

## More elk means smiling hunters

By Larry Hyslop



A group of bull elk spotted during a winter NDOW flight

Elko County is quickly becoming known as a Mecca for elk hunters. Elk populations are increasing across the county, and more elk hunt tags are being given out.

Ken Gray is the Regional Game Supervisor for the Nevada Department of Wildlife's Elko office. As one example of this increase, he compared this year's numbers with those of 2008. At that time, the elk population was estimated at 4,000 animals in Elko County. Nine different rifle, antlerless (cow) seasons were held, awarding 295 tags. The 2013 elk population estimate is 9,900 animals. Thirty-one rifle, antlerless seasons will be conducted, and NDOW is recommending 2,939 tags be given out for these hunts.

I asked Ken what part of the county now have elk and his answer was all parts. When elk were first re-introduced into Elko County, elk plans were developed having population maximum numbers for different areas. But, the elk population is over these maximums already, so more tags are being awarded in an effort to reduce the elk population.

The reason for the increase in elk numbers is their calf survivability these last few years. This is partly because large fires in 2005-07 that cleared sagebrush and now those burned areas contain good elk forage, grass and forbs (flowering plants). In contrast, mule deer live more on shrubs so recent fires have a negative impact on them.

The Ruby Mountains have been declared an elk-free area. Elk have definitely moved into these mountains and depredation hunts strive to keep the elk numbers low. Hunters have had good success hunting bulls in the Rubies and very few instances of elk depredation on private land have been declared by ranches surrounding the mountains.

In other areas, ranchers receive incentive tags based on elk use of their private rangelands. Fifty-nine incentive tags were given out last year, which the ranchers can then sell. Using a fair guess of a market price for these tags of \$8,000-10,000, Elko County ranchers may be bringing in around \$500,000 from the presence of elk.

For rifle hunts, 879 bull tags will be recommended for this fall, along with the 2,939 antlerless tags. For resident, antlered tags, approximately 13 people will apply for each tag awarded. But it used to be

close to 30-1, when elk and elk tags were fewer in number. The person lucky enough to draw an elk tag must wait 5 years before applying again. If they harvest an elk, the wait is 10 years.

Non-residents face 38-1 odds on drawing an elk tag. But there is no shortage of applicants since 65% of tag holders are successful and of those, 83% get at least 6-point bulls. Elko County is becoming well known for great elk hunting.

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