



DARCY KRAWLIGH

The elk population in the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park continues to grow from its start in 1985 of 47 animals. This year, elk numbers in the park are expected to reach about 1,500 animals.

Increasing Elk,



Elk numbers within Theodore Roosevelt National Park's south unit continue to grow, resulting in more and more animals leaving the park and not returning.

In the short term, this means North Dakotans will have increased elk hunting opportunities in 2008 in units E3 and E4 surrounding the South Unit. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department is proposing nearly 420 licenses this fall, an increase of nearly 100 licenses from 2007 and about 300 more licenses than 2006. What will happen down the road, however, is in question.

"We can't manage the park's elk population outside the park," said Randy Kreil, Department wildlife division chief, "but we can provide hunting opportunities while they exist, and control elk numbers on private land adjacent to the park."

The elk population in the park doubles every three years and is expected to reach 1,500 animals in 2008. According to research in the late 1980s that looked at dietary requirements of elk, feral horses, bison and the potential for damage to different plant species, the park established a population management objective of fewer than 400 elk for the South Unit.

The National Park Service, Kreil said, is working on what is sure to be a controversial plan to reduce elk numbers in the park, with implementation several years off at best. Therefore, in an effort to address elk related issues on surrounding private land while providing opportunities for hunters, the Department has deemed it necessary to dramatically increase not only elk license numbers, but also the length of the season.

Forty-seven elk were released in the South Unit in 1985, and for years animals were content to stay behind park fences. "Over the past several years as the park's elk population has grown, elk behavior has changed," Kreil said. "The number of elk leaving and not returning to the park has increased. We know this is happening because of a National Park Service study done with radio-collared elk."

Expanding Opportunities

By Ron Wilson



CRAIG BIRNLE

Elk numbers in southwestern North Dakota have grown not only because of increased populations in the park, Kreil said, but because landowner tolerance has changed over the years. "Some landowners enjoy having elk around while others are not so accepting. Tolerance has increased somewhat, and so have the number of elk," he said. "The real challenge is maintaining that balance. One of the main obstacles to finding that balance is the inability to manage elk the way we do in other units because there is no elk harvest in the park."

In 2007 the elk season structure was confusing, with a split August season (early and late), followed by an October season for the same hunters, a second season (added later in the year) set between the August and October seasons, and then an extended season in November and December. That will change. In 2008, there will be a September season, an October season, and an extended season in November and December in which both September and October license holders can hunt.

The idea, again, is to maximize elk hunting opportunities and harvest by providing a significant number of licenses throughout the season, and at the same time spread out hunting pressure, making it more tolerable for landowners and more enjoyable for hunters.

Elk hunters with a lottery license will be restricted to the unit on their licenses for the first three days of the September and October seasons, but then can hunt in either E3 or E4. "Giving hunters the option to hunt in both units may help maximize the opportunity to harvest elk, as elk are very mobile animals and can move significant distances during the season," Kreil said.

The August hunting season was first employed as a way to target those elk coming out of the park before they returned in advance of the traditional October elk season. But as elk behavior changed, and the problems associated with retrieving a large animal in the rugged badlands in hot August conditions did not, the need for an August elk season gave way to more hunting opportunities later in fall.

Also, elk hunters in units E3 and E4, including those who don't get an elk, will now be required to provide harvest information to the Game and Fish Department

Southwestern North Dakota is seeing more and more elk, in part, because landowner tolerance has changed over the years.

shortly after the season ends. Those who don't comply cannot apply for lottery licenses, such as for deer and turkeys, in 2009.

Because of the situation in and around Theodore Roosevelt National Park, it's essential that wildlife managers know exactly how many elk have been harvested in any given year. "We need to know hunter success rates in order to set the next year's season, and we have a short turnaround time from when the season closes in December to do so," Kreil said. "In previous years, we had more than three months to track people down and badger them to get us the information. With the extended season and additional hunting opportunities, we'll now basically have one month to get that information in, organized and analyzed."

