

**ELK** in Arkansas



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Northwest Arkansas is quickly becoming known for the Buffalo National River and the growing elk population. Photo by Michael Dougherty.



**W**e know them as elk. American Indians called them “Wapiti,” which means “white rump” in Shawnee. They are one of the largest members of the deer family, four times the size of Arkansas’s white-tailed deer.

Mature males, called bulls, normally weigh 600 to 800 pounds in Arkansas and stand 4½ to 5 feet tall at the shoulder. Adult females, called cows, weigh 400 to 600 pounds.

Elk have distinct summer and winter coats. They take on a copper look in summer with deep reddish-brown fur. In winter, the head, neck and legs are dark brown with the sides and back much lighter. Both sexes have a distinct yellowish rump patch and heavy dark manes extending to the chest.

Elk can live for many years. The oldest bull harvested in Arkansas was 15 years old, and the oldest cow was 24 years old. Most cows are younger than 10; bulls rarely get older than 6.



Photo top: Bull elk are usually much larger than cow elk. Photo by Jason Crader.

Photo inset: During summer, an elk’s coat takes on a deep reddish-brown color. Photo by Ed Porter.





**Eastern elk once roamed most of the state.** Settlement and exploitation by early immigrants reduced the population, and no reliable records exist of Arkansas elk later than the 1840s.

The first elk restoration attempt in Arkansas was in 1933 when the U.S. Forest Service stocked 11 elk in Franklin County. The herd increased to an estimated 200 animals by the mid-1950s, but then disappeared. Illegal hunting, natural mortality and loss of suitable habitat possibly exterminated the herd.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission began a second restoration effort between 1981 and 1985. The AGFC, in cooperation with citizens of Newton County, stocked 112 elk near the Buffalo National River. This herd has increased to an estimated 500 animals.

Arkansas's elk range consists of 383,809 acres in the northwestern part of the state. Most elk are in Newton and Searcy counties with a few found in Boone, Carroll and Madison counties. About 28 percent of Arkansas's elk range is on public land.

About 500 elk call Arkansas home.  
Photo by Don Nelms.



### ELK FUN FACT

The AGFC stocked **112** elk near the Buffalo National River. This herd has increased to an estimated **500** animals.



Nursery groups of cows with calves are easily seen throughout summer. Photo by Michael Dougherty.



### **Elk reproduction is slow compared to white-tailed deer.**

Most cows are almost 3 years old before they give birth. Calves take about 8½ months to develop, and single calves are usually produced. Twins are very rare.

Newborn calves are born in late May and early June. They are covered with white spots and normally weigh 25 to 40 pounds. Cows keep their calves hidden for several days and only visit them to nurse 4 to 6 times a day. After 3 to 4 weeks, cows with calves form nursery groups that stay together throughout summer.

Mature bulls typically spend summer in small groups and, with the exception of the breeding season, are very social. After the breeding season, mature bulls regroup into feeding and traveling groups for winter. Cows, calves and some young bulls normally form large groups that may remain loosely associated throughout winter. Most winter groups in Arkansas include less than 25 elk, but some with as many as 70 elk have been seen.



### **ELK FUN FACT**

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**Each year bulls grow antlers for dominance and combat.** New antler growth starts immediately after old antlers fall off in February and March. During spring and summer the antlers are soft and pliable with a hairy covering called “velvet.” Antlers harden in late summer, and bulls rub shrubs to polish them. Antlers of mature bulls may be as heavy as 40 pounds.

During breeding season in September and October, bulls separate and establish breeding rights. Prime bulls attract and protect groups of cows called “harems.” They make a low, loud, whistling sound called “bugling” to advertise their presence and fitness to cows and to scare off other bulls. Smaller males constantly challenge dominant bulls for their cows, which leads to many stand-offs and an occasional sparring match, with the harem going to the winner.

Bulls compete during fall to determine breeding rights. Photo by Michael Dougherty.



Velvet covers the antlers of bulls as they grow throughout spring and summer. Photo by Don Nelms.





**Elk are primarily grazers, eating a wide variety of grasses year-round.**

They also eat lush, green plants, shrubs and seedling leaves, as well as the woody stems of plants and acorns.

Open fields with grasses and broad-leaved plants are attractive feeding areas, and often attract elk near dawn and dusk.



Inset above: Although primarily grazers, elk feed on the lush green leaves of small shrubs and trees during summer. Photo by Ed Porter.

