

State elk count 34 percent above objective

Wapiti numbers are robust, according to annual census of 27 herds.

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The number of elk in Wyoming is 34 percent above objective in 27 herds counted this winter, a *News&Guide* analysis of a state Game and Fish Department report shows.

The annual census, made early in 2010, revealed 102,669 elk, according to the 2010 Big Game Management Information Summary, a document submitted to Game and Fish commissioners as they set hunting seasons last week. The state's objective for those same 27 herds is 76,275 animals.

Game and Fish calls the 2010 census the 2009 post-hunt population. The annual counts classify elk by sex and age, recording the number of bulls, cows and calves.

The information gives wildlife managers valuable data, including the ratio of cows, calves and bulls, that they use when recommending hunting seasons to commissioners. Biologists divide state elk into 35 herd units and last year were able to count 27 of them.

The summary shows that 20 of the 35 herds are more than 10 percent above their state-set objectives, and seven are within 10 percent of the goals. Some are more than 100 percent above objective.

There are no herd units that are listed below objective – having a population that is more than 10 percent below biologists' goals.

Elk hunters killed 22,839 elk in the 2009 hunting season, according to the report. That number was 9 percent more than the 20,866 killed the season before, according to a comparison with the previous year's big-game summary.

The number of hunters in the field also went up between the 2008 and the 2009 season. In 2009, there were 57,668 hunters who ventured out, an increase of 10 percent over the 2008 figure of 52,163.

Hunters' success rate was 40 percent each year.

The number of recreation days – a recreation day being one hunter in the field for all or part of a day while hunting elk – increased 2 percent in 2009 compared with the year before. Game and Fish counted 402,457 recreation days racked up by elk hunters in 2009.

The agency saw a decline in the



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An annual census puts the number of elk in Wyoming, including those on the National Elk Refuge, at more than 102,000. Eight herds weren't counted.

ratio between recreation days and elk killed. That went from 18.9 in 2008 to 17.6 in 2009.

The ratio should not be confused with the average number of days it took a successful hunter to bag an elk, however. The ratio includes days spent in the field by unsuccessful hunters as well as those who killed.

Four herd units are cataloged in the Jackson Region – the Targhee, Jackson, Fall Creek and Afton herds. The largest, the Jackson Elk Herd, includes animals that winter on the National Elk Refuge, up the Gros Ventre River drainage and in areas north of Jackson.

There were 11,693 elk estimated in the herd in the latest count, 6 percent more than the objective of 11,000.

Hunters killed 1,505 elk from the herd last year, down 24 percent from the 1,979 killed on average in the previous 10 years.

Managers have said they have reduced the number of licenses available in the area, cutting down on those issued for cow elk in northern Jackson Hole and prohibiting the shooting of spike elk in the Gros Ventre Wilderness.

The report puts the number of calves compared with 100 cows, known as the cow/calf ratio, at 24, down from a 10-year average of 25. Managers have said ratios in the Gros Ventre are lower than they want and suspect the same for the Teton Wilderness and southern Yellowstone population.

According to hunting regulations passed by the commission and waiting for the governor's signature, general license holders would again be

able to kill only antlered elk in areas 70 and 71 of the Teton Wilderness this year. Also, hunters would not be able to shoot spike elk in much of the Gros Ventre Wilderness this season.

A late-season hunt in area 80 just east of the elk refuge is proposed again this year; managers believe that regulation, along with hunting on the south end of the refuge, has helped the goal of killing more hard-to-hunt Grand Teton National Park elk than has been possible in previous years.

The Fall Creek Herd just south of Jackson, numbers 5,123, according to the census, 16 percent more than the objective of 4,400. There were 24 calves per 100 cows counted in the census, down from a 10-year average of 25.

According to proposed hunting regulations, Game and Fish would issue a liberal number – 1,200 – of cow elk licenses to be harvested from the Fall Creek Herd in hunt areas 84 and 85 again this year.

In the Afton Herd, the population was at 2,154, close to the objective of 2,200. Cow/calf ratio was at 28, down from a 10-year average of 36.

Pending regulations for 2010 propose reducing the success ratio in the Afton Herd from 34 percent to 24 percent.

The Targhee Herd is one of the eight that was not counted. The goal is to have 200 animals in that herd and a 2010 harvest of 75.

The state has a statewide objective of 83,640 elk. It is impossible, however, to determine the actual population because of the uncounted herds. The state, however, has set an objective population for those eight uncounted herds at 6,865 animals.

Wyoming's 2009 elk count

The annual elk count provided to Game and Fish commissioners that is made in early 2010 is known as the 2009 post-hunt census. Not all 35 herds are counted every year. Highlights are listed below for 2008 and 2009.

Elk population

Post fall hunt-counted herds only

	2008*	2009**
Objective	71,075	76,275
Census	93,383	102,699
Difference	+22,308	+26,394
% above objective	31	34

* for 25 counted herds

** for 27 counted herds

Herds versus objective

Number of herds at, above or below objective *

	2008	2009
At objective	7	7
Below	0	0
Above	18	20
Incomplete data	10	8

* Plus or minus 10 percent

Elk hunt, 2008 versus 2009

	2008	2009
Population (post hunt)	93,354*	102,669**
Elk killed	20,866	22,839
Hunters (in field)	52,163	57,668
Success %	40	40
Rec. days	395,534	402,457
Days/animal	18.9	17.6

* 25 of 35 herds counted

** 27 of 35 herds counted

Source: Wyoming Game and Fish 2010 Big Game Management Information Summary, 2009 Big Game Hunting Season Recommendation Summary



Elk try to catch up to the rest of their herd as it crosses Antelope Flats recently in Grand Teton National Park. The number of elk counted in Wyoming is 34 percent more than the objective for counted herds set by the state Game and Fish Department, according to a recent report.