

United States Department of Agriculture
Bureau of Biological Survey

Wildlife Research and Management Leaflet BS-12

Washington, D. C.

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July 1935

THE PRESENT PLIGHT OF THE JACKSON HOLE ELK

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Ever since the first settlers occupied Jackson Hole, in Wyoming, the elk herd of that section has commanded public attention. In early days, the Jackson Hole ranges were shared by elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, mountain sheep, antelope, and bison. The early history of the moose there is obscure, but since 1900 these animals have been increasing in numbers, until they are abundant and range over an extended area. Bison, antelope, and white-tailed deer have disappeared from the picture.

Elk a Last Remnant of Old Times

Narratives of old-time experiences with game provide material for a thrilling chapter in the story of this unique wilderness. They tell of the annual trek of the elk, the bison, and the antelope when autumn storms cause them to pick their way out of the higher mountains through the Gros Ventre Basin and the Hoback River country into the more favorable winter ranges of upper Green River and the sagebrush areas of western Wyoming. (See map, page 3.)

Of that historic pageant of animal migration all that remains now is the annual travel of the elk from their summer pastures around the headwaters of the Snake River and the upper Yellowstone River to the valley lands of Jackson Hole, the favorite range being at the southern end of the valley.

Jackson Hole a Recreation Area

Soon after the Jackson Valley was settled by ranchers, cattle raising there became an important industry. A gradual change, however, has come over the economic picture. Although cattle are still raised there, recreation has come to the front. Some cattle ranches have been turned into dude ranches, and many ranchers have found themselves in an unprofitable business, though a few are still doing fairly well. The elk herd, however, is more prominent than ever before and attracts national attention. It claims the interest of sportsmen, tourists, and the general public. This elk herd is now recognized as one of the great natural resources of Jackson Hole.

It is apparent that Jackson Hole is destined to become outstandingly important from the viewpoint of recreation and its attendant interests, including game and game management, and in this transition the elk herd, the largest remaining on the continent, will play an important part.

Elk Problem is Lack of Winter Range

The elk problem, which has existed since Jackson Hole was first settled, is definitely characterized by lack of winter range. In the Gros Ventre Basin, on the Teton National Forest, there is a favorable elk winter range, but the forage there is largely consumed each year by the cattle, which are driven over it to their summer ranges.

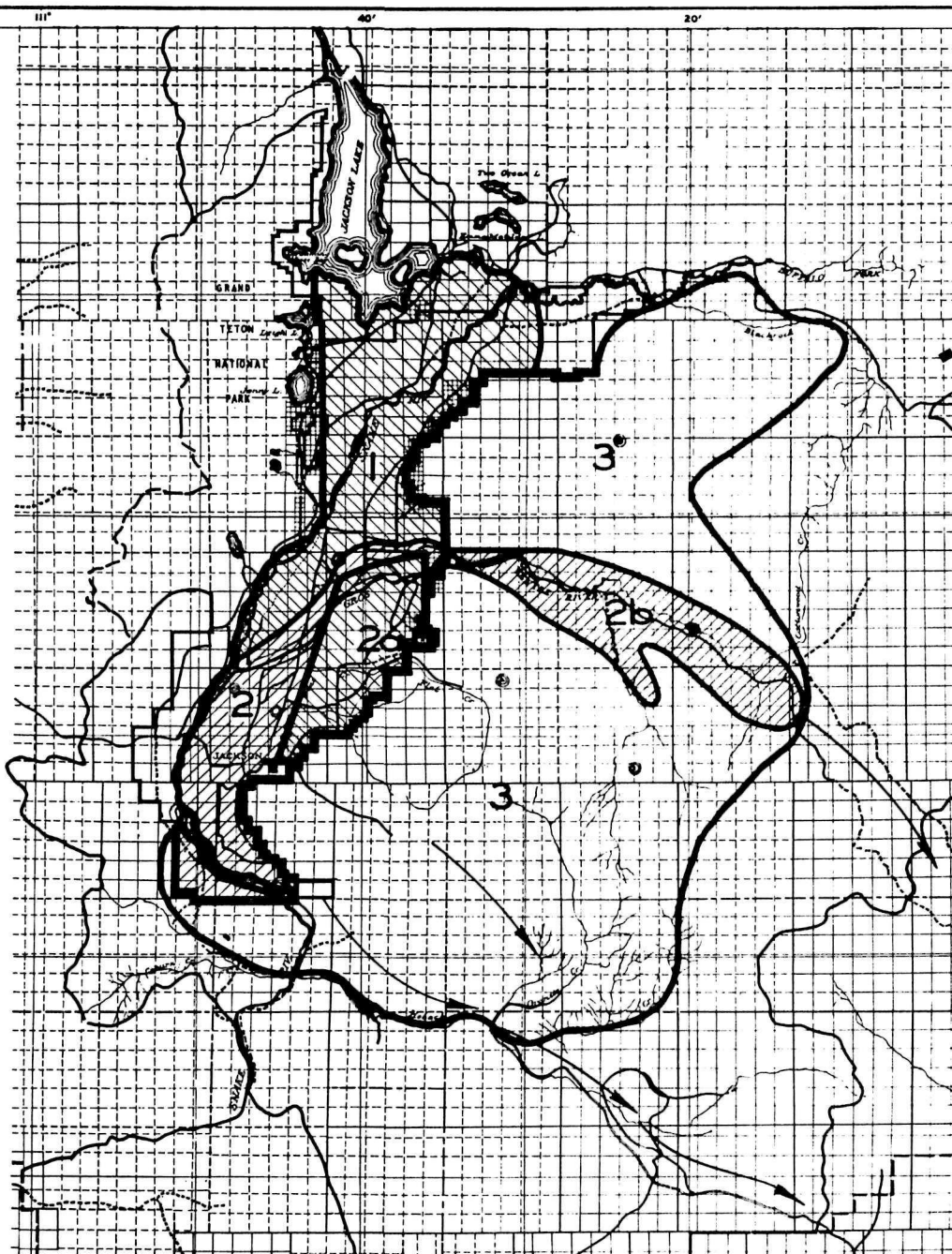
There is some winter range on the Teton National Forest along the lower foothills on the east side of the valley, the most important along the southern half. In the valley proper the range formerly used by the elk is now mostly privately owned. As a matter of fact the elk have wintered to a large extent on private property for 20 years and more.

