

Clam Lake Elk News—April 2013 through September 2013; Vol. 13, Iss. 2.

Current Status: As of 30 September, and based upon our past method of estimation, the Clam Lake herd is about 175 animals. We also have deployed 92 working radio collars.

2013 Calving Season: Spring was late in northern Wisconsin this year. Generally late springs are tough on Wisconsin elk calves. Timing of “spring green up” is important to elk because it influences the availability of abundant food for pregnant and lactating cows. Because spring green grasses, forbs and aspen leaves are important spring foods for pregnant elk cows elk project staff determine official “spring green up” for elk when 75% of the road ditches are green and 50% of young aspen in clear cut areas have leafed out. In 2008 on the Clam Lake elk range “spring green up” didn’t come until May 25th (the latest observed) and we saw some elk calf still births and 2 pregnant cows die due to birthing complications in 2008. In 2013 we expected similar results. Spring green up in 2013 was May 20th. Our first calf was found dead on May 25th. Indications were that the calf was normal, but green vegetation in its mouth indicated its mother might not have been lactating properly (necropsy still pending). Though we did see a low average birth weight of 33.8 pounds for 2013 calves (compared to 33.9 pounds in 2008), we did not see any still births or deaths of cows due to birthing complications.

During the 2013 calving season the DNR and UWSP elk calf search staff monitored 45 possible mothers, searched 31 of these 53 times and found 23 calves (found a calf every 2.3 searches and captured calves for 75% of cows searched). We also verified that 6 other calves were born but not captured, with another 4 cows monitored likely having given birth based upon behavior, sign and observed cow physical condition. These numbers do not include the 4 cows verified pregnant from serum tests from the Butternut group. Based upon past observed birthing rates by cow age class we had forecasted 37 calves to be born in 2013. Observations indicate that 37 calves were born. Two characteristics of the 2013 elk calving season are notable: 1) For the first time more females were observed born than males—13 females were found versus 10 males. As of 10/15/13 there are still 9 females alive compared to 6 surviving males (collective survivorship as of this date is 65 percent, better than average, however the year is still young). 2) No bear predation was observed on 2013 elk calves.

Weather and insects have impacts on calf survival. During the calf searching period we observed an overall moister than normal season (over the past 13 years) that contributed to fast and strong vegetative growth once temperatures warmed after May 20th. Mosquitos and biting flies were low until the second week of June when mosquitos became worse than any of the past 10 years. Deer flies and tick numbers remained below average throughout the 2013 calf search period, but deer fly numbers increased afterwards.

We had the help of 252 private citizen volunteers (72 of which were Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation Volunteers and 19 from the Natural Resources Foundation). Other volunteer groups included Northland College, Appleton, Hayward, Middleton, Park Falls school groups, and the Gaylord Nelson Chapter of the Audubon Society, 25 DNR staff (non-elk staff)—some from Spooner, Madison, Boscobel, and Dodgeville), and 2 US Forest Service staff, all helped calf search during the period of May 19th through June 21. Special thanks to calving season veterans Jeff Morden, “the Spooner Wildlife Crew”, “the Ladysmith Wildlife Crew”, Christine Priest, Josh Spiegel, and Beth Blicharz.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd: Bethany Blicharz continues with her University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point graduate evaluation of “assisted dispersal”, and development of a trail camera survey to estimate Clam Lake elk population growth. During the last week of March Ms. Blicharz, volunteer Jeff Morden and elk project staff Laine Stowell, Christine Priest and Josh Spiegel deployed 107 trail cameras upon the 81 square kilometer grid overlaying much of the Clam Lake activity range, and the 26 kilometer grid overlaying the Moose Lake elk subgroup’s home range. These cameras will continue to be maintained until late November, 2013.

Elk Health & Mortality: Since 31 March through September 30 we lost 10 elk to wolf predation, 4 due to unknown causes, 1 to a vehicle collision, 1 to birthing complications and 1 to exposure. We lost cows 137, 37, and 355; female calves 408, 400, and 404; bull calves 361, 390, 389, 410, 398 and 392; yearling bulls 365, 368, and 375; and bull 313. We are currently at 14 observed dead elk for this elk year (since mid May).

Assisted Dispersal Project : The Moose Lake subgroup has stayed within a couple miles of their release pen for 2 years and 4 months. This year they gave birth to a minimum of 4 calves. We hope this strong affinity continues and productivity continues to increase. Trail camera images show bull activity across the Moose Lake subgroup’s home range during the September 2012 rut. An aerial survey conducted on 6 March showed no calves from 2012 with the 8 cows of the Moose Lake group. Though we didn’t have sufficient candidates to move last winter we do have sufficient cows and bulls for this coming winter. We’ve consulted with the Ojibwe and have received permission from the Wildlife Policy Team to move elk this coming winter to a high quality translocation

site within the expanded range. Evaluations indicate that there is 1,382 acres of clear cut aspen in the 0-10 year age class within 1.8 miles from the proposed release site. Furthermore, there is over 2,000 acres of aspen that can be cut in the future within that same radius. We hope to move a minimum of 12 elk to this site this winter. Approvals have been given by the Sawyer County Forestry Committee and the site has been improved and fence polls placed for a 4 acre acclimation pen where elk will be kept until after spring green up, when they'll be released to wilds of the "expanded range". We hope the dense aspen growth will provide abundant food and predator escape cover that will promote double digit growth for this subgroup of elk in the future.

Population Monitoring and Elk Education: During the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2013 we made 5,704 telemetry location determinations and 11,406 mortality checks. During this past 2 quarters we gave 11 elk presentations to a total of 1,104 participants. We also gave 3 print, 1 television and 1 radio interviews. On September 24 we gave an elk predation presentation to the DNR wolf advisory committee. On 28 April through 1 May we hosted the Eastern Elk Management Workshop and Conference in Cable, Wisconsin. About 50 representatives from 10 eastern elk states attended and shared their elk management knowledge.

Elk Habitat Development: During this period we mowed about 60 acres of forest openings and 4 miles of trails and conducted recon for about 30 acres of other habitat work.

Partnerships: In August we met with a subcommittee of GLIFWC, USFS and department representatives to select prospective assisted dispersal release sites. The USFS reports that 1,000 acres of aspen has been harvested during the past 2 years on the Chequamegon/Nicolet Nation Forest within the elk range. However, all timber harvests have ceased during the Federal "shut-down". We received \$17,300 of elk project support from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, \$9,000 towards a UTV, mower and trailer from Turkey Stamp and a \$2,500 donation from Friends of Wisconsin Elk that we used to fund the UTV/mower/trailer purchase. This equipment will not only be used for creating turkey habitat, but also will be used to maintain elk forage habitat. RMEF volunteers helped take down the Moose River release site acclimation pen during Bugle Days...they got it down and loaded on trailers in 1 day!

Upcoming Events: During the next quarter we will initiate our 2013 CWD sampling of deer within the Clam Lake elk range. We will complete installation of the 4 acre acclimation pen. We will also initiate baiting for our winter elk trapping effort.

Laine Stowell, 15 October 2013