.

In addition, hunting helps keep elk wary of people, a trait that's important when elk and people are living close to one another. Elk can become unwelcome neighbors, occasionally threatening or injuring people, when they lose their fear of humans—as has happened in several communities across the West, including Banff, Alberta, and Estes Park, Colorado.



The North Hills elk herd grazes above homes in a Grant Creek subdivision.

Kristi DuBois

For More Information

Managing Missoula's Elk Herds

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
542-5500  
fwp.mt.gov

Learning About Missoula's Elk Herds

Hellgate Hunters and Anglers  
www.mhfi.org/MissoulaElkHerds/Index.htm

Protecting Land in Western Montana

Five Valleys Land Trust  
549-0755  
www.fvlt.org

City of Missoula Open Space

Missoula Open Space Program  
552-6267  
www.ci.missoula.mt.us/parksrec/openspace.htm

Conservation of Elk and Their Habitat

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
523-4500  
www.rmef.org

Weed Control

Missoula County Weed District  
258-4200  
www.mslacountyweed.org

Public Lands Used by Elk

Lolo National Forest, Missoula Ranger District



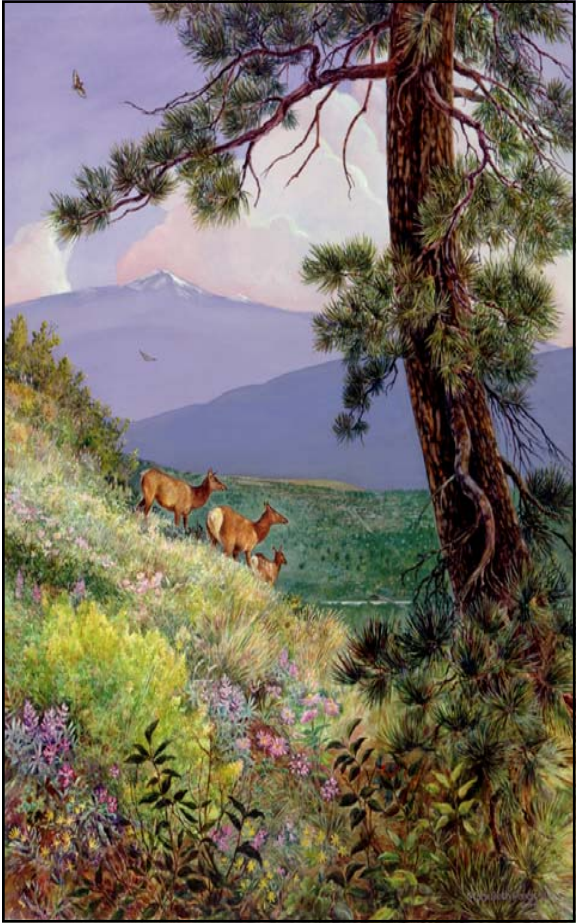
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Montana Natural History Center  
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Living With Wildlife



Mary Beth Percival

Elk on Mount Jumbo. Used with permission from Five Valleys Land Trust.

Missoula's Elk Herds





Pelah Hoyt

Missoulians keep a close eye on the Mount Jumbo herd.

Evapo and Lolo. About 800 elk spend the spring, summer, and fall in the mountains, returning to Missoula's valleys each winter. It's not unusual to see elk from town, particularly when they're grazing on Mount Jumbo or the North Hills.

### Surviving the Winter

In Montana, the productivity of winter ranges (where elk spend most of the winter months) usually controls the size of elk herds. Most of the elk return to their winter ranges by December 1, when snows have made the mountains inhospitable. Elk build up fat during the summer and fall that enables them to survive the lean times of winter. But long periods of extreme cold or a freeze that locks forage in ice can mean starvation for elk.

The North Hills herd wintering on protected lands in Grant



Bert Linder

### Hub of Six Herds

Missoula, the hub of five valleys, is also the hub of six elk herds. Winter ranges for these herds ring town: in the Miller and O'Brien Creek drainages, in the North Hills, on Mount Jumbo, and in the hills near

After the snow melts in the spring, the elk stay on the winter ranges to take advantage of the new growth of green grass. This time is critical because cow elk depend on the new grass to nourish the calves they are carrying. Elk leave their winter ranges sometime in May, usually before the cows give birth.

It's important that elk continue migrating to their summer ranges each year rather than spending the entire year along the fringes of town, as has happened in other areas of the West. If elk lost their migratory patterns, winter ranges would be overgrazed and the elk and their habitat would suffer. Some forms of seasonal public use, such as allowing hiking from mid-May to December 1, can help encourage the elk to migrate back into the mountains for the summer.

### Protecting Winter Ranges

Western Montana's rapid growth can mean less space, less security, less cover, and less forage for wintering elk and deer. Winter recreation can displace elk from their preferred feeding and bedding sites, forcing them to use their depleted energy reserves. These elk may be more vulnerable to predation by uncontrolled dogs, mountain lions, and possibly wolves.

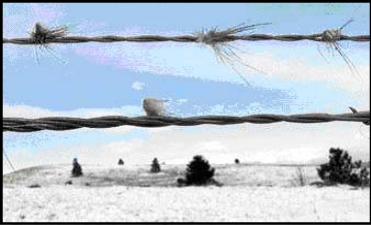
During the past 25 years, portions of the winter ranges of the Mount Jumbo, North Hills, and O'Brien Creek elk herds have been permanently protected through land trades, purchases, and conservation easements. Little protection has been provided for winter ranges used by the Miller Creek, Lolo, and Evapo herds.

The Missoula County open space bond issue passed by voters in the fall of 2006 could help provide additional protection for the winter ranges, ensuring that Missoula will be the hub of six elk herds for centuries to come.

### Making Winter Ranges More Valuable

In many areas, knapweed, leafy spurge, and other noxious weeds have replaced the native bunchgrasses that support wildlife. Weed control is crucial to keeping the winter ranges in the best condition possible for the elk. Grants from the Missoula County Weed and Conservation Districts, Cinnabar Foundation, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have helped control weeds and improve habitat for Missoula's elk herds. Wildlife-friendly fences can help landowners control cattle and horses while allowing safe passage for elk and deer. The benefit for ranchers is that elk aren't nearly as likely to damage such fences.

Traditional barbed-wire fences can be tough on elk—and elk can be tough on fences.



Tom Bauer, Missoulian

### What You Can Do to Help Missoula's Elk Herds

- Respect seasonal closures on elk winter ranges.
- Encourage additional protection for elk winter ranges.
- Encourage the use of wildlife-friendly fencing.
- Support efforts to manage weeds on elk winter ranges.
- Support efforts to keep Missoula's elk herds from growing larger than their winter ranges can support.
- Thank the private landowners who provide much of the winter range for Missoula's elk herds.
- Enjoy Missoula's wild elk.

