



Montana Wildlife Federation

# Elk Management in Montana

A SURVEY OF MONTANA HUNTERS



## INTRODUCTION

Elk management topic is consistently among the most contentious wildlife management issues in Montana. The Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) conducted a survey of Montana elk hunters to gauge hunters' attitudes toward different approaches to elk management. The survey was meant to measure support for different management strategies in order to inform the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks' (FWP) season setting process as well as longer term elk management questions.

## METHODS

MWF conducted this survey online from October 2019 – January 2020. We promoted the survey to a wide audience and encouraged our members and supporters to send the survey link to a broad network of elk hunters. We sent out several times to a list of approximately 5,000 people via email and to approximately 1,100 licensed Montana hunters via a direct mailpiece. We also promoted it through regular social media posts, newsletter stories, press outreach, and paid advertising in publications targeted at Montana hunters.

The survey asked respondents to rate their support for different management strategies to address elk populations, private land concentrations, and statewide management. It also asked open-ended questions to gather suggestions and other feedback on what hunters, public land managers, and private landowners can do to address elk management.

As of January 22, 2020, 1268 people responded to the survey. These hunters collectively have more 34,247 years of hunting experience in Montana, for an average of 27 years per hunter.

This is not a sample-based survey, and quantitative conclusions about the entire population of Montana hunters cannot be scientifically deduced from these results. However, we do believe that the aggregate opinions of more than 1,200 Montana elk hunters are inherently valuable and suggest likely patterns of public opinion. We invite further quantitative research into these topics to confirm or dispute these findings.

## RESULTS

### 1. How many years have you hunted in Montana?

Total Responses	1268
Average Number of Years Hunting	27
Total Number of Years Hunting	34,247

**2. How important do you think each of the following strategies are to manage elk herds in units that are over population objective? (With 1 being not important at all and 5 being very important).**

Unit Level Population Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
	Not Important								Very Important	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Increasing public hunting access to private lands	60	4.9%	53	4.3%	140	11.5%	186	15.2%	782	64.0%
Improving habitat conditions on public lands	46	3.8%	61	5.0%	163	13.3%	225	18.4%	727	59.5%
Increasing access to public lands	62	5.1%	55	4.5%	107	8.8%	151	12.4%	846	69.3%
Game damage hunts and management hunts on private lands that qualify	148	12.2%	174	14.3%	318	26.1%	239	19.6%	338	27.8%
Extending hunting seasons earlier (into August) and later (into February)	620	50.8%	168	13.8%	194	15.9%	112	9.2%	126	10.3%
Shoulder seasons that require data collection to show they're working	228	18.8%	136	11.2%	212	17.5%	225	18.5%	412	34.0%
Hazing and other efforts to drive elk off of private lands	303	24.9%	201	16.5%	292	24.0%	161	13.2%	260	21.4%

**3. How important do you think each of the following strategies are to reduce elk concentrations on private land? (With 1 being not important at all and 5 being very important).**

Private Land Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
	Not Important								Very Important	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Increased public hunting access during the general season	79	6.5%	42	3.4%	118	9.7%	188	15.4%	791	64.9%
Improving habitat on public lands	53	4.4%	68	5.6%	179	14.8%	215	17.8%	695	57.4%
Hazing and other efforts to push elk to public lands	259	21.3%	209	17.2%	294	24.2%	188	15.5%	265	21.8%
Game damage hunts and management hunts on private lands that qualify	171	14.1%	165	13.6%	324	26.7%	233	19.2%	319	26.3%
Extending hunting seasons earlier (into August) and later (into February)	609	50.5%	179	14.8%	175	14.5%	107	8.9%	137	11.4%
Shoulder seasons that require data collection to show they're working	250	20.7%	159	13.2%	225	18.6%	203	16.8%	371	30.7%
Hazing and other efforts to drive elk off of private lands	296	24.5%	215	17.8%	277	23.0%	163	13.5%	255	21.1%

**4. If FWP updates Montana’s statewide elk management plan, how important is it to you that the plan include the following strategies? (With 1 being not important at all and 5 being very important).**

Elk Management Plan Strategies	1		2		3		4		5	
	Not Important								Very Important	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Encourage elk presence on public lands	36	3.0%	19	1.6%	57	4.7%	159	13.1%	947	77.8%
Minimize game damage on private lands	177	14.6%	193	15.9%	368	30.4%	211	17.4%	262	21.6%
Minimize elk herd concentration on private lands	90	7.4%	85	7.0%	233	19.2%	251	20.6%	557	45.8%
Restore historical elk migration patterns	50	4.1%	55	4.5%	164	13.5%	251	20.6%	696	57.2%
Enhance habitat conditions on public lands	42	3.5%	40	3.3%	137	11.3%	221	18.2%	777	63.8%
Maximize number of hunters participating in elk hunting	251	20.7%	196	16.1%	433	35.6%	154	12.7%	181	14.9%
Manage for quality/trophy elk hunting	225	18.5%	199	16.4%	381	31.4%	207	17.1%	202	16.6%
Maintain high ethical standards in elk hunting	34	2.8%	13	1.1%	67	5.5%	112	9.2%	992	81.4%