Food plots offer excellent nutrition for elk throughout the year. Photo by Trey Reid.

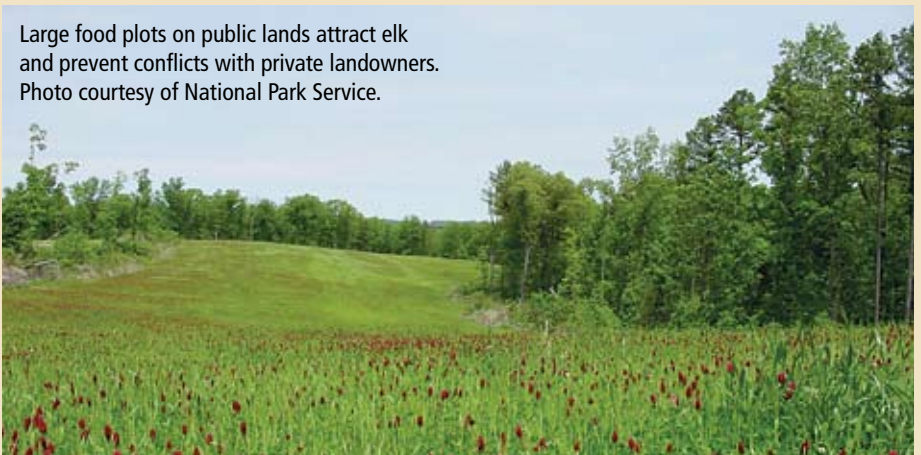
**Arkansas's elk management plan was developed in 2001 and guides biologists in maintaining the herd.** The program includes habitat management, research and monitoring, population management and public education. Support for elk management is provided by several cooperators, including the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, National Wild Turkey Federation, USDA Forest Service, the Arkansas Game and Fish Foundation and private citizens who donate money to the program.



Prescribed fire clears the ground of leaves and promotes lush green vegetation for wildlife. Photo by Keith Stephens.

Habitat management efforts are designed to hold elk on public land, minimizing conflict on private lands. A new private lands elk management program has been implemented by the AGFC to address habitat management and elk/human conflicts within the elk range. Habitat improvements for public lands include creating wildlife openings, planting food plots with winter wheat, clover and orchard grass, establishing native warm-season grasses, prescribed burning, mowing, reclaiming old fields, timber management and creating water holes.

Large food plots on public lands attract elk and prevent conflicts with private landowners. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.





Biologists use helicopters to count elk and to capture animals for research projects. Photo by Mike Cartwright.



Above left: Radio collars enable scientists to find elk throughout the year and study their movements.



Above right: Researchers collect data from a captured elk before fitting it with a radio collar and releasing. Both photos courtesy of Don White.

**With advances in technology, researchers are studying Arkansas's elk herd.** Radio collars are playing an important role in an ongoing study of bull elk mortality, survival and habitat use through the seasons. Another study, initiated in 2007, is focused on which specific foods Arkansas elk use throughout the year. Annual helicopter surveys maintain information on bull/cow and calf/cow ratios, as well as general population trends. Researchers also maintain records on non-hunting elk losses and nuisance elk problems.

## Arkansas's first elk hunting season was in 1998.

Hunting is by permit only, with free permits drawn at the Buffalo River Elk Festival in Jasper each June. The hunt controls the elk population, reduces nuisance complaints, directs the expansion of elk into suitable areas, provides recreational opportunity and gives managers information about the health of the herd.

