



THE GREAT NEW HAMPSHIRE ELK HUNT OF 1941

INTRODUCED IN THE EARLY 1900s, ELK WERE TARGETED
IN A REMARKABLE TWO-DAY HUNT – THE ONLY ONE OF ITS
KIND IN NEW HAMPSHIRE HISTORY

BY
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Don Weed remembers the stories. His grandfather, Eldon Howard of Epsom, shot one of the last elk in New Hampshire. Weed, also of Epsom, has heard the great beast was stuffed and still exists somewhere in northern New Hampshire today, but he's never been able to track it down.

That his grandfather took part in New Hampshire's only public elk hunt, held in December 1941 – and that he was successful – is a fact. His photo was published in an official account by Fish and Game naturalist Helenette Silver in *A History of New Hampshire Game and Furbearers*. Howard looks out from the pages with satisfaction, posing next to the mighty bull elk he took that day.

Elk are not native to New Hampshire, according to Fish and Game Wildlife Supervisor Kent Gustafson, and, given their voracious feeding habits – they consume three times the browse a deer would eat – they don't have a future here.

“Elk compete with deer and moose and cause damage to crops, orchards and timber stands,” said Gustafson. “We don't have the land or forage base for elk. They are not solitary animals like moose, either. Elk congregate in large herds, making them susceptible to problems like brainworm. A bull may have a harem of 20 or more cows.”

Today, it's hard to imagine elk bugling over the New Hampshire hills. But back in 1941, what a time it was for 200 hunters who bagged 46 elk in the towns of Lempster, Washington, Goshen and Unity! Thirty-seven elk were shot on the first day, and nine on the

second. A total of 18 bulls and 28 cows were taken, according to Silver. The average weight of the cows was 259 pounds, and the bulls averaged 301 pounds.

A GIFT OF ELK

The origin of these elk is a story in itself. There were no elk in New Hampshire until 1903, according to Silver. That year, heirs of the private game preserve in Croydon called Blue Mountain Forest Park, or Corbin's Park, gave the state twelve elk – eight cows and four bulls. Released near Ragged Mountain by the Andover Fish and Game Club, the elk were popular at first. People enjoyed seeing them, and they got along fine. Elk numbers gradually grew, and complaints began mounting as they ventured into fields and orchards. As many as 40 elk were observed in a single herd in 1912.

Local farmers were irate. Silver writes, “George W. Stone, an Andover lawyer, presented a claim for damage to his orchard. This was refused (the law requiring payment for game damage not having been passed until 1915), and Stone ordered his hired man to shoot the elk. Five were killed in one morning and the meat peddled in a butcher's

Eliot G. Clemons Sr., a licensed guide and championship marksman, was one of 200 hunters who took part in New Hampshire's only public elk hunt, held two days in December of 1941. He got his bull elk out of the woods with the help of four men and a team of horses pulling a sledge.





This photo of Eldon Howard of Epsom and the magnificent bull elk he took during the 1941 hunt appears on page 217 of Helenette Silver's *A History of New Hampshire Game and Furbearers*. Silver documented the impact of the elk release in New Hampshire.

cart around the town. Stone advised other farmers to kill the elk, and offered to defend, free of charge, anyone prosecuted for so doing.”

More complaints came in. “Lloyd H. Stone killed a bull in his orchard in Webster in 1913, after having been advised by the [Fish and Game] Commission that he might shoot at the “deer” which was destroying his trees. The cut-up meat weighed 525 pounds, and Mr. Stone sold two of the teeth to a firm in South Dakota for \$5.00 each,” Silver wrote.

Eventually, most of the elk introduced in 1903 were shot, “and the few that remained moved over to Cardigan Mountain, to be picked off by poachers around Canaan,” wrote Silver. The antlers from one of these elk decorates the rooms of the Andover Fish and Game Club – a gift from Conservation Officer Ernest Melendy,

who got them from “an old-time hunter who, after years of guilty knowledge, finally broke down and produced them from his attic.”

MORE ELK RELEASED

Corbin Park gave the state of New Hampshire a second gift of elk in the spring of 1933, and, despite the problems with the elk introduced twenty years earlier, they were set free. According to Silver, “Two bulls and 10 cows were released on the Pillsbury Reservation, then a state game refuge, in the towns of Washington and Goshen. The elk herd increased, ranging over several surrounding towns. By 1941, according to local residents, there were about 200; but in the opinion of Conservation Officer Jesse Scott, who is in a better position to know the facts, there were not over 60.”

