



The ecology of reintroduced elk in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota  
by Jerry Allen Westfall

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Fish and Wildlife Management  
Montana State University  
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**Abstract:**

The ecology of a population of Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*), reintroduced into the South Unit (SU) of Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP) in 1985, was studied from 1987-1988. Eight elk, previously equipped with radio-collars, were relocated daily during 4 seasons. At each observation, location, activity, habitat use, and behavior were noted. The population grew at a logarithmic growth rate of 0.31 over 4 years. Elk were segregated into a bull and a cow-calf group that only associated during the rut. Home ranges were largest in winter for the cow-calf group (62.6 km<sup>2</sup>) and in summer for the bull group (80.0 km<sup>2</sup>). Adult and yearling males preferred more rugged habitats than females. Elk exhibited crepuscular activity during spring and summer but remained active throughout diurnal hours in winter. Elk fed primarily in upland grasslands in all seasons. Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*), in breaks habitats, was used as overhead cover during midday hours in spring and summer. Elk did not use overhead cover in winter but bedded near foraging areas.

Humans on foot were more disturbing to elk than stationary vehicles or horseback riders. Elk did not respond to humans >1,000 m away, but always displaced when approached <100 m. A dominance hierarchy of bison (*Bison bison*) > feral horses (*Equus caballus*) > elk > mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) was observed at TRNP. Elk habitat selection was most correlated to horses during the growing season and to mule deer over the entire study. Diet composition for elk, bison, feral horses, mule deer, and white-tailed deer was determined from fecal microhistological analysis. Total elk diets were most correlated to total feral horse diets, but were not significantly correlated to the diets of any ungulate species for major forage items. Diet composition, distribution, and vegetative production were used in a computer model to determine the optimum carrying capacity for elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer. Winterfat (*Ceratoides lanata*) was the forage item that most limited ungulate numbers.

THE ECOLOGY OF REINTRODUCED ELK IN THEODORE ROOSEVELT  
NATIONAL PARK, NORTH DAKOTA

by

Jerry Allen Westfall, Jr.

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APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

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iii

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
ABSTRACT.....	xv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
STUDY AREA.....	4
Geology.....	4
Climate.....	6
Vegetation.....	6
METHODS.....	9
Daily and Seasonal Movements.....	9
Habitat Use and Activity Patterns.....	10
Ungulate Interactions.....	12
Human Impacts.....	13
Population Dynamics and Carrying Capacity.....	13
Population Censuses.....	13
Forage Allocation.....	14
Number of Hectares of PTs.....	15
Amount of Time in Region.....	15
Ungulate Diets.....	16
Production of Major Dietary Items.....	17
Growing Season Forage Intake.....	17
Percent Allowable Use.....	18
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	19
Distribution.....	19
Pellet Group Survey.....	21
Herd Organization.....	23
Seasonal Distribution and Home Range.....	25
Summer 1987.....	25
Winter 1988.....	31
Spring 1988.....	33
Summer 1988.....	34
Population Dynamics.....	35

TABLE OF CONTENTS—Continued

	Page
Food Habits.....	40
Elk Diets.....	40
Comparison of Ungulate Diets.....	44
Activity Patterns.....	46
Habitat Use.....	54
Sex/Age Classes.....	54
Overall and Seasonal Habitat Use.....	57
Feeding Areas.....	58
Bedding Areas.....	62
Calving and Rutting Areas.....	64
Ungulate Interactions.....	65
Elk - Bison Interactions.....	65
Elk - Feral Horse Interactions.....	68
Elk - Mule Deer Interactions.....	69
Dominance Hierarchy.....	71
Human Impacts.....	72
Optimum Carrying Capacity.....	74
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	82
REFERENCES CITED.....	85
APPENDICES.....	93
APPENDIX A - Description of Physiographic Types and Habitat Types/Mapping Units/Complexes in TRNP.....	94
APPENDIX B - Percent elk activity in Physiographic Types and Habitat Types/Mapping Units/Complexes for each season and time period.....	99
APPENDIX C - Ungulate interactions and reaction of elk to human caused disturbances by distance category...109	109
APPENDIX D - Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal analysis of elk, bison, feral horses, mule deer, and white-tailed deer in TRNP.113	113
APPENDIX E - Percent composition, hecterage and vegetative production of Habitat Types/Mapping Units/ Complexes in the Upland Grassland Physiographic Type for the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.....	123

