

BRINGING BACK THE GAME

ARIZONA WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT | 1912–1962

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ARIZONA'S ELK RESTORATION

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In 1893, the Arizona Territorial Legislature imposed a closed season on elk, but this was not soon enough to save the state's native elk from extirpation. Never numerous or widespread, the so-called Merriam's elk¹ had disappeared during the settlement years for reasons that remain imperfectly understood. With reports of Merriam's elk drying up completely by 1910, concerned citizens were eager to participate in any program that would restore this important native game animal.

The story of the first elk reintroduction to Arizona by Dr. Robert N. Looney, a frontier doctor in Prescott, and the state's Elks Lodges in 1913 has been told several times, most accurately in an article edited by Neil Carmony in the January–February 2003 issue of *Arizona Wildlife Views*. After reading an article on trapping and shipping elk in the August 1912 issue of *Outdoor Life* magazine, the young doctor contacted the Boone and Crockett Club, who advised him on the details of translocating animals. Having gained the support of Gov. George Hunt and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, Looney and the Elks secured a permit to transport 80 head of elk from Yellowstone National Park and release them on the Sitgreaves National Forest southeast of Winslow, Arizona.

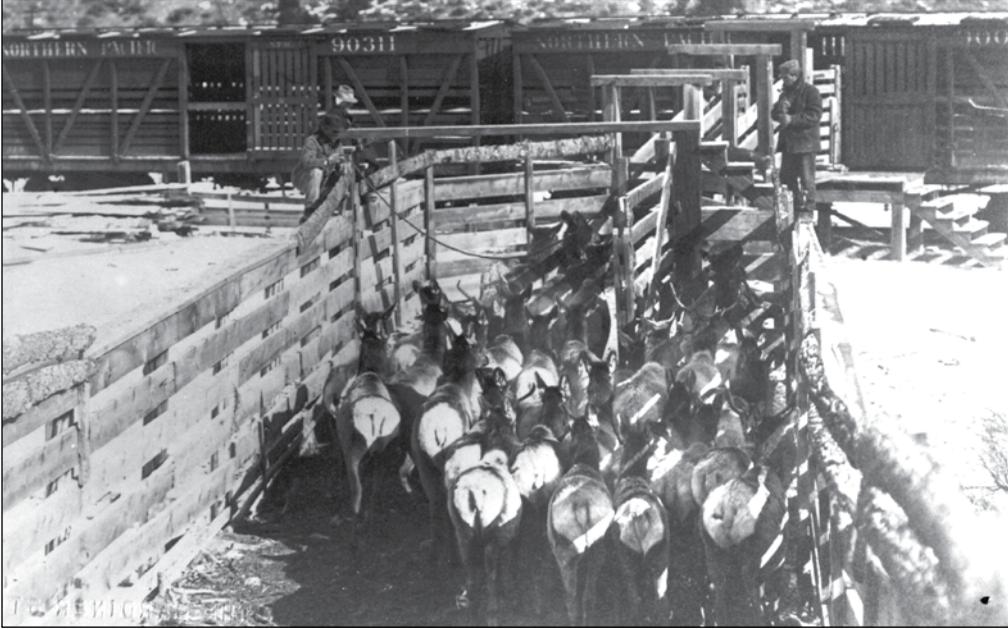
Arizona members of the Elks provided financial and logistical support. Although Governor Hunt was enthusiastic about the transplant, the state had no money available to finance such a venture. The only department money involved consisted of a special \$50 travel stipend to the new State Game Warden, Frank Rogers, to oversee the unloading of the elk at Winslow. This he did, advising Hunt on the success of the transplant by telegram on February 20, 1913.

The Yellowstone elk were captured out of the northern Yellowstone herd near Gardiner, Montana, in February 1913 and shipped by railroad to Winslow, Arizona. Although the permit was for only 80 head, a few additional animals were included, and 86 elk arrived in Winslow (see table, page 109). The elk (14 bulls, 4 adult cows, and 68 heifer yearlings) were unloaded from the rail cars and held in the stockyards. Then they were transported to a holding pen at Cabin Draw in the Chevelon District of the Sitgreaves National Forest in 12 wooden, horse-drawn wagons modified for the task. Olaus Murie (1951) reported in *The Elk of North America* that in 1937 a large bull elk was harvested south of Winslow bearing an ear tag from the 1913 release. If so, this animal would have been at least 25 years of age.



The frequent retelling of that famous first elk translocation obscures the fact that there were other, equally colorful, elk releases in Arizona. Yellowstone's elk continued to overpopulate their winter range, and the federal government maintained its offer to provide surplus animals to any state or responsible party that wanted them. The catch was

¹The description of *Cervus merriami* was based on two male specimens sent to the US National Museum by Dr. Edward Nelson and described by C. Hart Merriam, a notorious taxonomic "splitter." There is little reason to differentiate the native elk of Arizona and New Mexico from others of the same species in the Rocky Mountains.



