

Elk - Horse Grazing Situation, Yaha Tinda Ranch, 1957

Mr. F. Dixon, ranch foreman, estimated on the basis of a partial count that the largest number of elk on the ranch at one time, last winter, was about one thousand.

Probably some of the elk which winter on the ranch, summer in the park. I saw only six elk near the ranch in June, two bulls in Scalp creek north of the ranch, and four cows on the mountain south of the ranch. There was evidence of more elk summering in the area but most of the wintering animals had dispersed to other ranges. According to Mr. Dixon and members of the warden service who have been associated with the ranch, the buildup of elk wintering there has been rapid. They report that the effect on the grazing for horses, and also the hay crop has been very pronounced. I found elk pellets very numerous on the grassland of the valley.

The grassland of the ranch is of a good type and is generally in good condition. The current utilization of the grass is heavy. I believe that if it continues at the present rate, the range will deteriorate rapidly. In some sections large numbers of seedlings of shrubby cinquefoil about four years old are present.

The fenced areas maintained for hay cutting were heavily grazed during the past two winters, so that areas not hayed for three years do not carry enough hay for cutting. Large numbers of aspens on the lower slopes on the ranch and adjacent land have been barked by elk during the past two winters.

As I understand the legal status of the ranch, it is ^{was} owned by the province but leased by the federal government. Is now deeded to the federal government. Only small portions of it are fenced. In one way it would be to the disadvantage of the ranch unit to have it fenced. A large area of good range currently grazed by ranch horses lies outside the legal boundaries. Fencing would make this unavailable.

Hunters have more or less successfully been prevented from hunting on the ranch. However, there are no legal grounds for this. Under the Alberta Game Act the ranch could be posted against hunting only if it were privately owned and fenced. If it were fenced and "no trespassing"

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signs put up hunters could be forced to leave under the Criminal Code. Fencing would be expensive and would restrict the government horses to the ranch.

The open season for elk this year in the area surrounding the ranch is October 21 to December 14 for bulls and December 9 to December 14 for cows. Last year the opening date was about the same but the season closed earlier.

The severe weather did not arrive until about the end of the season. As a result, the elk kill in the area surrounding the ranch and at the "Corners" on the Panther River, was poor. About 300 to 400 hunters hunted around the ranch and about 40 elk were taken. There have been seasons on elk around the ranch for about ten years. Last autumn was the first open season for cow elk in the area. With the later closing date of the elk season this year a better harvest seems probable. However, the only access road to the area is through the ranch. Unless hunters are allowed access by that road, an adequate harvest cannot be attained and the spectacular increase of elk controlled. Hunters could improve the situation not only by reducing total elk numbers, but by forcing them to disperse from the ranch which now serves as a sanctuary into which they gather. If, when hunters were allowed on the ranch, they were not able to make an adequate elk kill during the open season, October 21 - December 14, we would be in an excellent position to approach the province to request that a special late season on elk be held in the area next year. The provincial game authorities are aware of the increase in elk in that area and I am confident that they would cooperate.

Some of the considerations which are reported to have been the basis for attempting to prohibit hunting on the ranch are as follows:

1. Risk of having horses shot. There is a certain risk in this connection. However, I feel that it is a risk worth taking. It would be better to have the occasional horse shot than to have the forage for two or three hundred horses exhausted by elk. I know of no reports of horses having been shot on the east slope in the vicinity of the ranch. Outfitters and livery stables winter several hundred horses in areas adjoining the ranch where there is hunting, as for example the "Corners" on the Panther River.

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2. The damage to forage by hunters driving over it. Hunters could be asked to restrict their driving on the ranch to the roads. I am certain that the Ranger from the Red Deer Ranger station and the Game Officer from Didsbury, both of whom patrol the area around the ranch, would be ready to supervise hunters on the ranch. If necessary a Banff Park Warden could be posted to the ranch for the hunting season, and meet cars as they entered the east gate of the ranch. The average hunter is especially well behaved when an enforcement officer is present.

3. The status of bighorn sheep in the ranch area. This matter gives no cause for concern. During our reconnaissance of some of the neighboring mountains, Holsworth and I observed 96 different sheep and we were only able to cover a limited part of the potential sheep range. Forty of them were on the Scalp Creek drainage north of the ranch and included 4 rams, 13 lambs, and 23 ewes and yearlings. Fifty-six of them were on the mountain south of the valley. They included 10 unidentified sheep, 19 lambs, and 27 ewes and yearlings.

There are large areas of sheep range on the mountains both north and south of the ranch valley. These ranges are of a productive type and in good condition. I feel that they are probably stocked with sheep to about a safe carrying capacity. While the mountains are less rugged than many of them on which sheep occur in Banff Park, I believe that there is adequate escape terrain available. I consider the status of those sheep secure. The catastrophe most likely to offset them is range deterioration due to a further great increase in numbers of elk, and perhaps of sheep in the area surrounding the ranch.

The open season for sheep hunting in the area surrounding the ranch is September 2 to October 19. Thus, the season for sheep closes two days before the elk season opens. As far as I know, sheep hunting in the area surrounding the ranch has never been entirely closed and for many years it has been restricted to rams. It was recently further restricted to rams of $\frac{3}{4}$ horn curl or better. Under the present regulations no sheep bands in Alberta are in danger of depletion from legal hunting. Mr. Dixon reports that sheep move into the ranch to lick salt and graze occasionally throughout the winter, spring and summer. He says that through the hunting season they stay in the high country. Sheep hunting in that

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area is mostly a proposition which requires a pack trip. About a dozen rams were taken in the area around the ranch last year, mostly in the Scalp Creek drainage, and mostly by American non-resident hunters. Permitting hunters on the ranch during sheep or elk season would not affect the sheep. However if it were so desired hunters could be prohibited from the ranch during the sheep season and permitted during the elk season.

4. Danger of fire. This is a possibility. However the Eastern Rockies Conservation Board has never traced a fire to hunters in the area under their jurisdiction. That area is used by thousands of hunters every season.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald R. Flock,
Wildlife Biologist.

Banff,
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