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Verified reports of elk leaving and later returning to TRNP from 1985-1988. Reports for 1985-1986 are from Sullivan (1988).....	21
2. Seasonal home range sizes (km <sup>2</sup> ) for radio-collared and uncollared elk in TRNP.....	31
3. Population dynamics of adult male and female ( $\geq 2$ years), yearling male and female (1 year), and calf elk in TRNP. Data for 1986-1987 are from Sullivan (1988).....	36
4. Male:female ratios and logarithmic growth rates based on elk within and outside TRNP, and calf:cow ratios based potential breeding females within TRNP during previous years.....	40
5. Seasonal percent elk diet composition of graminoids, forbs, and browse comprising $\geq 3\%$ of any seasonal diet.....	42
6. Spearman's rank correlations ( $r_s$ ) of total diets (TOT) and diets of 11 major forage items (MAJ) for elk, bison, feral horses, mule deer (MD), and white-tailed deer (WTD).....	45
7. Season lengths and number of observation-minutes recorded for elk during each season.....	47
8. Feeding to bedding ratios of elk during diurnal hours in each season, and the time period designation for morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM).....	48
9. Percent elk activity for each season and adjusted activity for the spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988 seasons. Adjusted activities are in parentheses.....	52
10. Percent feeding (F), bedding (B), and total activities (TOT) by adult male, yearling male, female, and calf elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) of TRNP.....	55
11. Percent feeding (F), bedding (B), and total activities (TOT) by adult male, yearling male, female, and calf elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes of TRNP.....	56

LISTS OF TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
12. Percent utilization of Physiographic Types (PTs) by elk during summer 1987-1988, winter 1988, spring 1988, the growing season (summer 1987-1988 and spring 1988) and over the entire study, and the percent of Physiographic Types available.....	58
13. Percent utilization of Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes by elk during summer 1987-1988, winter 1988, spring 1988, the growing season (summer 1987-1988 and spring 1988) and over the entire study, and the percent of HTs, MUs, and Complexes available.....	59
14. Percent activity of elk within Physiographic Types (PTs) during the entire study and during the growing season (spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988). Growing season values are in parentheses.....	60
15. Percent activity of elk within Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes during the entire study and during the growing season (spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988). Growing season values are in parentheses.....	62
16. Percent bedding, unknown, and adjusted bedding activities during midday hours by elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) for spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988.....	63
17. Percent bedding, unknown, and adjusted bedding activities during midday hours by elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes for spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988.....	64
18. Total percent utilization of Physiographic Types (PTs) by ungulates. Utilization is based on observation-minutes for elk and on sightings for bison, feral horses, mule deer (MD), white-tailed deer (WTD). Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	67
19. Percent utilization of Physiographic Types (PTs) by ungulates and percent feeding by elk during the growing season. Utilization is based on observation-minutes for elk and on sightings for bison, horse, mule deer (MD), white-tailed deer (WTD). Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	67

LISTS OF TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
20. Spearman's rank correlations ( $r_s$ ) of Physiographic Types (PTs) used during the entire study (TOT) and during the growing season (GRO) by elk, bison, feral horses, mule deer (MD), and white-tailed deer (WTD).....	68
21. Percent reaction of other ungulate species to elk with mean displacement distance.....	70
22. Percent reaction of elk to other ungulate species with mean displacement distance.....	70
23. Percent reaction of elk to human caused disturbances with mean displacement distance.....	74
24. Percent utilization of regions in TRNP by elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer (MD) during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988). Utilization is based on observation-minutes for elk and on sightings for the other ungulates.....	75
25. Population estimates, weights of the typical animal, daily intake, and forage intake over the growing season for elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer (MD).....	75
26. Typical animal intake (kg) during the growing season (spring and summer) by elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer (MD) of the 11 major forage items used in the Ungulate Resources Allocation Model.....	77
27. Optimum carrying capacity of elk in a 6-region area of TRNP based on utilization patterns for each region, population levels for bison (200), feral horses (50), and mule deer (312), and limiting forage species.....	78
28. Population levels, densities, and stocking rates for elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer at the optimum carrying capacity for a 6-region area (123.9 km <sup>2</sup> ) of TRNP.....	79
29. Exchange rate coefficients of ungulate species 1 for species 2, based on predetermined optimal population levels from winterfat intake.....	81

LISTS OF TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
30. Description of Physiographic Types in TRNP (Norland 1984).....	95
31. Description of Habitat Types, Mapping Units, and Complexes in TRNP (Norland 1984, Sullivan 1988).....	96
32. Percent activity of elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) during winter 1988.....	100
33. Percent activity of elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) during spring 1988.....	100
34. Percent activity of elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) during summer 1987-1988.....	101
35. Percent feeding by elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	101
36. Percent bedding by elk in Physiographic Types (PTs) for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	102
37. Percent utilization of Physiographic Types (PTs) by elk for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	102
38. Percent activity of elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MU), and Complexes during winter 1988.....	103
39. Percent activity of elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes during spring 1988.....	104
40. Percent activity of elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes during summer 1987-1988.....	105
41. Percent feeding by elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	106
42. Percent bedding by elk in Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	107

