



A herd of Roosevelt elk graze in a meadow near Prairie Creek in Redwood National and State Park on the northern California coast. **Photo by James Adam Taylor**

[CALIFORNIA FORUM](#)

California's elk need protection. The state needs to try harder to bring them back

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

jbittle@dyerpress.com

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Elk are California's largest land mammal. At 500 pounds with three-foot antlers, their sheer size inspires wonder. And for anyone who has watched cows and their calves emerge from the trees to cross an open meadow, or heard bulls bugling during the annual fall rut, the majesty of these animals is unparalleled.

Today the state's three elk species face an uncertain future.

More than 500,000 of them once roamed from the state's northwest corner south into Ventura County: Roosevelt, Rocky Mountain and tule elk, which are found nowhere else. By 1872 only a few of this smallest California species remained. And while a variety [of largely uncoordinated efforts](#) were made [to protect elk in California](#), by the 1960s the population had plummeted to around 1,600 animals.

That prompted legislators in 2003 to call for a statewide elk management plan. In November – a full 15 years later – California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials released it. The protracted delay between legislation to protect California's elk and [the draft management plan it mandated](#) is one telling reflection of the disregard department officials accord this species. The 450-page plan is another.

As the first statewide look at recovering a species that was pushed to the brink of extinction, the plan is long on minutia and short on science. It sets any number of specific goals and objectives for each of the 22 high-priority elk management units it identifies, but offers no overarching conservation strategy to achieve them. It describes population growth rates in specific small areas but lacks any clear unifying structure for advancing holistic recovery.

“This plan suffers from an overzealous focus on trees thereby forgetting and misunderstanding the forest,” said Rick A. Hopkins, a private consultant with expertise in the ecology and biology of large mammals.

The Fish and Wildlife Department developed the elk management plan with input from hunting and agricultural groups as well as other state and federal agencies. Scientists and conservation groups were not consulted and the plan was not peer reviewed.

That may explain its emphasis on hunting to control populations and resolve human-elk conflicts, primarily broken fences and crop damage. While it discusses options to reduce the harm elk can cause, including hazing, physical barriers and repellents, the plan calls hunting “the recommended primary method of population control.” Yet it provides little of the basic information on elk abundance and distribution, numbers needed to inform hunting quotas.

More troubling is the plan's discussion of wolves and their potential to prey on elk, “possibly extirpating local populations.” Although the state's known population of wolves is still in the single digits, elk management needs to be concerned with increased kills as wolf population grows, said Joe Hobbs, state elk coordinator. “No one really knows how wolves will impact elk populations,” he told me.

That is certainly true for California, but wildlife managers in neighboring states have documented wolf-elk interaction in a variety of scientific studies. In most cases they find that wolves contribute to an ecological balance of elk and deer populations, generally enhancing both plant and animal biodiversity. Instead, the California plan “scapegoats” wolves, laying the groundwork for killing them if the state's “arbitrary” elk population targets are not met, said Jeff Miller, a spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit conservation organization.

At a time when elk, now estimated at nearly 13,000 animals, are making a slow but gradual comeback, state wildlife officials missed an opportunity to contribute. Their recovery plan should have provided basic population information and determined the minimum levels populations need to survive.

It is encouraging that elks are expanding in the redwoods of Humboldt County and the meadows of Modoc and Lassen counties. They are valued not just by the 36,000 people who apply annually for 330 tags to hunt them. Wildlife watchers now comprise a constituency seven times the number of hunters, [according to Department of Interior data](#).

Past management nearly caused elk to go extinct in California. State wildlife officials can do better by this species treasured by hunters and environmentalists alike. The department should review its elk management plan with independent wildlife biologists who have scientific expertise. For an indigenous species that roamed California long before humans arrived, we owe them that at the least.

Jane Braxton Little, a freelance writer, covers science, natural resources and rural Northern California from Plumas County. Contact her at www.janebraxtonlittle.com or on Twitter @JBraxtonLittle.