

# ELK HUNTING IN WOLF COUNTRY: THE FACTS



## Wolves and elk numbers—what's the real deal?

Some hunters in the Northern Rockies have reported that it is harder to find elk since wolves have returned to the region, but this is not because there are fewer elk. Rather, as documented by researchers and experienced by sportsmen, wolves cause elk to change their behavior on the landscape. Since the return of wolves to the West, elk tend to linger less in open areas, often move to higher altitudes, and may even leave one valley to seek out more hidden locales in a nearby valley.

While changes in elk behavior may create a more challenging hunting experience for people and wolves

alike, elk populations throughout the region remain high. In fact, wildlife agencies in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho report that overall elk populations are either at, or above, statewide population objectives.

## Wolves and hunter harvest

Although widely assumed that wolves decrease hunting success, hunter harvest of elk in the Northern Rockies continues to increase in all three states, in some cases approaching record highs<sup>6</sup>. And in Wyoming, hunters also had another good year in 2007, leading the region with a 40% success rate<sup>7</sup>.

All three states believe that locally overabundant elk populations are managing to remain above state management objectives by using privately-owned lands (that are closed to public access) to escape from hunters. Although this has been little documented, it is possible that wolves may reduce such over-concentrations by hazing the animals from private land into areas where they can be publicly hunted.

## ELK POPULATIONS

- WYOMING<sup>1</sup>**
- 95,161 elk estimated statewide, 14% above objective
  - 19 herds were over objective, 1 under, and 7 herds at objective
  - Calf:cow ratio—35:100 (the Game & Fish objective is 25:100)
- MONTANA<sup>2</sup>**
- 130,000-160,000 elk estimated statewide, 14% over objective
  - 60% of elk management units are above population management objectives
- IDAHO<sup>3</sup>**
- 103,160 elk estimated statewide, at or slightly above objective<sup>4</sup>
  - Wolves are thought to be significantly impacting elk populations in only two of the 29 game management units in Idaho, although it is uncertain that wolves are the primary cause of reduced elk populations in these units
  - Calf:cow ratio—29:100<sup>5</sup>

## More wolf/ungulate facts

Wolves help keep elk herds strong and healthy by preying preferentially upon the most vulnerable, sick or old animals<sup>8</sup>. Antelope fawns are a primary prey of coyotes in many areas. A recent study, published in the scientific journal

*Ecology*, indicates that wolves have actually increased survival rates of antelope fawns in Wyoming by lowering coyote numbers.

## The future of elk in the Northern Rockies

The biggest threat to elk in the Northern Rockies is not the wolf, but rather the loss of habitat due to residential and industrial development. For this reason, preserving as much of our wildlands as possible for elk populations is extremely important, and will require a sustained effort

by conservationists, sportsmen and wildlife lovers, all working together over the long-term.

For more information about elk populations in the Northern Rockies, see the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's webpage "Elk Facts": [www.rmef.org/AllAboutElk/](http://www.rmef.org/AllAboutElk/)

<sup>1</sup>2007 Wyoming Game & Fish Dept.  
<sup>2</sup>2007 Elk Summit data  
<sup>3</sup>2007 Idaho Fish & Game Dept.  
<sup>4</sup>2007 Idaho Fish & Game Dept.

<sup>5</sup>Average of above two surveys (3, 4)  
<sup>6</sup>2007 Idaho Fish & Game Department Elk Report  
<sup>7</sup>2007 Wyoming Game & Fish Dept.

<sup>8</sup>Lukens, Jim. "Eleven years with Wolves – What We've Learned," News release, Idaho Fish & Game Dept., April 25, 2006.

<sup>9</sup>Kim Murray Berger, Eric M. Gese, and Joel Berger. 2008. Indirect effects and traditional trophic cascades: a test involving wolves, coyotes, and pronghorn. *Ecology* 89: 818-828.