The Department has also created a new elk hunting unit, E5, which encompasses most of North Dakota outside traditional elk range, not including the Turtle Mountains. This unit will be open to all elk lottery license holders. "Over the past several years the number of instances where wild elk have been attracted to farmed elk operations has increased," Kreil said. "It is critically important for both the farmed elk industry, and the management of wild elk, that wild elk are not allowed to have contact with farmed elk."

The first course of action in these situations is to haze wild elk away from farmed elk enclosures. If hazing or exclusion by double or electric fencing does not work, the wild elk must be removed. "In the past the Department has killed some of these animals, while in other instances we have used the legislatively authorized method of drawing a name from the unsuccessful elk applicant list and allowing that person to kill the elk," Kreil said. "In almost all cases this solution bears no resemblance to fair chase hunting, and can be difficult to coordinate and implement."

Elk killed in these situations are not critical to a population and are typically young males looking for females. As an alternative, the Department has established E5 and will allow any lottery license holder from any unit to take an elk in this area from September 5 through December 31. Hunters can only take the type elk indicated on their license.

"If people are hearing about or seeing an elk hanging around, the word gets out," said Greg Link, Department assistant wildlife division chief. "And before you know it, someone knows of someone with an elk license and the situation is taken care of."

In another new move, if any antlerless elk licenses remain after the lottery, they will be issued first-come, first-served, but will still count as a once-in-a-lifetime license. "The thinking behind a first-come, first-served option is that if someone wanted an antlerless elk license, they had their chance to apply in the lottery either as a first choice or second choice," Kreil said. "It will be much simpler, less confusing and save another application and lottery process to issue first-come, first-served antlerless licenses."

Details concerning first-come, first-served licenses will be announced after the lottery if licenses remain.

What the future holds for elk and elk hunting in southwestern North Dakota remains to be seen. "How the NPS handles the elk population in Theodore Roosevelt National Park will certainly have a large influence, as will present and future attitudes and tolerances of private landowners and those who graze cattle on the Little Missouri National Grassland," Kreil said. "Our Department has the responsibility to factor all this in when developing and implementing management actions now and in the years to come."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota **OUTDOORS**.

The number of instances where wild elk have been attracted to farmed elk facilities in North Dakota has increased.



Theodore Roosevelt National Park South Unit

March 1985 – The National Park Service released 47 elk from Wind Cave National Park, South Dakota, into the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

September 1989 – 176 elk were counted in the park. The mean annual growth rate of 31 percent over the previous four years was one of the highest reported in literature.

November 1991 – Billings County opened to elk hunting, expanding hunting Unit E2 that included Dunn and McKenzie counties.

January and February 1993 – 350 elk were estimated to be in the park, and 220 were removed.

November 1996 – Golden Valley County opened to elk hunting. This expansion of the established hunting Unit E2 enlarged the area that also included Billings, Dunn and McKenzie counties.

Elk hunting opportunities in southwestern North Dakota will increase significantly in 2008.



August 1997 – Elk season format changed for the area surrounding TRNP. A late August season with 47 any-elk permits was offered, plus one Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation raffle permit. Thirty-seven bulls were harvested.

August 1998 – Unit E3 was split into an early and late season (August 14-20 and August 21-30), with 58 any-elk permits issued, plus one RMEF raffle permit. A total of 37 elk (34 bulls and three cows) were harvested.

March 1999 – North Dakota Game and Fish Department helicopter survey of TRNP and surrounding area. A total of 410 elk were counted in TRNP (67 bulls, 257 cows and 86 calves).

Additionally, seven bulls were counted outside the park.

May 15 – July 15, 1999 – Landowners with preferential licenses were allowed to harvest depredated elk during this period, as well as during the August season. None of the landowners participated.

August 1999 – Unit E3 was divided into two new units – E4 (selected areas along the northern boundary of TRNP) and a new E3 (the remainder of Billings and Golden Valley counties). Unit E4 remained split into an early and late season (August 13-19 and August 20-29) with 58 any-elk permits issued. Again, one RMEF raffle permit was issued. A total of 36 elk (20 bulls and 16 cows) were harvested in E4. Unit E3 offered 14 any-elk permits. A total of eight bulls were harvested in Unit E3. A total of 16 cows were harvested in the two units.

