

Introducing Elk

Sometimes humans bring wildlife species into Alaska that once thrived here or introduce to an area a new species that people want to hunt. This should be done after careful study so we do not create problems or conflicts with other plants and animals. This is called “introducing” or “reintroducing” a species. Elk were brought to Alaska so people could hunt them and are considered an introduced species, although fossilized bones indicate elk once lived in Interior Alaska many thousands of years ago. Two types of elk can be found in Alaska today: Roosevelt elk and Rocky Mountain elk.

Elk, which are a member of the deer family, were first released into the wild on Afognak Island near Kodiak Island in 1929 and then to Etolin Island near Petersburg in Southeast Alaska in 1987. Both of these new Alaska populations began with a small number of elk brought in from Washington and Oregon. The herds eventually grew in size. Today, elk are provide an important source of meat for people.

Elk now live on Afognak and Raspberry Islands and number about 900 elk in eight herds. They can swim in the ocean to Kodiak Island but have never established a herd there. Southeast elk now live mainly on Etolin Island and nearby Zarembo Island, and number about 400.

Elk share many similarities with moose, deer and caribou. They are usually smaller than moose and larger than deer or caribou. Bulls (the males) stand about five feet tall at the shoulder; cows (the females) are about six inches shorter. The legs and neck of elk are usually darker in color than their body. Elk also have a distinctive light beige or yellow patch on their rump.



How can you tell elk scat from deer or moose scat? It's smaller than moose poop but bigger and longer than deer.



Fun Elk Facts



Big to Little: Newborn elk calves are born in late May and early June and start out weighing about 35 pounds. Adult bull elk on Afognak Island can weigh up to 1,300 pounds!



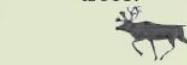
Prize-Winning Teeth: An elk's top two canine teeth are called ivories. Though smaller than they used to be, scientists believe they are the remains of saber-like tusks that elk used long ago for fighting.



A New Hunt: A hundred or so years ago, there were only six land mammals on islands of the Kodiak Archipelago: tundra vole, short-tailed weasel, little brown bat, river otter, red fox and brown bear. Because people wanted animals to hunt for meat, they introduced Sitka black-tailed deer and elk.



Big Eaters: Elk need lots of food to survive! From late spring through fall, elk are grazers, meaning they feed on grass and other leafy vegetation. In fall, they become browsers and eat sprouts and the branches of shrubs and trees.



The red area to the left on this map represents Afognak and Raspberry Islands. The red area on the right is Etolin Island near Juneau.



Elk herds tend to be small and consist mostly of cows, calves, yearlings and, more rarely, mature bulls. The herd in this photo to the left is traveling through a logged area on Afognak Island. Logging has affected elk habitat but through proper management, elk on Afognak Island have continued to thrive.

Look it Up! Look on the ADF&G website, www.adfg.alaska.gov, in the species section to learn more about “nonnative” species in Alaska. Write down other introduced species besides elk below: