

# Making Sure the Big Elk Are There Waiting for You

By M. David Allen, RMEF President and CEO

EDITOR'S REMARKS

The expansion of elk herds across the U.S. during the last 20+ years is nothing short of remarkable. This is in part due to the conservation efforts of organizations such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. With expanding wolf populations along with continued loss of elk habitat, we as hunters and conservationists are in desperate need of help from conservation organizations such as RMEF to help preserve and protect our resources now more than ever!

—Jason

The great outdoor writer, John Madson, once wrote, "Maybe I ain't much of a warden, but I sure try."

"And what I try for is this: That 50 or 100 years from now, some shiny-eyed kid can run up to some man and say, 'Mister, what did you see in the high country this time out? Are the big elk still there?' And the man can grin and say, 'They sure are, son—there and waitin' for you!'"

That's pretty much what the four men who launched the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 1984 were trying for. It's what we still try for every day.

When Columbus landed here, 10 million elk lived from coast to coast. By 1900, 99 percent of them were gone. Habitat destruction and unregulated market and subsistence hunting had wiped elk from all but a few remote pockets. Fewer than 100,000 remained. But hunters awoke in time to save America's grandest big game and the conservation movement which we are a proud part of took root.

By 1984 when those four hunters launched the Elk Foundation out of a double-wide in Troy, Montana (which still hasn't seen its first stop light), North America was home to 550,000 wild elk. Twenty-five years later, that number has almost doubled. More than a million elk now roam from California to Pennsylvania and Alaska to Arizona. Of course, the Elk Foundation can't take all the credit for that phenomenal growth. But the 5.7 million acres of elk country we've conserved so far darn sure don't hurt.

The Elk Foundation's mission is to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, and their habitat. The way I see it, that basically comes down to protect the best, improve the rest, and make us more blessed.

Our permanent land program focuses on forever protecting America's most vital elk habitat. We use three primary strategies to achieve that goal: acquisitions, exchanges, and conservation easements.

When critical elk habitat comes up for sale, we do our best to ensure that it winds up in the hands of either the state, the Forest Service, or the Bureau of Land Management with the stipulation that it will always be managed first and foremost as wildlife habitat and open for public hunting. Exchanges take fragmented and scattered public lands and consolidate them into big blocks of intact habitat. Conservation easements are voluntary agreements between the Elk Foundation and private landowners in which the landowners forever give up the right to subdivide and develop their property in return for significant tax savings.

If permanent land protection is the meat of our mission, then habitat stewardship is the potatoes. The RMEF partners with state, federal, and tribal agencies as well as private landowners to thin and burn overgrown stands of timber and brush, kill weeds, reseed with native forage, bring water to parched places, tear down old fences, put up wildlife-friendly fences... you get the picture. We strive to make habitat healthier and more productive for

elk and a whole host of other wildlife. That's what we do, day in and day out. So far we've funded almost 6,000 stewardship projects and enhanced 4.8 million acres of prime elk country.

The Elk Foundation has also played a leading role in restoring and expanding elk populations. Twenty-five years ago, no one dreamed wild bulls would ever bugle again in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Wisconsin, or Ontario. But thanks to a lot of hard work from Elk Foundation members, they are back! Kentucky now has more than 10,000 elk. In the past 25 years, Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and both Dakotas have all held their first modern elk hunts. Those hunts are not only hugely popular, they're producing some of the biggest bulls in the country. That's a lesson in what a group of dedicated people can accomplish when they put their hearts on the line and their shoulders to the wheel.

Another issue that is important to me to communicate is over the past 18 months we have significantly strengthened our position on how wolves should be managed throughout



the West, especially in the three core states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming where the reintroduction of the Northern Gray wolf took place. Hunters, ranchers, and state wildlife management agencies made wolf recovery possible. All three should now have a firm hand in their management. The RMEF whole-heartedly supports the steps that Idaho and Montana have taken to quit idolizing wolves and start treating them simply as wild animals—more specifically, game animals.

I don't want to overwhelm you with a bunch of numbers and statistics. But here's my personal favorite: the Elk Foundation has now torn down the "No Trespassing" signs on over 600,000 acres of great elk habitat. That's enough to cover all of Washington D.C. twice over with elk country. (I expect we all agree DC could use some covering up!) And every foot of that 600,000 acres is now open for the public to hunt, fish, and enjoy.

But there's one more figure you ought to know. As proud as we are of all the elk country that the RMEF has saved and enhanced in our first 25 years, we never lose sight of all that's been lost in that same time. Every day across America, we lose another 5,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

Now, that's just a number. Maybe it doesn't sound like that much. Can you picture 3,700 football fields stretched end-to-end? How about 1,100 Wal-Marts side by side? That's how much elk country we lose every single day to new housing developments, box stores, parking lots, roads, and other forms of civilization. Five thousand acres per day is equal to almost one Yellowstone Park each year. This expansion has to stop at some point. Because once that land is gone, it's gone for good. I'm not into doom and gloom, sky-is-falling propaganda, but that number is real. If it doesn't scare you, I don't know what will. Because without wild places, you don't have wildlife. And without both, hunting has no future.

I'm proud to say that 90 cents out of every dollar the Elk Foundation raises goes to work on the ground, conserving more habitat and opening more country for you and me to hunt and recreate. If hunting elk in wild country boils your blood—or even if you've only dreamed of chasing them or watching them—think about joining the 150,000 dedicated members of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Help us fight the good fight so we can tell tomorrow's outdoorsmen, "The big elk are there and waitin' for you."



Photo by Randi Myse Ristau