January 2000 – 208 elk were removed from TRNP.

May 15 – July 25, 2000 – Landowners with preferential licenses were allowed to harvest depredated elk during this period, as well as during the August season. None of the landowners participated.

August 2000 – Unit E4 remained split into an early and late season (August 11-17 and August 18-27) with 57 any-elk permits issued. Additionally, one RMEF raffle permit was issued. A total of 24 elk (14 bulls and 10 cows) were harvested in E4. Unit E3 offered 14 permits. A total of 11 bulls were harvested in Unit E3. A total of 10 cows were harvested in the two units.

February 2001 – Aerial surveys determined an elk population estimate of about 300 animals.

May 15 – July 24, 2001 – Landowners with preferential licenses were allowed to harvest depredated elk during this period, as well as during the August season. One landowner participated.

Elk Summary

August 2001 – Unit E4 remained split into an early and late season (August 10-16 and August 17-26). There were 67 permits issued. Unit E3 offered 14 any-elk permits. One RMEF raffle permit was also issued. A total of 25 elk were harvested in units E3 (one cow and eight bulls) and E4 (two male calves, 10 cows and 13 bulls). A total of 11 cows were harvested in the two units.

August 2002 – Unit E4 remained split into an early and late season (August 11-17 and August 18-27). There were 65 permits issued. Unit E3 offered 20 any-elk permits. One RMEF raffle permit was also issued. A total of 13 and 19 elk were harvested in units E3 (13 bulls) and E4 (10 cows and nine bulls). Ten cows were harvested in the two units.

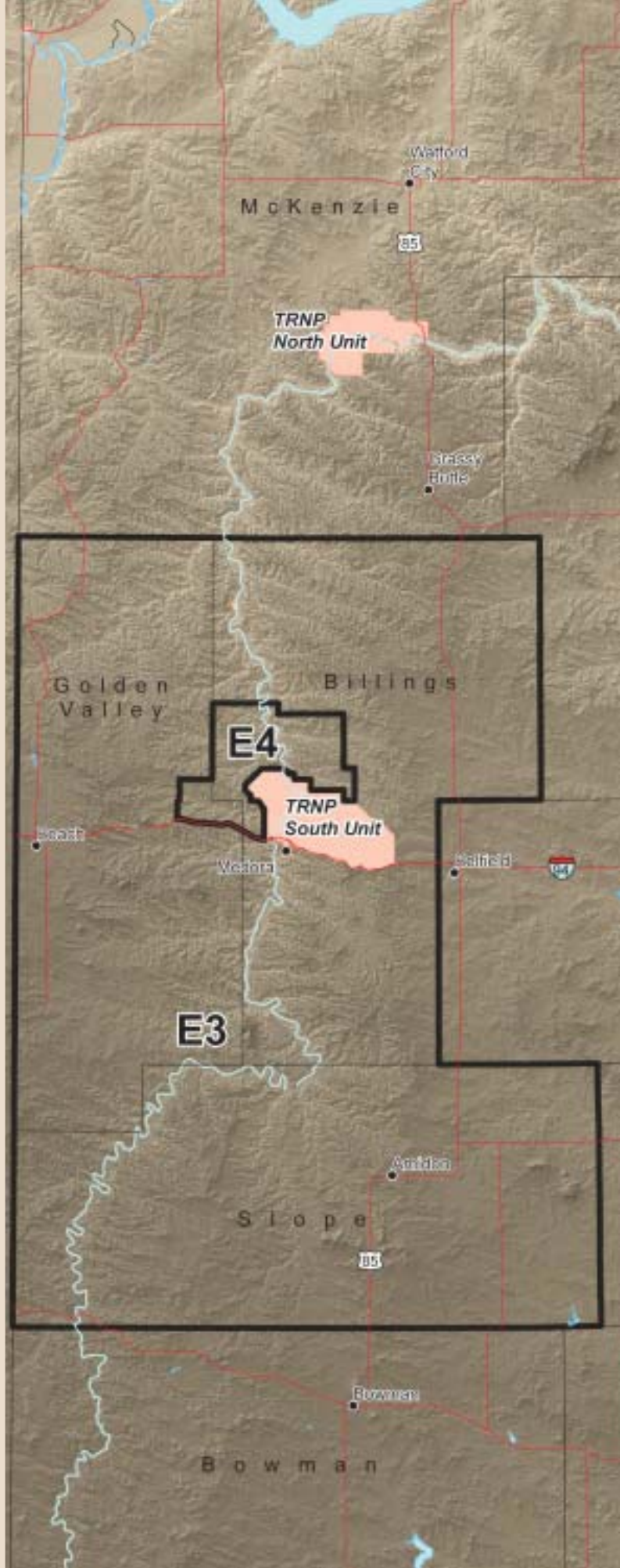
August 2003 – Unit E4 remained split into an early and late season (August 8-14 and August 15-24). There were 65 permits issued. Unit E3 offered 20 any-elk permits. One RMEF raffle permit was also issued. A total of 13 and 19 elk were harvested in units E3 (12 bulls and one cow) and E4 (12 bulls and seven cows). Eight cows were harvested in the two units. The population estimate for TRNP was about 560 animals (including calves-of-the-year). The annual rate of growth was 20-25 percent.

