

Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Management Plan (2017-2020) – Draft Addendum

The Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Management Plan established goals of reducing resource damage to open space areas, reducing damage to croplands and private property, inducing migration in portions of the elk herd, and reducing the population size of the herd. Boulder County Parks & Open Space has completed the three years approved by the plan, during which time we have allowed limited public hunting in the fall and winter and taken other management actions to address the goals set by the plan.

The limited hunting occurred from September through January in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The results produced harvests of 25, 31, and 27 elk from the open space properties respectively. Additionally, elk were redistributed to adjacent properties, which resulted in increased private land harvest. Estimated harvest in the whole subunit, including county open space and damage licenses for the first two plan years, was around 50 elk. We anticipate plan year three to be similar but subunit harvest data is still being collected. These numbers represent an increase from the 12-25 harvested in the previous years of the subunit, when hunting did not occur on open space.

We installed fencing around two high-use areas on Rabbit Mountain. The fencing has successfully kept the elk out and removed their prime bedding grounds. We continued to haze periodically and noted that the elk became even more habituated to the hazing, thus harder to move off Rabbit Mountain. We continued to monitor the vegetation transects, both shrubs and grasses, and will continue this monitoring in the future.

Hunting pressure, harvest, fencing, and hazing combined to decrease elk use at Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain. Public hunting has been the most effective management action to both reduce the size of and disperse the elk herd. The area used by elk during the hunting season prior to the public hunting on open space was approximately 16 square miles, centered around Rabbit Mountain and Indian Mountain. This area increased to 27 and 44 total square miles in the first and second years of the public hunting on open space. This wider distribution, combined with a smaller herd, reduced presence and impact to the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain. On multiple days and weeks during the hunting seasons, no elk were present on Rabbit Mountain itself.

Wildlife game damage claims still occurred on the same properties as before the plan's implementation. However, private land impacts and complaints persist, but have not increased. The elk population winter counts have dropped from the high of 360 in 2016 to around 120 in early 2020. This reduction is a positive trend; and with reduced herd size, we anticipate game damage claims will go down in the future.

The results of this management action are all trending toward meeting the goals of the management plan. However, the goals of this plan, particularly having a herd size of 30 non-migratory to 70 migratory elk, have still not been met. Therefore, we recommend extending the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain Elk and Vegetation Plan for a period of five years.

The proposed management actions for 2020 mirror that of 2018 and 2019 (three hunters per week in the fall/winter). The plan and its adaptive management strategy provide the flexibility to alter the number of days, hunt weeks, hunters, breaks, and other hunt parameters to achieve hunting pressure and harvest if the metrics of the goals are met or get close. We foresee doing the same or

less public hunting in future years, depending on how close we are to achieving the plan's objectives. We want to maximize the amount of time Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain remains open to the public, while still achieving the plan's objectives.