WYOMING IS NOT IN DENIAL AT ALL

From the perspective of Tory and Meredith Taylor, Wyoming is in a state of denial concerning predation of our elk herds. I think that it is time that we set the record straight and the Clark's Fork herd mentioned in the "Perspective" that appeared in the Casper Star-Tribune on July 11, 2009 is a prime example of what is happening to elk populations in the Greater Yellowstone area and more specifically to those elk that summer in Yellowstone National Park and winter outside of the park.

The Clark's Fork Herd Unit encompasses hunt areas 50-54, 65, and 121 and includes two elk sub-populations: a migratory herd as described above and a resident herd that became established in the Heart Mountain area in the mid 1990's. The migratory herd winters primarily in the Crandall and Sunlight areas west of WY 120 while the resident herd permanently occupies an area of private and BLM lands between the forest boundary and Heart Mountain on both sides of WY 120.

The herd objective for the Clarks' Fork Herd Unit is 3,000 elk and the overall elk population within the herd unit is well above objective; however, one needs to separate the data for each sub-population (herd) to understand what is happening. In looking at the population data for the two herds, recruitment levels in the migratory herd peaked ca 1994 with approximately 43 calves per 100 cows and has basically been in decline since wolf reintroduction, with recruitment declining to 9 calves/100 cows in 2008. Unit wide, recruitment is hovering around 23 calves/100 cows - which is reflective of the strong recruitment (~ 32 calves/100 cows in 2007) in the resident herd, which is not subject to intensive wolf predation.

Clearly, wolves are not 100% responsible for the precipitous decline in elk numbers in the migratory herds in the Greater Yellowstone area. Based on extant research, black and grizzly bears are responsible for 69% of elk calf mortality within 30 days of birth, with wolves accounting for 12% of calf mortality during this same period. The difference is that bear predation declines significantly after 30 days, yet wolf predation continues year round, with wolves targeting elk of all ages - particularly mature bulls following the rut.

The other variable in elk recruitment involves pregnancy rates, with the migratory elk experiencing decreased pregnancy rates compared to the resident elk. Pregnancy rates for cows two plus years of age in the migratory herd averages 59 - 73 %, while the cows in the resident herd exhibit pregnancy rates averaging 84 - 94%. Yearling cow pregnancy rates in the migratory herd is 0% as compared to 50% in the resident herd. These differences in pregnancy rates may be due to a combination of poor nutrition (displacement from preferred habitats), abortion following conception, or the inability to breed as a result of continuous wolf harassment during the rut. Wolf attacks on domestic livestock in Montana have been shown to result in dry cows, abortion in heifers, significant weight loss (particularly in calves), and displacement of animals from preferred grazing habitat. These observations would be consistent with the reproductive decline in the migratory elk herd. Considering that the migratory elk in the Clark's Fork Herd Unit must contend with four separate wolf packs between their summer and winter ranges, these animals are subjected to continuous wolf harassment.

So, while wolves may not be entirely responsible for the decline of the migratory elk herd, the cumulative impact of increased bear predation following the 1988 fires combined with the reintroduction of wolves into the park in 1995 has created a scenario of increased predation that has fostered a precipitous decline in recruitment within the migratory elk population. As the elk population ages and recruitment declines, a point will be reached where the herd is no longer

sustainable and the population will crash - unless the predator populations (primarily wolves) outside of the park are controlled. Had wolves not been reintroduced into the park, predation levels on the migratory elk would not have resulted in a significant reduction in recruitment rates - thereby allowing for a continued and sustainable harvest of surplus elk by both resident and non-resident hunters.

Ultimately, we are losing our elk hunting opportunities to wolf predation - particularly in the wilderness areas surrounding Yellowstone National Park. Late season Any Elk quotas in Hunt Areas 51 and 52 have been systematically cut from 150 licenses to 20 licenses and the late season will be eliminated altogether in 2010. This hunt used to be one of the premier hunts for trophy bull elk in Wyoming, but will be eliminated due to low recruitment rates in the herd unit. This loss of hunting opportunity translates into a direct economic impact upon Wyoming, the communities and outfitters affected by the reduction in elk permits. More importantly, these economic losses will never be replaced by revenues generated from eco-tourism.

Note: If you would like to view the article by Tory and Meredith Taylor that appeared in the Opinions section of the CS-T on Saturday, July 11 titled "Wyoming Continues It's State of Denial" go to www.trib.com/articles/2009/07/11/editorial/forum and click on the title of the article. The email forum following the article contains some interesting back and forth on the issue as does the forum following the rebuttal by Robert M. Anderson printed on July 18, 2009.