



2019

E L K

Three seasons

By Joe Kosack

Already offering some of America's best elk hunting, with record-book bulls and quarter-ton cows being shot annually, Pennsylvania now has created a two-week elk archery season and a seven-day after-Christmas cow hunt.

Things just keep getting better.

The new format sandwiches the immensely popular general elk hunt – to be held this year from Nov. 4 to 9 – between the archery season – Sept. 14 to 28 – and late cow season – Jan. 4 to 11.

The archery season provides the rare opportunity to hunt among bugling bulls during the peak of Pennsylvania's rut, Game Commission elk biologist Jeremy

Banfield said.

“Those two weeks surely will be some of the most exciting days to be afield with a bow in Penn's Woods,” Banfield said.

But the cow hunt holds the potential for magic, as well, he said.

“Think about tracking elk in the fresh snow of a January hunt,” Banfield said. “It's an elk hunt that surely will generate more excitement every step of the way.”

These new hunts both have low numbers of tags available, and hunters will be spread out across the elk range. No hunter will have bonus points in the



Jacob Dingel

ns share action

drawings for archery or after-Christmas season elk licenses because the hunts are in their inaugural year.

In all, Pennsylvania is offering 142 elk licenses (32 antlered) over the three seasons. Five antlered and 10 antlerless tags are available for the archery elk season; 27 antlered and 71 antlerless tags are available for the general elk season and 29 tags are available for the late antlerless season.

The cost to enter the drawing for each season is \$11.90; it costs \$35.70 to enter all three drawings. Season-specific bonus points will be awarded for each year a hunter enters a drawing.

“This is an unprecedented chance for hunters across Pennsylvania – even across the United States – to get into some of the best elk hunting found in North America,” noted Game Commission Executive Director Bryan Burhans. “It’s every hunter’s chance to stalk one of the continent’s most-coveted game animals in the some of the wildest, most-remote country remaining in Penn’s Woods.”

SEASON IN REVIEW

Pennsylvania’s credentials for world-class black bear and whitetail hunting are well known. But in recent years, the state also has become a destination for elk. For many, it’s a destination much closer than the Rocky Mountains, and it’s hard to ignore impressive trophies are being taken.

“Large bulls are present in pretty much every hunt zone, but you need to walk to reach these animals,” Banfield pointed out. “Only on rare occasions are they close to public roads.”

These big boys have been down that road before, Banfield explained. There’s something to be said for those big bulls that suddenly disappear during the hunting season.

But the bottom line, Banfield noted, is the limited number of hunters, and the limited time they have to hunt big bulls.

“Many hunters don’t have the time to find some of these monsters,” Banfield said. “Add to that a short season and limited hunting pressure and it isn’t difficult to see how some of these big bulls shake their pursuit.”

The elk hunt drawing has attracted more than 30,000 applicants annually in recent years, generating more than \$325,000 for elk conservation. The new seasons and additional licenses are expected to grow that return, providing for expanded elk research and habitat management. That’s good news for Pennsylvania’s elk and elk hunters.

Pennsylvania elk hunters routinely enjoy good success.

In 2018, 99 of 125 elk hunters filled their tags. All but one of 26 bull tags were filled. But there’s room for improvement. While Banfield was pleased to see the overall harvest reach nearly 100 elk, some Elk Hunt Zones (EHZ) didn’t reach their harvest objectives.

“Typically, we see success and some failure in every hunt, but this past year, we had several zones limit out and then others that struggled,” Banfield explained. “I would have liked a few more elk removed in EHZs 10 and 5, but those were areas where hunters seemed to have a harder time.”

Poor weather on three of the elk season’s six days might have contributed to the lower harvest, but Banfield noted most hunters recognize the rarity of having an elk tag and hunt hard no matter the weather.

In that inclement weather on the 2018 opening day, 39 elk – nine bulls – were taken. For comparison, 69 elk – 12 bulls – were taken on the 2017 opener. The



Ross Hunsinger, of Harleysville, right in photo, in 2018 brought home the new state record typical elk, a 388-1/8-inch 8-by-7 harvested in Benezette Township, Elk County.

Elk County Outfitters

2017 season finished with 104 out of 117 hunters taking elk.

