

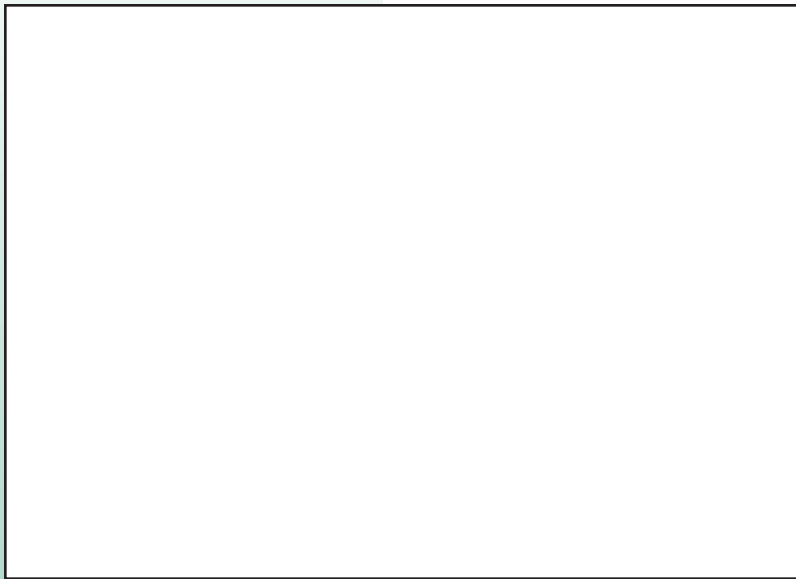


Information Bulletin

Ingenika River Elk Transplant

PEACE/WILLISTON FISH & WILDLIFE COMPENSATION PROGRAM

Objective: To establish a viable population of elk at the north end of Williston Reservoir.



▲ Each group of elk was caught in a corral trap baited with hay.

In February 1996, fifty Rocky Mountain elk were given a new home along the slopes of the Ingenika River at the north end of Williston Reservoir.

The transplant is an enhancement project designed to stimulate population growth and increase the genetic diversity of the population, thus creating a larger, healthier elk herd. The existing herd in the Ingenika and lower Finlay River areas had been estimated at 30 to 40 animals with marginal population growth.

The decision to make the transplant was based on a B.C.Environment wildlife management plan which estimated that the Ingenika/lower Finlay River areas was capable of supporting up to 200 elk. The transplant site also has available forage in winter because of low snow depths.

“Since our mandate is to enhance wildlife populations and habitats where possible, we’re always looking for ways to do this,” said Mari Wood, program biologist for the Peace/Williston Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program (PFWWCP). “The habitat in the Ingenika and lower Finlay River areas is capable of supporting higher numbers of elk than were previously there. Our objective was to boost the numbers of the existing herd and create a viable elk population in the area.”

The transplanted elk were part of a larger herd east of Chetwynd. They had become unpopular with area ranchers because they were in the habit of feeding from the ranchers’ winter haystacks.

A former conservation officer was hired by the PFWWCP to capture the animals. Since the elk fed from haystacks at night, he baited a corral trap with hay and then climbed onto a platform in a nearby tree to monitor the trap. Using a night-vision spotting scope, he waited until there were enough animals in the corral before shutting the door with a remote trigger mechanism.

From the corral trap, the elk were pushed into a squeeze chute one at a time where they could be safely handled by the wildlife biologists.

"We fitted 10 females with radio collars to allow us to monitor their movements and survival rates. For identification purposes, we put numbered nylon collars on the remaining females and ear-tagged all the bulls and calves," said Wood.

Before they could be loaded into the livestock trailer for the journey north, the animals were inoculated against potential parasites. They were also injected with an antibiotic which gets deposited in the teeth and acts as a marker in case their

tags or collars come off.

In order to increase the population at the transplant site most efficiently, the majority of the elk taken were females. In total, 12 males and 38 females were moved, including 16 calves. Female elk typically start breeding at 2 1/2 years of age and give birth to one calf in late May or early June.

The transplant itself was an arduous process, requiring three trapping sessions and three separate trips before the desired number of elk was relocated.

"It took many hours to capture and process each group of elk, followed by a 10-hour drive through the snow and the dark to the release site on the Ingenika River. We released the elk in the middle of the night and then made the return drive to complete the process all over again," said Wood.

Biologists are monitoring the success of the transplant by conducting tracking flights to locate the radio-collared females. This information helps them to determine what habitats the animals are using and how far they are moving.

The success of this project depends not only on environmental factors, such as snow conditions, predator populations and food supply, but also on human factors. If the elk population is to grow, the animals must be protected from hunting for a number of years. There is no legal hunting season in the immediate area, and the local Tsay Keh Band has agreed to refrain from subsistence hunting of the elk for five years.

The transplanted elk are expected to mix with the existing herd and to reach a population of 150 animals by the winter of 1999/2000, when an inventory of the herd will be conducted. In the meantime, wildlife biologists may consider supplementing other small elk populations in the watershed.

The Peace/Williston Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program is a joint B.C. Hydro and B.C. Environment initiative to enhance and protect fish and wildlife within the Williston and Dinosaur watersheds in northeastern British Columbia.

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