## LISTS OF TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
43. Percent utilization of Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes by elk for the morning (AM), midday (MD), and evening (PM) time periods during winter 1988, spring 1988, and summer 1987-1988.....	108
44. Percent reaction of other ungulate species to elk within distance categories. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	110
45. Percent reaction of elk to other ungulate species within distance categories. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	111
46. Percent reaction of elk to human caused disturbances by distance category. Sample sizes are in parentheses.....	112
47. Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal samples of elk during spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988 and during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1987-1988).....	114
48. Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal samples of bison during spring 1988 and summer 1988 and during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1988).....	116
49. Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal samples of feral horses during spring 1988 and summer 1988 and during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1988).....	118
50. Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal samples of mule deer during spring 1988 and summer 1988 and during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1988).....	119
51. Percent vegetative species composition identified in fecal samples of white-tailed deer during spring 1988 and summer 1988 and during the growing season (spring 1988 and summer 1988).....	121
52. Percent composition and hecterage of Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes in the Upland Grassland Physiographic Type (PT) for the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.....	124

LISTS OF TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
53. Vegetative production (kg/ha) for Habitat Types (HTs), Mapping Units (MUs), and Complexes within the Upland Grassland Physiographic Type (PT). Production figures are from Marlow et al. 1984, Norland 1988 <sup>a</sup> and Sullivan 1988.....	125

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Map of the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.....	5
2. A view of the Physiographic Types within an idealized landform of the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. From Norland (1984).	8
3. Elk pellet group survey in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, 1988. Numbers in sections = pellet groups per km. Map drawn by Sullivan (1988).....	22
4. Locations of adult male and female elk during summer 1987.....	26
5. Locations of adult male and female elk during winter 1988.....	27
6. Locations of adult male and female elk during spring 1988.....	28
7. Locations of adult male and female elk during summer 1988.....	29
8. Percent observation-minutes spent feeding, bedding, standing, moving, and other by elk during summer 1987-1988.....	49
9. Percent observation-minutes spent feeding, bedding, standing, moving, and other by elk during winter 1988.....	50
10. Percent observation-minutes spent feeding, bedding, standing, moving, and other by elk during spring 1988.....	51

## ABSTRACT

The ecology of a population of Rocky Mountain elk (Cervus elaphus nelsoni), reintroduced into the South Unit (SU) of Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP) in 1985, was studied from 1987-1988. Eight elk, previously equipped with radio-collars, were relocated daily during 4 seasons. At each observation, location, activity, habitat use, and behavior were noted. The population grew at a logarithmic growth rate of 0.31 over 4 years. Elk were segregated into a bull and a cow-calf group that only associated during the rut. Home ranges were largest in winter for the cow-calf group (62.6 km<sup>2</sup>) and in summer for the bull group (80.0 km<sup>2</sup>). Adult and yearling males preferred more rugged habitats than females. Elk exhibited crepuscular activity during spring and summer but remained active throughout diurnal hours in winter. Elk fed primarily in upland grasslands in all seasons. Rocky Mountain juniper (Juniperus scopulorum), in breaks habitats, was used as overhead cover during midday hours in spring and summer. Elk did not use overhead cover in winter but bedded near foraging areas. Humans on foot were more disturbing to elk than stationary vehicles or horseback riders. Elk did not respond to humans >1,000 m away, but always displaced when approached <100 m. A dominance hierarchy of bison (Bison bison) > feral horses (Equus caballus) > elk > mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) was observed at TRNP. Elk habitat selection was most correlated to horses during the growing season and to mule deer over the entire study. Diet composition for elk, bison, feral horses, mule deer, and white-tailed deer was determined from fecal microhistological analysis. Total elk diets were most correlated to total feral horse diets, but were not significantly correlated to the diets of any ungulate species for major forage items. Diet composition, distribution, and vegetative production were used in a computer model to determine the optimum carrying capacity for elk, bison, feral horses, and mule deer. Winterfat (Ceratoides lanata) was the forage item that most limited ungulate numbers.