Loading elk in cars at Gardiner, Montana in 1913 to be shipped to other states. (Arizona Historical Society/Tucson, Will C. Barnes Collection, #13-5999, PC10, Box 7, Folder 235)



Elk in crates from Yellowstone National Park being unloaded onto wagons at Winslow, Arizona in 1913 before being pulled by horse to their release site in Cabin Draw. These were the first of several loads of Yellowstone elk that became the Arizona elk we enjoy today. (AGFD files)

that the recipients had to provide a suitable release site and pay for the elk's transportation. This could be a problem, as the elk had to be captured and shipped from the winter range by rail car and thus were only available when most states' "elk country" was inaccessible.

One of the provisions prescribed in the Arizona 1912 game code was to restock Arizona's depleted wildlife populations. Free elk were especially attractive, even though stockmen worried about elk competing with livestock for forage, and some sportsmen believed elk would displace the state's struggling populations of deer and antelope. It was therefore not until 1918 that George Willard, who had been appointed to replace Rogers as State Game Warden by Governor Hunt, made arrangements to obtain a second shipment of elk.

The original plan called for transporting 56 elk from Gardiner, Montana, to Clifton, Arizona. Then Deputy Warden Frank Maxwell would herd them to the Blue Range Game Preserve. However, the Montana man assigned to accompany the elk on their train ride pointed out the inadvisability of trying to drive wild elk from Clifton to the Blue, warning that the animals would likely scatter and go into New Mexico.

Realizing the need for a change in plans, Willard wrote Maxwell on March 29, 1918, that his administration “would not survive” a transplant of elk to New Mexico. He then informed his deputy that, since the elk were intended for Maxwell’s home district around Nutrioso, north of the Blue Range, and because he was the only man experienced enough to drive them, he was to trail the elk from just east of Globe to the White Mountains—a distance of more than 100 miles as the crow flies. To soften the blow of such an arduous assignment, Willard told Maxwell this was to be his only responsibility throughout the summer, and his allowance for horse hire would be increased to \$1.50 per day.

Not all of the elk were destined for the White Mountains. One railroad car of 22 elk was unloaded at Pima (west of Safford), where it was hoped the animals would make their way into the Graham (Pinaleño) Mountains. Whether or not they did is unknown, but less than 10 years later State Game Warden Dwight Pettis reported that none of these elk remained.

The remainder of the shipment, some 34 head, was sent on to Cutter, a railroad siding east of Globe near the present site of the Apache Gold Casino. What happened at Cutter is now mostly legend, but it appears the elk either broke loose or were turned loose. Once released, the animals were determined to go their own way. Instead of being driven north by Maxwell across the Natanes Rim toward the Blue Range, most of the elk headed south toward the Mescal Mountains in the southeast corner of the San Carlos Indian Reservation.

The state’s unintended gift to the San Carlos Apaches proved surprisingly persistent. Although a few ponderosa pines are present in the Mescals, most of the “elk habitat” in this range is chaparral brush and grassland. Ten years later, in 1927, the Cutter herd was estimated to number only 50 or less. But then, as livestock waters were developed, elk numbers gradually rose until the population was conservatively estimated to number between 150 and 300. Livestock operators on the reservation thought any elk were too many, and petitioned the Arizona Game and Fish Commission to authorize an any-elk hunt in the fall of 1950. The commission complied and issued 150 permits that, combined with another any-elk hunt of 250 permits the following year, resulted in 258 elk being removed by hunters.

The Cutter herd, as it was popularly called, was further reduced by a series of hunts by tribal members that continued until 1965, after which time the elk were commonly shot on sight. Pat O’Brien, a wildlife manager in Globe who carefully researched the history of the Cutter herd, reported in a 1979 article in *Arizona Wildlife Views* magazine that the elk were then reduced to four small herds totaling about 52 individuals in an area covering 150 square miles. Lacking protected status, the herd’s numbers continued to decline. With the possible exception of a few animals holding out in the foothills of the Pinal Mountains, such Mescal Mountains place names as Elk Tank, Elk Spring, and Elk Dam are now only of historic interest.