Winter Feeding Degrades the Magnificent Elk







In order at least partially to relieve the ranchers of elk depredations, and to prevent the annual threat of destruction of the elk herd, through starvation and disease, the Government has been forced to adopt the practice each year of winter feeding of hay. As a result, the elk have become somewhat domesticated; a definite percentage of the calf crop is lost from disease; and a large annual feeding expense is incurred. In other words, this feeding practice, which has been forced upon the Government under present conditions, is degrading the elk of Jackson Hole to the uninspiring status of domestic animals.

Temporary Measures Costly

In order to provide for emergencies, it is necessary to have on hand each fall considerable supplies of hay and other feed, at a possible cost of nearly \$100,000 to the Federal Government and the State of Wyoming. The severe conditions that prevailed during the winter of 1934-35 completely exhausted the reserve feed supplies, and in the emergency it was necessary to purchase additional quantities to prevent threatened disastrous losses through starvation. More feed, adequate to carry the elk through a possible similar emergency, must be acquired and stored before fall each year that the present shortage of range



LEGEND

-  ELK RANGE IN WINTER AND SPRING. CHIEF WINTER RANGE AT SOUTH END.
-  RANGE IN JACKSON VALLEY IN WINTER (NOT ON NATIONAL FOREST).
-  WINTER CONCENTRATION AREA OF MOST IMPORTANCE.
-  GROS VENTRE WINTER RANGE, ON TETON NATIONAL FOREST.
-  POTENTIAL NATIONAL FOREST HUNTING AREAS.
-  FORMER MIGRATION ROUTES OF ELK, BISON, AND ANTELOPE.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
BUREAU OF BIOLOGICAL SURVEY
J. N. DARLING CHIEF

RANGE OF JACKSON HOLE ELK HERD TETON COUNTY WYOMING SIXTH PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN

1935

SCALE

1 2 3 4 5 MILES

continues. To face a winter with less than the average quantity of feed is to invite appalling losses from starvation and disease, a situation that would arouse the justifiable indignation of millions of Americans.

Winter feeding, therefore, while necessary to meet an immediate emergency, is only temporary, and will afford no permanent relief. The annual purchase of feed represents an unnecessarily expensive hand-to-mouth policy, one that will not remove the threat of destruction to the finest herd of big-game animals in the United States nor relieve the Government of the necessity of each year expending large sums of money.

Permanent Solution Requires Adequate Range

The restoration and protection of natural range is the only permanent solution of the elk problem in Jackson Hole. The elk need a natural winter range in order to be free from the yearly danger of starvation and deterioration, which occurs wherever wild animals are forced to depend on artificial food for long periods of time. Immediate difficulties would be met if the elk could use some 12,000 to 15,000 acres of land now privately owned between the Elk Refuge on the south and the Gros Ventre River on the north, together with a small area at the junction of the Gros Ventre and Snake Rivers to the north, and if live-stock grazing could be eliminated from the area.

The herd should be maintained at about 20,000 animals, and any excess should be disposed of by hunting, by removal for restocking other desirable areas, or by regulated killing if necessary and the distribution of the meat for relief purposes. Arrangements are being made to cooperate with State authorities for keeping the herd at the optimum number of 20,000.

Until the necessary lands become available for the use of the elk, there is always the imminent danger of a shortage of winter feed, with recourse to the undesirable expedient of purchasing and feeding hay. Purchase of private lands, together with the setting aside of some publicly owned land within the area, will probably terminate the artificial conditions accompanying winter feeding.

It does not seem appropriate that the remnant of our splendid American elk should be required to forage for subsistence among farm crops like strayed barnyard stock, and it is hoped that by the acquiring of new lands to be included in the Elk Refuge, the herd will again somewhat resemble that of the pioneer days. Under such a situation Jackson Hole should present an inspiring spectacle of wildlife, with the elk herd inhabiting its native range as free and untrammelled as on the day the first white man invaded this magnificent wilderness.