Thirteen bulls weighing 700 pounds or more were taken last fall. It compares with 10 in 2017. The heaviest bull was estimated at 894 pounds. Sporting a 7-by-8 point rack, that bull was taken at 11:34 a.m. on the last day of the season in Gibson Township, Cameron County, by Richard L. Reicherter I, of Wynnewood, Pa. Reicherter was guided and took the bull with a Remington Model 700.

Another bull topping out at 806 pounds with a 10-by-7 rack was taken at 7 a.m. on the third day of the season by Mark D. Copp, of Wellsboro, in Goshen Township, Clearfield County. Copp was guided and took the bull with a Ruger American .270 Win.

But it was Ross Hunsinger, of

Mark Copp, of Wellsboro, right in photo, stands behind the impressive 10-by-7 rack of the 800-plus-pound bull he harvested in Clearfield County in 2018. Also pictured are wife Lori and guide Jason Rankin.



Trophy Rack Lodge

Harleysville, who came home with the record-breaker. He killed Pennsylvania's new all-time No. 1 typical bull at 6:50 a.m. on the first day of the 2018 season. Officially scoring 388-1/8 inches, the 753-pound bull was taken in Benezette Township, Elk County. Hunsinger was guided and took the 8-by-7 bull with a Savage .338 Win. Magnum.

Eight of the 74 cows taken by hunters in the 2018 hunt exceeded 500 pounds. The largest went 551 pounds. It was taken by Jonathan M. Millinder, of Morrisdale, Pa., at 5 p.m. on the season's first day with a Savage Model 110 in 7mm Magnum in Noyes Township, Clinton County.

SCOUTING REPORT

Banfield estimates Pennsylvania's elk herd exceeds 1,000, which keeps it at a size the elk management area can accommodate. With chronic wasting disease management now extending into elk country, maintaining a healthy elk population is paramount. To date, CWD has not been found in Pennsylvania elk.

Banfield believes elk in EHZ 2, the area around Winslow Hill, are slightly overpopulated. But he believes the new season structure will provide the management flexibility needed to reduce this population to a level more balanced with habitat available.

The average age for cows in the herd is five years, while it's six for bulls, based upon recent cementum analyses, Banfield said. They're solidly in age ranges that support population vitality. The prime reproductive ages for cows are 3 to 12 years. Bull antler development peaks from 8 to 10 years of age. Bulls 5 years or older generally produce nice 6-by-6-point racks and are what most elk hunters consider "shooters."

"So, if the average age of bulls is 6

years, there are plenty of good bulls out there," Banfield noted.

Banfield also pointed out that he'd like to see hunters take some of the older cows in the elk herd. Every year, he pointed out, a few very old cows – 15 years and older – are taken. They are no longer contributing to population growth, but are still consuming resources and impacting habitat, he added.

STRATEGY

If you're preparing for a hunt in EHZs 2, 6 or 8 – the areas around Benezette, bumping elk while scouting might not hurt your chances in the fall. But if you're hunting in EHZs 13, 10 or 5, know that elk there are less tolerant of humans, Banfield said.

Elk scouting for the general season should focus on the best feeding locations within the EHZ to which a hunter is assigned. Following the September rut, elk look to regain what the rut has stripped from their bodies.

Elk are mixed feeders, browsing in early successional forests, but also depending on herbaceous grasses and forbs, Banfield said. So, seek out open-canopy areas ahead of the season and check them for elk sign regularly.

Know that waiting for elk isn't the way to fill your tag. Even when you're sure where elk are, the goal is to intercept them without being detected. So, it's best to line up several feeding locations to rotate through early and late in the day, which is when elk are most active.

"Elk are found in nomadic groups that move about the landscape, often without what we would see as a clear purpose for their movements," Banfield explained. "So, it's best to find the elk and hunt them where they are."

Many elk hunters, and nearly 100



**The Sept. 14 to 28
elk archery season
will provide 15 lucky
hunters the exciting
opportunity to pursue
elk during the rut.**

percent of bull hunters, opt to hire an elk guide. Those planning to go with a guide are wise to sign up early, Banfield said.

“Guides can take on only so many clients, and depending on your hunt zone, they can book up quickly,” he explained.

Elk hunters who forego a guide really need to develop a game plan that includes hunting on both public and private lands.

Using a guide has proved an advantage.

In 2018, 32 percent of unguided hunters didn’t take an elk. That compares with 20 percent of guided hunters who didn’t take an elk. But the bottom line remains there are no guarantees in Pennsylvania elk hunting.