Transporting Yellowstone National Park elk from the rail siding at Holbrook, Arizona, to the Campbell Blue Creek was a major feat, owing to two feet of fresh snow. The men had to break trail with cars and on foot to make it through the pass two to three miles south of Alpine, Arizona. (AGFD files)

In an attempt to prevent future fiascos, Arizona entered into an agreement in 1919 with the US Biological Survey and US Forest Service stating that no further elk introductions would be made without the consent of all three parties. A series of cooperative elk surveys were also begun that year to determine the extent of Arizona's elk population on the Mogollon Rim and the validity of depredation complaints in and around the Sitgreaves National Forest. Federal biologist Edward Goldman and State Game Warden Joe Prochaska concluded that the state harbored between 300 and 500 head—maybe more—and recommended a limited hunt to scatter the elk, which were then largely confined to the western portions of the Sitgreaves National Forest; the Coconino National Forest east of Blue Ridge Road; and the Tonto National Forest north of Tonto Basin. Wet weather, a lack of manpower, and a change of administration, all conspired to forestall a hunt.

Eight years later, in 1927, an *Arizona Wild Life* article by Apache National Forest Supervisor Kenner Kartchner reported that Arizona's elk numbers had increased to about 800, but that their distribution had changed little. Thus, when State Game Warden Pettis addressed the White Mountains Sportsmen's Association in Springerville that year, and asked the club's members what they thought about an introduction of 60 elk to the Blue Range Refuge, the response was instant approval. The Game and Fish Department would pay the \$800 capture and shipping charges, and the elk would be sent by rail to Holbrook, where they would be loaded in trucks chartered to take them to the Blue. Thanks to the diplomatic skills of Pettis and Kartchner, the Blue's cattlemen agreed to the transplant. The White Mountains Sportsmen would foot most of the \$250 hauling cost, while the Apache and Greenlee county boards of supervisors each contributed five dollars. The sportsmen would also build the crates and arrange for the trucks.

Although this introduction was more carefully considered than the ones in 1918, there were still problems. For one, the sportsmen thought only yearling elk would be shipped. Accordingly, a holding pasture of alfalfa was leased at Springerville to hold 30 yearlings until spring. These plans had to be dropped when Pettis, who had supervised the shipment from Yellowstone and accompanied the elk, showed up at Holbrook with mostly adult animals. The crates had to be rebuilt, an additional cost funded by the Holbrook Gun Club, and a chore personally undertaken by Pettis and two of his deputies, W. W. Freeman and W. O. Hamblin.

Finally, amid much grumbling from the drivers, 27 elk (all that could be loaded) were trucked from Holbrook to Springerville on February 10, 1927. In addition to a large six-wheeled vehicle, the convoy consisted of two smaller trucks holding six elk each. The remaining elk, some 30 head, were sent on in a rail car to be released near Williams.

The trucks arrived in Springerville about 10 p.m. to considerable fanfare and comment. The weather being freezing and the road treacherous, the men took rooms for the night to ensure a fresh start at 6:30 in the morning. Three elk—a cow, a yearling bull, and a heifer—died during the night from being too crowded, but the rest of the animals survived just fine. Although frozen, the road had been judged passable for at least a mile past Alpine. Excellent time was made until the convoy reached a hill south of Alpine on the Coronado Trail. Here, the trucks encountered two feet of snow, requiring the

men to break a trail with their cars and on foot. When a truck slid off the road, a horse team pulled the errant vehicle back on the track. Finally, at 4 p.m., the caravan reached Campbell Blue Creek, where the remaining 22 elk in good condition (16 cows, 2 heifers, 3 yearling bulls, and 1 bull that was two or three years old) were released directly into the wild. Nearly every animal had to be dragged out of the truck with ropes. Given a ton of baled meadow hay and a salt block, the elk were then left in the care of Deputy Warden Hamblin, who would watch over them until spring.

The second carload of elk, intended for Williams, was sent on to Kingman due to the opposition of local stockmen. The elk arrived in Kingman on February 11, and, after being fed and watered, were released in the foothills of the Hualapai Mountains on Admission Day 1927. As with the elk in the Campbell Blue, these animals had to be dragged out of the railroad car, whence they were harried up a ridge to the Hualapai Mountains by horsemen.

When ranchers succeeded in sending the railroad car of elk on to Kingman, Arizona Game Protective Association officers Tom McCullough and Gordon Evans redoubled their determination to get elk reintroduced to the Flagstaff-Williams area. A former Forest Service employee, McCullough was a deft politician who knew the ins and outs of rural politics. With Pettis's assistance, the two men not only obtained the Forest Service's and Biological Survey's agreement to the release, they also convinced the Arizona Cattle-growers Association to go along with an introduction of 60 elk.

