

Elk – Deer Relationship

Larry Hyslop had an article in the Elko Daily Free Press a year or so ago critical of those who were concerned about elk introductions. Larry said that he had checked with the folks at NDOW and found a lot of theory but no facts supporting the idea that deer numbers seem to drop whenever elk are introduced into new areas.

It seemed odd that the folks from NDOW could not find such information when there have been so many studies and articles produced supportive of such “theory” over the years. The earliest that I am aware of was a Forest Service study which was completed by Edward Cliff in 1939. It seems that in order to increase numbers of elk in the Blue Mountain area of Oregon, elk were brought in from the Yellowstone and Jackson Hole areas of Wyoming during 1911, 1912 and 13, 1918 and again in 1930. Prior to the planting of these elk, the Blue Mountains were noted for producing large numbers of mule deer. Indications are the ranges were overstocked, and following the hard winter of 1931 - 32, numerous deer carcasses were found scattered across wintering areas. Edward Cliff wrote; “The history of the Blue Mountain deer and elk herds demonstrates conclusively that mule deer cannot compete successfully with their larger adversaries when food becomes a limiting factor. The elk can browse about 2 ½ feet higher than deer. When foliage and twigs are consumed as high as elk can reach they often break large shrubs and small trees down and it is common for the bulls to rake limbs down with their antlers to a height of nearly 10 feet. Elk are more robust than deer and are able to paw more effectively for snow-covered forage. Their longer legs enable them to buck deeper drifts and range farther for feed. By preference they will eat much more dry grass than deer when browse feed becomes sparse. By reason of these differences, elk are able to gradually increase at the expense of the deer and eventually dominate the range.”

As mentioned above, I have found several studies and articles that have been written or produced over the years addressing elk/deer competition. One of the best, was written by Dr. Charles Kay not so long ago, wherein he states among other things, “Elk can live on a 100% shrub diet or a 100% grass diet and everything in between. But, and here is the rub, elk prefer to eat the same high-quality foods that mule deer must eat.” - once all the high quality foods are skimmed off, elk can live on the remaining lower quality foods, while deer cannot.” - Elk can reach higher than mule deer, so more food is physically available to elk than mule deer, especially in shrub ranges during winter.” - mule deer find elk offensive and will move to less desirable areas, when elk arrive.”

Truth is, deer and cattle are compatible, while elk are not compatible with much of anything. Elk compete with bighorn sheep, and domestic sheep. They tear down fences. They destroy water developments. They wallow in riparian areas in a way that agency people would not tolerate if it were domestic animals doing it. They tear down stack yards and people’s haystacks. And once established, they only provide about a third of the hunting opportunity that mule deer do.

Again, it seems odd to me that the NDOW folks say they are not aware of these kinds of information -- particularly in view of the fact that I drove all the way to Reno one time, not long before the NDOW folks began planting elk in the eastern part of Elko Co. so that I could give them copies of much of the information which I talk about here. I wonder what happened to all those copies I gave them. They must have used them to start their fires in the mornings.