For hunters not adept at scouting, unfamiliar with elk or unwilling to drive to the elk range to scout, the best play, given the rarity of securing an elk license, might be to pony up and get a guide. No, it isn’t cheap. But what you get for your investment surely pays off if you take an elk.

The new archery and January antlerless elk seasons both are unproven opportunities. They both occur at times when elk largely have been un hunted, and surely offer unique, almost-unparalleled elk hunting. But getting an elk within bow range, or finding a flat-top deep behind the gates on an after-Christmas hunt has the potential to be challenging. Make sure you recognize what you’re up-against before you enter these drawings.

Private property acres vary from EHZ to EHZ. In some areas, Banfield said, acquiring access to private property is pretty easy, while in others it can be challenging. Guides also often have exclusive access to some private

properties. EHZ 4 has historically been difficult for elk hunters to gain access to private property, Banfield said. However, almost 2,000 acres of private property this summer will be enrolled into a conservation easement, administered by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which will open the land to public hunting.

“This is a huge win for EHZ 4 elk hunters,” Banfield noted.

State Game Lands 14, 34, 90, 100 and 331 all are good areas to hunt, because they often are overlooked, Banfield explained.

“No one seems to realize there are elk there,” he noted.

There are only four state forests – Elk, Moshannon, Sproul and Susquehannock – within the occupied elk management area, Banfield said.

“The Sproul and Susquehannock have sub-populations that are warier and less visible than the elk on the Elk and Moshannon state forests,” he added.

RESEARCH

Improving habitat and creating more of it are the best management strategies to accommodate Pennsylvania elk. Through a forage-preference study, the Game Commission hopes to get a better handle on what elk prefer. The project offers 10 to 12 different forage species planted near one another in a cafeteria-like arrangement.

Some of the species used in the field-work include: orchard grass, red clover, New England aster, switchgrass and little bluestem.

The agency also is involved in the second year of a long-term study aiming to distinguish the differences between elk and deer browse. Using three different habitat-management treatments at six sites across the elk range, the study is attempting to ascertain if there are varying browse impacts in areas with deer, elk or both.

The Game Commission also is in the second year of a three-year study investigating Pennsylvania elk pregnancy rates. The work was started to determine if Pennsylvania elk are reproducing at rates lower than elk in other states. About 50 samples were collected in 2019 for analysis in the ongoing study.

EELK LICENSES

Last year, 36,416 hunters entered the drawing for an elk license. It was the second-largest number of applicants in a year, trailing only the inaugural hunt, when a record 50,046 applied.

The drawing has had at least 30,000 applicants in the past three years.

“It’s great to see interest growing for elk hunting in Penn’s Woods,” Banfield said. “It’s exclusive, exciting and worth every penny.”

About 10 percent of all applicants are nonresident hunters and, on average, about 5 percent of the hunters drawn are nonresidents. In 2018, one hunter each from Maryland, New York and North Carolina participated in the hunt, and each took an elk. Two had guides.

Pennsylvania also has two special conservation licenses that are raffled and auctioned annually. Both can be used

across all EHZs for any elk; winners always have harvested bulls.

The Keystone Elk Country Alliance sold 9,944 raffle tickets and raised \$186,650 for elk conservation. The previous year, KECA raised a record \$195,350 through its raffle.

For the second consecutive year, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation raised \$105,000 for its conservation license. It remains the highest price paid for this tag.

That price tag traces back to one of the best managed, most electrifying elk populations in the world.

You can’t beat those majestic mountains, the fall foliage, those magnificent elk. It’s a spellbinding experience and all you have to do to put it in play is fill out an entry.

The Game Commission’s elk-license drawing will be held Aug. 17 at the Pennsylvania Great Outdoors Elk Expo.

The KECA raffle for its conservation tag will be held at the Expo on Aug. 18.

The most straightforward way to get into the running for an elk tag is to apply when you’re buying your 2019-20 hunting license. Drawing applications will be accepted only until midnight July 31.

Every year, hunters entering the drawing for the first time are selected. And about 15 percent of those drawing licenses for the general hunt have entered the drawing every year.

Whether you’re putting down \$11.90 for one drawing, or for each of them, know there probably isn’t a better deal to hunt world-class elk anywhere else.

But remember, you can’t win if you’re not in. **EN**