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FALL 2018
WATERWAYS

A century in the big wild

Michigan elk herd continues to thrive after reintroduction 100 years ago.

A veil of fog rises above amber-colored fields on a chilly fall morning in the Pigeon River Country State Forest 20 miles north of Gaylord. Sunbeams cut through the towering trees, casting dancing shadows on the ground below. In the distance, a distinctive bugling sound permeates the air, first from one direction and then another.

The elk rut has begun.

In September and October, elk bulls and cows engage in their annual mating rituals. This draws countless tourists to the forest who trek down dirt roads and winding two-tracks to one of the dozen designated elk-viewing areas. The Michigan elk population — comprised of animals weighing as much as 900 pounds each — is near a record high with an estimated 854 to 1,512 within this 106,000-acre tract referred to as “The Big Wild.”

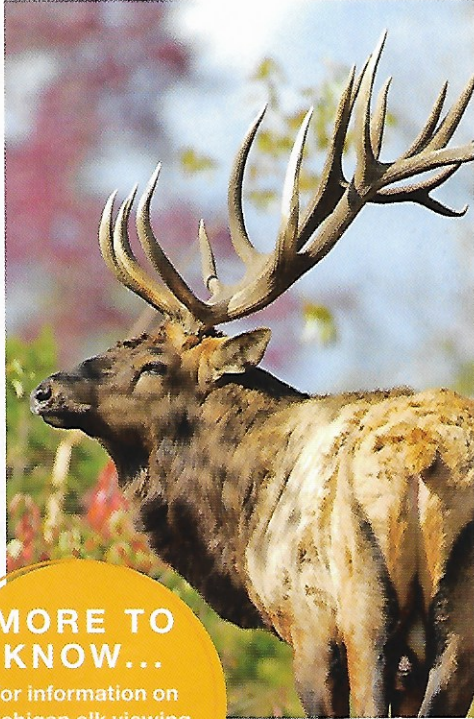
It is one of only two free-ranging elk herds

in the Midwest and is housed on the largest tract of wild land in the northern Lower Peninsula. Impressive, considering that by the turn of the 20th century, native elk had all but disappeared from this northern landscape due to overharvesting and lack of management, according to state wildlife officials. There were no licenses, designated hunting seasons or limits on how many elk could be harvested. At the same time, large sections of land were being cleared for the development of communities; timber was logged and shipped throughout the Great Lakes to cities like Chicago; and the elk's habitat slowly was eliminated.

By 1908, Michigan's native elk were extinct.

Yet, within 10 years, efforts were underway to reintroduce the species back into the region. Seven Rocky Mountain elk (two bulls and five cows) were brought in from Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park in 1918





MORE TO KNOW...

For information on Michigan elk viewing areas, visit mi.gov/elk or gaylordmichigan.net.

and released in southern Cheboygan County near the Sturgeon River, between Wolverine and Vanderbilt.

The area was cut over, burnt over and wide open, while also providing good thermal cover, making it a prime environment for the new herd to thrive.

This year, conservationists, nature lovers and tourism leaders celebrate the 100th anniversary of Michigan's elk reintroduction. A poster contest was held; the state's wildlife license plate was redesigned to feature a bull elk; and a new discovery center was opened to display historical artifacts for the region.

"This really is a wonderful conservation success story," said Brian Mastenbrook, wildlife field operations manager for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. "What we're doing is for us but also future generations. I want people to value our wildlife, and when they're here, to look out and think their life is better because of all this."

— Dianna Stampfer

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