

# Return of the Elk

By Ed Felker



An adult bull elk can weigh up to 700 pounds. (Photo by Russ Morton)

While most Virginians might put their home state near the bottom of likely elk habitats, elk in the Old Dominion is nothing new. Elk were here in great numbers long before borders were drawn. But unregulated hunting and loss of habitat to agriculture, among other factors, proved too much for the hearty animal, and by the late 1800s they were not to be found.

Several waves of public interest since that time have led to restoration efforts, some more successful than others, but all ultimately failing to establish sustainable herds. Attempts in the early 1900s failed but in 1916 the Virginia Game Commission tried again, releasing elk in 11 Virginia counties. Most of those releases failed and by 1926 only two elk herds remained. Even so, elk-hunting seasons were held until 1960, and the great animals once again had vanished from the state by 1970.

The state of Kentucky first released elk in December of 1997 and continued adding elk for the next five years. About the same time, in the late 1990s, Virginia Tech did a feasibility study on elk restoration in Virginia. The study, funded primarily by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), looked at both biological and sociological factors. RMEF, whose mission is to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife and their habitat, pledged support for a restoration effort, including financial assistance, technical expertise and volunteer labor.

In the fall of 2009, Virginia's Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) was tasked to create an operational plan for elk restoration. A draft plan with multiple options focused on two Virginia regions: the coalfield counties of Dickenson and Wise, and the valley and ridge counties of Lee, Russell, Scott and Tazewell, all in the southwestern part of the

state. It was approved in June 2010, at which time the DGIF solicited public input on the plan. During public meetings during the summer, strong opinions were voiced both for and against elk restoration.

A final operational plan was submitted in August 2010. In the plan, it was determined that the coalfield counties were more suited to elk, due to the potential for agricultural damage in the other counties. So a decision was reached to stock 75 elk in the coalfield counties—but then modified to become a pilot project for Buchanan County only. "One major factor in this decision was the level of support from the three counties in the area," Allen Boynton, DGIF biologist said. "Two county boards opposed elk restoration, and one county (Buchanan) supported it."

In October 2010, a final plan outlining the implementation of the program was approved. The first elk released in Buchanan County came from the Kentucky



**A newborn elk calf, weighing about 35 pounds, spends the first few weeks hiding motionless while its mother feeds. (Photo by Joel Thompson)**

1,200. Some public hunting opportunities could be provided fairly quickly, Boynton said. “This decision will be made based upon both time and population factors.”

Countless hours of research, debate and planning have gone into Virginia’s elk restoration program, and the history of elk in Virginia is one that would advise caution regarding expectations. Boynton says his biggest short-term worry is acquiring a sufficient number of animals to establish the nucleus of a herd in Buchanan County. Long-term, his biggest concern is providing the public with opportunities to enjoy the elk herd. Buchanan County is largely made up of privately owned lands, and access may be difficult.

But even with such cautions, Virginia’s sportsmen and wildlife enthusiasts have good reason to be excited and proud of the effort to restore elk to their home ground. “Hats off to the citizens of Virginia, and especially those of Buchanan County, who understand there is no higher calling in conservation than restoring a native game species to sustainable, hunt-able, balanced populations,” said David Allen, RMEF president and CEO. “For everyone who doesn’t understand it today, I believe you’ll be convinced over time that this was the right decision, the right thing to do, the right way to go about it.”

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**A set of antlers on a mature bull can weigh up to 40 pounds. (Photo by Betty Morton)**



herd. They were trapped in January of this year and then quarantined and tested for bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, chronic wasting disease and a number of other diseases. A small herd of about 20 animals – large enough to become a cohesive social unit – was released in Buchanan County this spring. More will be added next year.

Kentucky’s elk restoration program has proven extremely successful with a current population of over 10,000 animals. Virginia will draw on Kentucky’s experience. While Virginia does not purchase the elk per se, the state reimburses

Kentucky for expenses incurred during the trapping, quarantine and delivery process.

When released, the elk are outfitted with a GPS telemetry collar that provides real-time information on the location of each animal. “The collars provide a number of locations each day through a satellite link,” Boynton said. “They work well in the mountainous terrain of Buchanan County.”

The short-term expectation, Boynton says, is to grow the Buchanan herd to 400 elk. If support grows from Dickenson and Wise counties, the long-term goal in the area would be a herd of