February 2004 – Midwinter aerial surveys indicated an elk population estimate of about 530 animals.

August 2004 – 26 elk were harvested in Unit E4 north of TRNP by 67 hunters; 15 elk were harvested in Unit E3 north of TRNP by 20 hunters. A total of nine cows and female calves were harvested in the two units.

February 2005 – The projected precalving elk population estimate for TRNP was about 750 animals (about 60 percent females).

August 2005 – A total of 20 licenses were issued for E3 and 65 licenses for Unit E4; 30 elk were harvested in Unit E4 north of TRNP by 65 hunters; and 17 bulls were harvested in Unit E3 north of TRNP by 20 hunters. A total of 13 cows were harvested in the two units.



December 2005 – An NPS progress report was released (Movement and Distribution of Elk at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota, 2003-2004). Included in the initial results: (1) distribution of elk in TRNP display dramatic seasonal variability, (2) elk rarely use water developments, (3) elk use drainage systems for egress from the park, (4) distribution of elk outside the park is patchy and localized, with most occurring within 15 miles of the park. Elk response to hunting varied between 2003 and 2004. In 2003, elk gradually reduced activity outside the park over a series of days. In contrast, radio-collared elk abruptly reduced activity outside the park when the 2004 season began.

February 2006 – Projected precalving elk population estimate for TRNP was 900 animals (about 60 percent females).

August 2006 – The number of licenses available for E3 hunters was expanded to 30 any-elk and 20 antlerless elk. A total of 50 licenses (20 any-elk for early season and 30 any-elk for late season) were issued for E4; a total of 68 licenses were issued for Unit E4. Additionally, an extended season (October 6-29) was offered for those unsuccessful during the August seasons. Unit E3 was extended to include Slope County.

Twenty-nine elk were harvested in Unit E3; and 42 elk were harvested in Unit E4 north of TRNP by 68 hunters. A total of 15 cows were harvested in the two units.

March 2007 – The regular season for Unit E3 was August 10-26 and opened again from October 5-28. A total of 70 licenses (40 any and 30 antlerless) were issued for E3. The regular season for Unit E4 was split season (early August 10-16; late August 17-26). All unsuccessful licenses holders, both early and late, were allowed to hunt again from October 5-28.

July 2007 – An amended proclamation allowed an additional 130 licenses (100 any-elk and 30 antlerless) in Unit E3, and 30 licenses (15 any-elk and 15 antlerless) in Unit E4. Second elk season license holders in both units were allowed to hunt from August 31 to September 30. An extended season was also added and ran from November 2 to December 30. In units E3 and E4 elk hunting seasons essentially ran from August 10 to December 30. Total numbers of E3 licenses issued was 200. Total number of E4 licenses issued was 96.

Compiled by **BILL JENSEN**, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game management biologist.

Elk Population Growth in Theodore Roosevelt National Park (TRNP) and Removal Rate in and Around (Units E3 and E4) TRNP, 1985-2006

**Moratorium on Removal from TRNP (7-26-2002)*