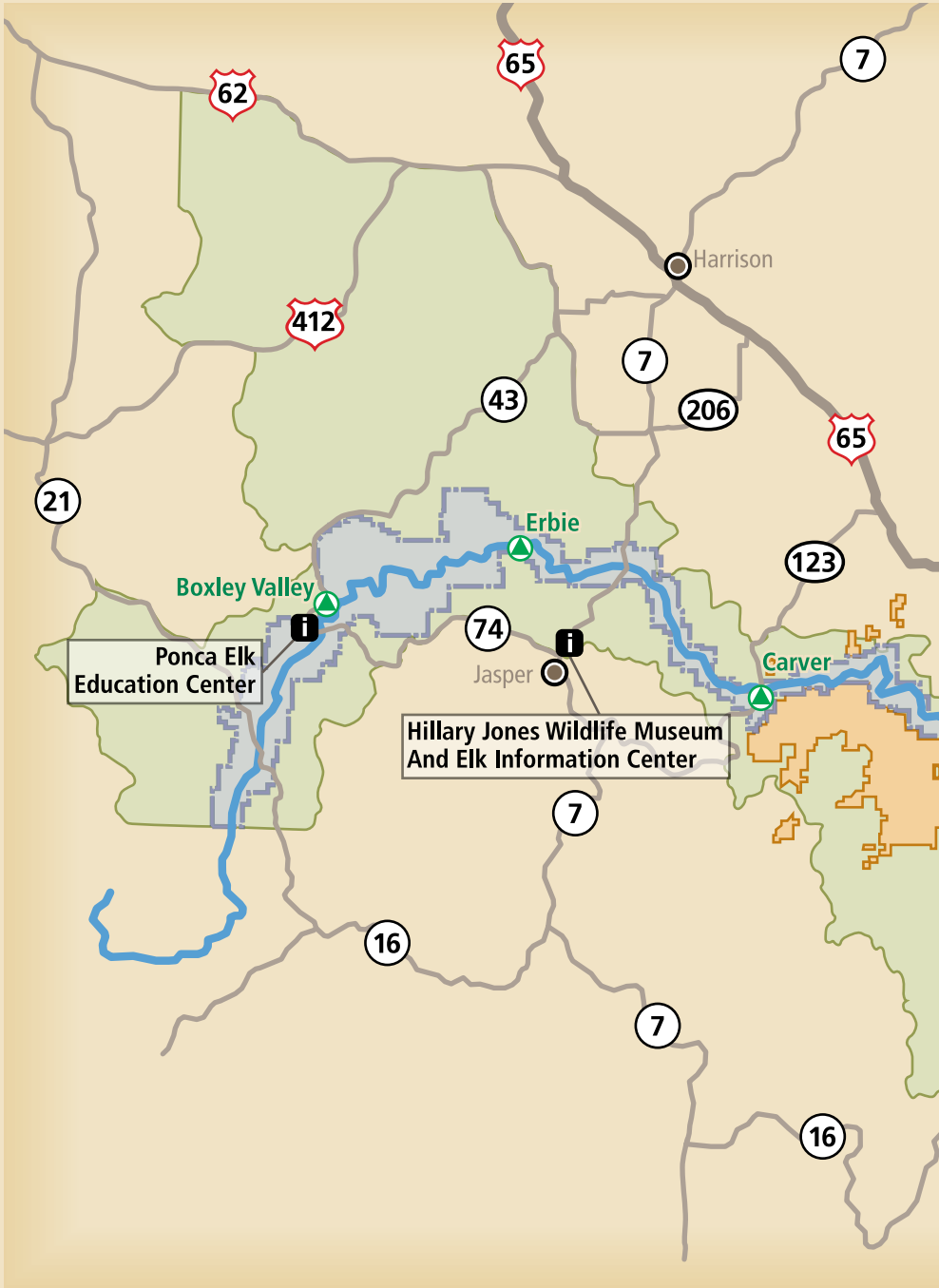


Hunts for Arkansas elk occur in September and December, with free permits drawn in a June lottery. Two permits are reserved for youth hunters. Photo by A.J. Riggs.

Data is collected from each elk killed during Arkansas's hunting season. This data guides biologists in their decisions for the herd. Photo by Jeff Williams.



The Ponca Elk Education Center at Ponca and the Hillary Jones Wildlife Museum and Elk Information Center at Jasper entertain visitors while educating them about elk in The Natural State. Visit [www.agfc.com](http://www.agfc.com) for more elk information.





## DIRECTIONS

### Ponca Elk Education Center

Ponca is on Arkansas Highway 43 in Newton County, a quarter-mile north of the Arkansas Highway 74 intersection.

### Hillary Jones Wildlife Museum and Elk Information Center

The center is on Scenic Highway 7, a half-mile north of Jasper.

