



Parks & Open Space

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TO:	Board of County Commissioners
DATE/TIME:	Monday, March 30, 2020, 4:30 p.m.
LOCATION:	Virtual Meeting on Teams Live, Boulder, CO
AGENDA ITEM:	Red Hill Elk Management Plan
PRESENTER:	Therese Glowacki, Resource Manager/BCPOS Ben Kraft, Terrestrial Biologist/Colorado Parks & Wildlife
ACTION REQUESTED:	Approval of the Red Hill Elk Management Plan

The Red Hill elk herd's habitat ranges from the plains along Highway 36 and extends all the way to the Indian Peaks. This herd was nearly exclusively migratory in nature, summering in the Indian Peaks area west of the Peak-to-Peak Highway and wintering primarily on Heil Valley Ranch. They would also use portions of open space just east of Highway 36.

The elk use pattern has changed dramatically in the last several years, with a growing portion of the herd becoming non-migratory, with significant use of areas south of Nelson Road. This includes the Federal Department of Commerce facility at Table Mountain and adjacent private property. Informal counts and observations detected these summering animals. New radio telemetry surveys have confirmed this summer use pattern. Three formal summer counts in 2019 all counted in excess of 88 elk, including a large segment of calves.

This growing population has now come into conflict with neighbors and POS tenants north and south of Nelson Road. Colorado Parks and Wildlife paid \$4,500 in game damage in 2019. This situation mirrors that of the Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain: a non-migratory herd is growing and developing in an area that sees very little hunting. Colorado Parks and Wildlife was concerned enough about the situation to expand the Unit 20 subunit for the 2020 hunting season to encompass both the Rabbit Mountain and Red Hill/Table Mountain areas to enable harvest on the Red Hill sub-herd. Thirty-two game damage tags were issued to multiple landowners in 2019.

Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) inventoried Boulder County in 2007 and 2008 to assess the county's biodiversity. This survey identified areas with the highest biodiversity significance based on rare, threatened, and endangered species and habitats. Red Hill was awarded a B1 ranking due to its concentration of four or more globally critically imperiled to globally imperiled element occurrences that are in excellent or good condition. Red Hill is one of three areas in Boulder County that holds a B1 ranking. Additionally, Table Mountain and the Lykins Gulch area (east of US 36) are CNHP B2 areas (Very High Biodiversity Significance; CNHP 2009).

Having experienced natural resource damage on Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain by an overabundant, resident herd, the growing resident herd at Red Hill therefore warrants

immediate action. Preventive management of the Red Hill herd will benefit the otherwise irreplaceable resources of Red Hill and the surrounding area.

In addition, public safety along Highway 36 is concerning. There have been 89 elk collisions along this stretch of highway since 2005, and the trend shows more collisions in recent years with increases in traffic.

If no management action occurs to limit population growth and encourage redistribution, the non-migratory segment of the Red Hill elk herd will continue to increase with the recruitment of calves, as well as recruitment of individuals from the remaining migratory segment. As elk numbers increase, impacts to natural resources, damage to crops and private property, and threats to public safety are expected to increase.

To present this to the public, staff held an open house on February 5, 2020, where 70 members of the public attended. We also presented this to the Parks and Open Space Advisory Committee (POSAC) on November 18, 2019 and again on February 27, 2020. Four people spoke at POSAC in February. We also had an on-line questionnaire for the public to provide input on potential management actions. This generated 60 comments to date from the public, with 66% supporting action. The public input included: 1) neighbors concerned with the increasing elk damage on their private property; 2) neighbors concerned with the potential safety issue of hunting on open space adjacent to their residences; 3) public support for elk management because it has proven to be effective at Ron Stewart Preserve at Rabbit Mountain; 4) public opposition to hunting elk on open space; 5) support for culling instead of hunting, and 6) public support for elk management in general.

POSAC approved the draft plan by a vote of 6 to 1. Since that meeting, we have modified the plan to more specifically outline our safety precautions.

With this in mind, we have drafted the attached Red Hill Elk Management Plan. The goals and objectives clearly indicate that this is an elk management action, not a recreational hunt.

Goal:

Manage a sustainable, migrating elk population on open space properties surrounding US 36 through adaptive management to protect areas of high biodiversity and reduce elk-human conflicts.

Objectives:

1. Prevent impacts to areas of high biodiversity, including grassland sites, shrub stands, and forested areas in the Heil Valley Ranch/Red Hill area and natural lands east of US 36.
2. Maintain a migrating elk herd, with no more than 25 summering individuals.
3. Continue to work with agricultural tenants, farmers, and landowners to minimize elk-human conflicts and elk damage.
4. Facilitate highway safety along US 36 and Nelson Road by reducing elk-highway interactions and establishing partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies.

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