Of 63 elk shipped, 55 survived to be unloaded just north of Williams in early 1928. This time the release went smoothly. The railroad to the Grand Canyon passed through reasonable elk habitat, forgoing the need for unloading the elk into crates and transporting them by truck or wagons to a remote holding area. Nor was there a need to drive the animals by horseback. By all accounts everything went well, and the elk drifted southward and westward onto the Coconino-Yavapai Game Preserve. As the herd's numbers increased, so did its distribution, and the elk presently found north, west, and south of Flagstaff probably originated from this transplant. For years afterward, McCullough and Evans regarded this release as one of their and the Arizona Game Protective Association's greatest successes.

The final release was a shipment of 40 elk (four of which died en route) to the Hualapai Reservation in 1963—an introduction first proposed in the early 1930s. A translocation of elk to the Chiricahua Mountains, a popular recommendation when proposed by Governor Hunt and State Game Warden Pettis in the late 1920s, was eventually nixed by succeeding administrations and Coronado National Forest Supervisor Fred Winn due to the lack of wet meadows in that mountain range.

Except for the translocation of 29 elk from Arizona to Kentucky in 2000, these are the only elk translocations into or out of the state in the historical record. Because of the interest and research this topic has received, it is unlikely that any translocations went unrecorded.

These relatively small releases succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. There were only 281 Yellowstone elk known to be released in Arizona between 1913 and 1963, and this source stock has multiplied to well over 24,000 animals. The only introduction to

Historical Arizona Elk Translocations, 1913 to the Present

Source: AGFD and Arizona Game Protective Association

Capture Date	Capture Site	Release Site	Number Captured	Number Mortalities ^a	Number Released ^a	Release Sex ^a
2/1913	Yellowstone National Park (Gardiner, Montana)	Cabin Draw, Chevelon Creek, Sitgreaves NF (GMU 4B)	86	4	82	14M:4F:64yrlg
1918	Yellowstone National Park	Graham Mountains ^b (GMU 31); El Capitan Mountain, south of Cutter, San Carlos I.R. (GMU 26)	60	4	56 (22) (34)	
2/12/27	Yellowstone National Park	Campbell Blue, south of Alpine (GMU 27); Hualapai Mountains, southeast of Kingman (GMU 16A)	57	5 (5)	52 (22) (30)	(4M:18F)
1928	Yellowstone National Park	Bill Williams Mountain (GMU 8)	63	8	55	
12/22/63	Yellowstone National Park (Slough Creek, Wyoming)	Park Tank, Peach Springs Hualapai I.R. (GMU 14)	40	4F	36	12M:24F

^aParentheses () subdivide the total number of elk released into the number released at each specific site in the "release sites" column.

^bGraham Mountain release unsuccessful.

Note: NF=National Forest; GMU=Game management unit; M=Male; F=Female; yrlg=yearling; I.R.=Indian Reservation

have failed was the attempt to release elk in the Graham Mountains favored by Governor Hunt and State Game Warden Willard in 1918. Today, elk inhabit nearly every forested area in northern Arizona, including the small ponderosa pine forest atop Dean Peak in the Hualapai Mountains. Movements of elk into southeastern Arizona have resulted in a small herd being established north of Willcox. Given the events of 1918, it is ironic that this herd spends some time each year in the Graham Mountains.

As early as 1929, Arizona's elk were thought to have increased to more than 3,000 and a hunt to harvest 1,000 animals was recommended—a hunt that was finally realized in 1935, when 266 bull permits were authorized and 145 elk harvested. Elk have been hunted nearly every year since, with the exception of a few years during World War II. Since then, the state's elk herd has grown substantially, until more than 11,000 elk were harvested in the fall of 1994—80 years after the first release. Today, several game management units annually produce more harvested elk than were originally brought into the state.

Not only do we have quantity, we have quality as well. Arizona is known for its ability to produce trophy bulls. In the latest edition of Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game*, 14 of the 53 largest elk (26%) ever harvested came from Arizona. What accounts for our large-antlered elk in Arizona? Some sportsmen have speculated that our trophies represent an influence of Merriam's elk that somehow survived to the first release in 1913 and then interbred with Yellowstone elk. This genetic influence, they say, is the reason for the large antlers that crown Arizona's bull elk.

Recently, a genetic analysis was conducted to compare today's Arizona elk to see if there was any hint of genetic variations that does not occur in Yellowstone elk. If some

Arizona elk have a very different genetic signature that did not come from Yellowstone, this could be interpreted as evidence that Merriam's elk contributed to the building of Arizona's elk herds. Seven different genetic variants (haplotypes) were found in Arizona's elk, but all were commonly found in Yellowstone elk. The analysis showed that all the Arizona haplotypes are exactly what one would expect from a sample of Yellowstone elk. In other words, there is no evidence to suggest that elk from Arizona are anything but a subsample of elk from Yellowstone. ❁