**5. How much do you trust the following to make decisions about elk management in Montana? (With 1 being I do not trust at all and 5 being I trust a great deal)**

Trust to Make Decisions	1		2		3		4		5	
	Not At All								A Great Deal	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Legislators	753	61.8%	271	22.2%	139	11.4%	33	2.7%	23	1.9%
The Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks	134	11.0%	149	12.2%	277	22.7%	331	27.2%	328	26.9%
The Fish & Wildlife Commission	192	15.8%	223	18.4%	369	30.4%	278	22.9%	153	12.6%
Your local Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist	118	9.7%	91	7.5%	207	17.0%	341	28.0%	461	37.8%
Private landowners	546	44.9%	285	23.4%	223	18.3%	105	8.6%	58	4.8%

**6. What ideas do you have for how hunters can do more to address elk management problems? (Open-ended Question)**

Responses (n = 883) were coded into the following categories:

Topic	Count	%
Work with landowners to open more access to private lands	390	44%
Limit outfitting on private lands	187	21%
Other	169	19%
Get involved with game management and habitat projects	108	12%
More predator management	43	5%

Sample Responses:

*“We need to work diligently to open access to more private land during the regular hunting season. Shoulder seasons should be abandoned.”*

*“Elk are being over pressured on public lands and accessible private lands driving the elk to areas where hunting is now allowed. Shorter hunting seasons and limited tags are the only way I see improving this problem.”*

*“Discourage leasing of private lands to outfitters. No public hunting, no shoulder seasons or damage hunts.”*

**7. What actions do you think our public land management agencies can be doing to improve habitat conditions and attract elk to public lands? (Open-ended question)**

Responses (n = 914) were coded into the following categories:

Topic	Count	%
Create elk security habitat by regulating motorized use	342	37%
Other	277	30%
Controlled burning, selective timber harvest and weed treatments	253	28%
Limit grazing in some areas	84	9%

Sample Responses:

*“Do whatever it takes to create better safe zones to minimize disturbance, like closing more roads, enforcing off-road vehicle access, rethinking livestock access and grazing, improving forage conditions.”*

*“Do more to limit roads and motorized access that will improve elk security.”*

*“Weed management projects and prescribed burns could be very beneficial.”*

*“Control the number of cows on public lands.”*

**8. What ideas do you have for how private landowners can do more to address elk management problems? (Open-ended question)**

Responses (n = 939) were coded into the following categories:

Topic	Count	%
Allow public hunting to manage elk	843	90%
Other	130	14%
Limit outfitting on private lands	107	11%
Haze elk off their property	69	7%

*Sample Responses:*

*“Open gates to public lands, allow limited public hunting.”*

*“Allow hunting to help move animals off their land and reduce numbers where needed.”*

*“Let people hunt on their property who are willing to follow some simple guidelines.”*

*“Do not lease out hunting rights to outfitters.”*

*“Landowners should form relationships with hunters to understand their value of elk herds. This will improve everyone’s ability to find successful tools and strategies to manage healthy elk herds.”*

**DISCUSSION**

The Montana hunters who responded to this survey expressed a strong desire to focus our elk management on public hunting during the five-week general rifle season, held in late October and November. Hunters continue to see public hunting of public elk as the best management tool, whether the issue is unit-level population objectives, high numbers of elk on private lands, or statewide management. They also said maintaining ethics in hunting is important to them. Finally, they said increasing access to public and private land during the general season is important to getting effective elk management.

Montana elk hunters showed support for continued efforts to open access to private lands and working with landowners to reduce elk numbers, decrease game damage and better distribute elk on the landscape, including working to push them to adjoining public lands. They expressed opposition to extended late and early hunting seasons. Support for “shoulder seasons” was somewhat higher when they were framed in terms that explicitly require data collection.

Hunters expressed an overwhelming desire to see more hunting access to private land to help achieve better elk management. They also expressed the belief that there are too many elk concentrated on private lands, and not enough elk on public lands where hunters can access them to help manage their numbers. There was a strong desire to see policies that encourage elk presence on public lands, including access to adjoining private lands to get elk back onto public lands.

The Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF) is Montana's oldest, largest, and most effective conservation organization. MWF was founded in 1936 by hunters, anglers, landowners, and other conservationists who were concerned about the loss of Montana's natural lands, healthy waters, and abundant wildlife. Over the years, MWF has conserved wild rivers, natural lands, abundant fish and wildlife, and public access for outdoor recreation. MWF has secured some of the Treasure State's most important conservation victories.

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