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As these elk trampled tender crops and devoured orchards, anxious residents urged their lawmakers to take action. “To forestall extensive damage to agricultural lands, the Legislature authorized the reduction of the herds by a maximum of 125 animals, to be taken during a 2-day open season,” Silver’s account reads.

Hunters were to be chosen by lottery, but only 293 applied, so all were given an opportunity to hunt. They bought a special \$5 hunting license in addition to their combination license. When the hunt took place on December 17 and 18, 1941, a total of 200 hunters showed up to take part.

Among them was Eliot G. Clemons Sr., who had lived in Farmington, N.H., and moved to New London. Clemons was a 40-year licensed guide and championship marksman who later would serve in the US Navy during World War II. He took his elk with a Model 86 Winchester, caliber 45/70. Four men and a team of horses with a sledge helped bring the animal out of the woods.

CLOSE SHAVES

About one hunter in four was successful during the 1941 hunt. “No accidents were reported although there were some close shaves,” according to Silver’s account.

In an article written more than a decade later (“Elk Down East,” October 18, 1954), *Sports Illustrated* reporter James B. Trefethen described the hunt as quite an affair. “Legal shooting time was set at sunrise on December 17, 1941,” wrote Trefethen. “Fish and Game Director Ralph G. Carpenter II had issued 293 special resident permits, pulled in 21 of his conservation officers to oversee the area and crossed his fingers. There was a good tracking snow and fine visibility as the eager hunters converged on the known and suspected haunts of the elk.”

Trefethen captured the frenzy of the two-day hunt, writing, “‘Long Tom’ Currier, a famous guide and hunter and...resident-manager of the Corbin Park preserve, drew first blood by trailing a

band of 20 elk to the top of a hill in Goshen and making a clean kill on a 276-pound cow. Tom, however, was not alone. Other hunters had located the range of this same band and about 30 of them were deployed along the opposite slope of the hill. As Tom ran to his kill, the surviving elk flushed from cover straight toward this line of skirmishers. There may have been more shooting at the charge of the Light Brigade, but Currier wouldn’t swear to it. He dived behind the carcass of his dead elk, which outweighed him by no more than a few pounds, and crouched low while bullets cracked over his head. Fourteen elk were killed in 10 minutes on that one hill.”

WHAT NEXT?

As the hunt came to a close on the second day, a total of 46 elk had been taken, according to Silver. Conservation Officer Scott, considered the most knowledgeable source by Fish and Game, estimated that just 13 elk remained.

With elk still on the landscape, local residents were fearful of continued agricultural damage and pushed for action. The Legislature looked into possible North Country locations for the remaining elk, but nothing came of it. These northern “sites which had been considered favorable were now marginal even for deer,” explained Silver. “It takes approximately three times as much food for one elk as it does for a deer, and the elk always win. Wherever the two species are in competition for limited food, the deer are pushed out.”


Descendants of the surviving elk continued to damage crops and trees as the herd increased, despite being picked off by farmers and poachers. By 1954, 32 elk still roamed New Hampshire’s landscape.

To address the elk problem, the Legislature authorized “the Director of Fish and Game to capture, release, move and relocate, or destroy such of these elk as were a menace to agriculture,” according to Silver.

In 1955, a House bill was introduced requiring the immediate reduction of the herd to a population that would no longer present a threat to agricultural interests.

“The Unity herd was eased over into an uninhabited mountain section of Sullivan County away from the valley farms, and on March 16, 1955, 14 cows and 2 bulls were shot by conservation officers in the town of Lempster,” wrote Silver. Four of the elk escaped, two of which were later shot by a farmer.

By Silver’s estimate, some 20-30 elk then remained in the state. Potential release sites in northern and western New Hampshire continued to be explored in July of 1955, but no action was ever taken. The lack of suitable elk habitat and the threat to the deer population was becoming better understood. Eventually, the remaining elk were thought to be shot by farmers or poachers.

In this quiet way, a colorful chapter in New Hampshire’s hunting and wildlife history came to a close. For a few remarkable years, elk roamed the New Hampshire hills. The memorable hunt that ended their reign lives on in many a family’s lore. 




Jane Vachon is the managing editor of the Journal. Special thanks to Rita Boisvert of the Fish and Game Wildlife Division for her assistance with this story.

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