## INTRODUCTION

With the recession of glaciers at the end of the Wisconsin glacial stage 10,000 years ago, elk spread south and east from non-glaciated Alaskan refugia to inhabit prairies, parks, and open forests. Elk became the most widely distributed North American cervid, extending their range as far south as northern Mexico, Louisiana, and Alabama (Hall and Kelson 1959, Curren 1977, and Boyd 1978). By the end of the Wisconsin glacial stage, elk were segregated into 4 geographic regions: 1) the northwestern Pacific coast; 2) western and central California; 3) the southwestern United States and northern Mexico; 4) the area east of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges (Guthrie 1966).

The ranges of three presently recognized subspecies of the North American elk: Rocky Mountain elk, Manitoban elk (*C. e. manitobensis*), and Eastern elk (*C. e. canadensis*), overlapped in the area of the Northern Great Plains (Guthrie 1966). Guthrie (1966) suggested that a distinct subspecies uniquely adapted to the environment of the Great Plains may have been forming. However, Bryant and Maser (1982) asserted that elk in the Northern Great Plains were Manitoban elk. With the extirpation of elk in the eastern 2/3 of the continent, any subspeciation that may have been occurring was forever halted.

In North Dakota, elk were abundant before European settlement. Audubon, Lewis and Clark, and Alexander Henry all reported seeing vast

herds along the Missouri River. Remington Kellogg hypothesized, based on reports of early explorers and settlers of the region, that elk migrated to river bottoms in the fall and back to the open prairies in late spring (Bryant and Maser 1982). Riparian areas presumably provided ideal winter range, with thermal cover and abundant browse. However, the last reported elk killed in North Dakota occurred in Cavalier County in 1883, precluding any further research into this phenomenon (Kruckenberg 1973).

In 1942, 25 Rocky Mountain elk were released in the Killdeer mountains, western North Dakota, by the North Dakota Department of Game and Fish (Bryant and Maser 1982). This transplant failed and future reintroductions were not attempted. In 1979, however, a small herd of elk escaped from a holding pen on an Indian reservation into river breaks near the North Unit (NU) of TRNP (Sullivan 1988). Within a few years this herd had grown in size to allow a limited hunt (25-30 animals per year) by the North Dakota Department of Game and Fish.

Plans to reintroduce elk into the SU of TRNP were initiated in 1984, in an attempt to restore one of the major ungulate species native to the area. Pronghorn (Antilocapra americana), bison, and California bighorn sheep (Ovis canadensis californica) were reintroduced into the SU in 1951, 1956, and 1959, respectively. Mule deer and white-tailed deer (O. virginianus) were present in the Park since its inception. Feral horses, from a variety of sources, have established themselves in the Park, and are currently being managed according to Park goals (TRNP 1984). An elk reintroduction would complete the historic ungulate assemblage in the badlands ecosystem

(TRNP 1984). In March 1985, 47 Rocky Mountain elk were acquired from Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota and released in the SU of TRNP on Buck Hill (Fig. 1).

This study represents the second phase of a 4-year investigation of the dynamics and ecology of a reintroduced elk population. M. Sullivan conducted research during phase 1 of this project from 1985-1986. Specific objectives of phase 2 (1987-1988) were:

1. Description of daily and seasonal movements of elk.
2. Description of the population dynamics of elk and determination of elk population levels that are consistent with Park management objectives.
3. Identification of seasonally important Habitat Types/ Mapping Units/Complexes and Physiographic Types used for feeding, cover, mating, and calving.
4. Description of interactions between elk and other ungulates and identification of interactions that could detrimentally affect individual ungulate species.
5. Determination of human impacts on elk behavior and distribution in the Park.

## STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in the SU of TRNP in southwestern North Dakota (Fig. 1). The Park was originally created as Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park on 25 April 1947, but the name was changed to Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 1978. The Park is divided into two units; the SU near the town of Medora, and the NU, 80 km to the north. The SU of TRNP is bordered by U. S. Interstate Highway 94 to the south, private landholdings to the north and east, and USFS Little Missouri National Grasslands to the west. The SU covers 18,756 ha, and is bisected north to south by the Little Missouri River.

### Geology

The SU of TRNP is part of the Missouri River Plateau of the Great Plains Province (Fenneman 1931). Soil substrates are from the Paleocene, Fort Union Group of the Tongue River Formation (Leonard 1930). Although TRNP was unglaciated during the last ice age, glacial diversion caused an eastern shift in the route of the Little Missouri River, which caused extensive downcutting in areas along the river channel creating an unique topography known as the badlands. The badlands are characterized by considerable erosion leaving resistant layers of sandstone, shale, and lignite.

Often when partially exposed lignite beds became heated, they would bake overlying clay beds, forming a red, slaglike clinker





















































































































































































































