### Boxley Valley Viewing Area

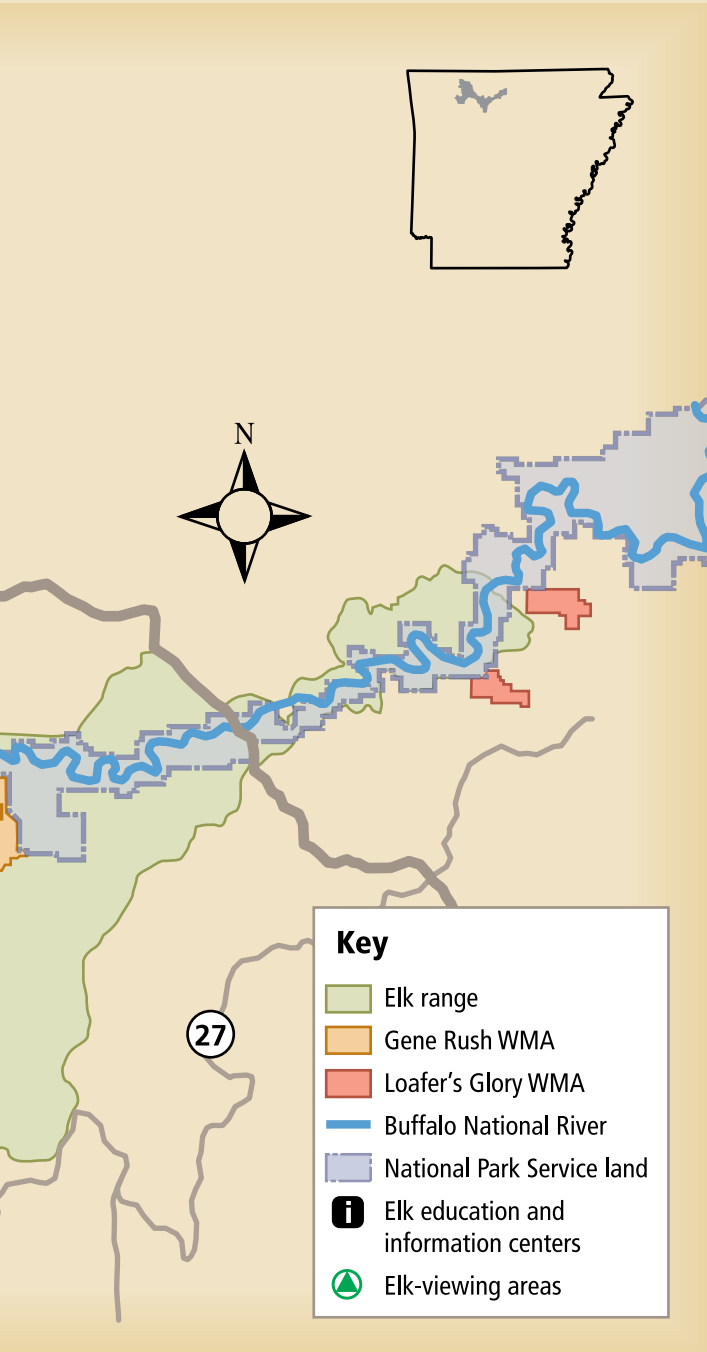
Highway 43 runs south through Boxley Valley from Ponca. The pastures to the side of Highway 43 are excellent viewing areas. Be sure to pull completely off the road when stopping to watch.

### Erbie Viewing Area

Go to the town of Jasper. Travel north from Jasper on Highway 7 about 3.3 miles. Turn left (west) on Erbie Campground Road. Travel west on Erbie Campground Road about 6.8 miles to the Erbie area.

### Carver Viewing Area

Go to the town of Western Grove on U.S. Highway 65. Travel south from Western Grove on Highway 123 about 11 miles to the Carver area on the Buffalo National River.





Keep a sharp eye out when traveling through elk country. There's no telling when one may cross the road to visit a field. Watch for elk crossing signs along highways. Photo by Michael Dougherty.

**Elk viewing has become one of the greatest pastimes for visitors to northwest Arkansas.** Elk gather in the mornings and evenings from September through March and often may be seen at Boxley Valley, Erbie, Carver and the Gene Rush Wildlife Management Area in Newton County.

Elk are large wild animals and can be dangerous and unpredictable, especially during calving and breeding seasons. Elk should always be appreciated, viewed and photographed from a safe distance. By keeping your distance, you won't spook the elk and everyone can enjoy watching them. While searching for elk, always respect the animals and private landowners' rights and privacy. Do not attempt to feed elk.

If you stop, park your vehicle off the road or highway. This is especially important in Boxley Valley, where traffic can become a problem.

  
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Keeping the Natural State natural.

[www.agfc.com](http://www.agfc.com)

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