

Facts about Elk Restoration in Southeastern Kentucky



Summary of Key Facts

- The Commissioner (agency head) of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) has the statutory authority to authorize and oversee operations of the department, including fish and wildlife restoration activities.
- The Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission—a 9-member, volunteer advisory board for KDFWR—hires and advises the Commissioner, approves the department’s budget, recommends regulations, and approves land acquisition and research projects.
- Wildlife viewing, together with hunting, fishing, trapping and boating, are important ways that people enjoy fish and wildlife and their habitats, fostering appreciation for these resources as well as providing vital economic benefits to the people of Kentucky. More than 1.3 Million Kentuckians actively participate in wildlife viewing each year.
- KDFWR has been providing numerous opportunities for wildlife viewing for decades, including many diverse partnerships.
- Following positive results from both a habitat feasibility study and a series of public meetings held to gauge support, KDFWR began restoring elk in southeastern Kentucky through intensive stocking of 1,541 individual elk from 1997-2002. The elk were made available for the stocking program through cooperative agreements with 6 western states.
- KDFWR historically has trapped and relocated elk within the 16-county Kentucky elk zone to better distribute elk across the zone and create new localized herds for expanded public opportunities to view and hunt them.
- In 2006, KDFWR began exploring the concept of an elk refuge and interpretive center within Kentucky’s elk zone to provide elk and other wildlife viewing opportunities and to encourage wildlife-related tourism in the region.
- In 2010, the Appalachian Wildlife Foundation (AWF) was formed as a nonprofit, wildlife conservation organization to promote conservation and education in the region. In the following years, KDFWR began exploring partnership with AWF for creation of an elk refuge and interpretive center.
- In 2016, KDFWR and AWF signed a Memorandum of Agreement. AWF agreed to fund-raise and build the Appalachian Wildlife Center (Center) and provide suitable habitat for elk on 12,000+ acres in its control. KDFWR agreed to relocate free-ranging elk to the property and provide technical assistance in habitat enhancement. Elk released on the property will serve as a source herd for future restoration efforts and offer research opportunities for the department.
- Also in 2016, KDFWR biologists prepared a habitat improvement plan for AWF’s land.
- From 2017-2019, KDFWR biologists relocated a total of 241 elk to AWF’s property, which is unfenced so the elk are free to come and go on and off the property.
- Early in 2018, KDFWR publicly announced the project using a [statewide news release](#) and virtually all agency media and communications platforms, attaining a wide reach. One Facebook [video](#) post alone has been viewed over 237,000 times by the public.
- In the short time since relocation of elk to the AWF property, KDFWR biologists have documented instances of these same elk: being later harvested by a Kentucky elk hunter off AWF’s land; calving 1.5 miles from AWF’s border; and being captured for another relocation project more than 10 miles from the AWF border.

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Does the Commissioner of Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources have the authority to relocate and restore wildlife in Kentucky?

- By state law ([KRS 150.061](#)), the Commissioner has general supervision and control of all activities, functions, appointments and employees of the department. The Commissioner enforces “all provisions of the laws of the state related to wild animals, birds, fish and amphibians, and shall exercise all powers necessarily incident thereto not specifically conferred on the commission.”
- The Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission is a 9-member board comprised of volunteers who serve 4-year terms after nomination by licensed hunters and anglers, appointment by the governor, and confirmation by the Kentucky Senate. The Commission hires the Commissioner and approves the agency’s annual budget, thereby authorizing the Commissioner to carry out the work of the department. It also recommends regulations and approves the department’s research projects per state [statute](#). However, the Commission does not approve fish or wildlife restoration efforts (for example, capture and relocation of elk, or stocking of fish) nor other operational activities of the agency.

Why is Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources enhancing management for wildlife viewing opportunities?

- Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) and other state and federal fish and wildlife agencies in the U.S. have long understood the importance of keeping people connected to nature through outdoor recreation, both for sustaining a populace that cares about fish and wildlife resources and for sustaining funding for conservation and related recreation programs. Hunting, fishing, trapping and boating historically have been central activities in this natural heritage. As a smaller percentage of the population participates in these activities, wildlife viewing and other activities are increasingly important for maintaining a healthy public appreciation of fish and wildlife and their habitats. These activities have historically been, and remain, key department priorities over time as stated in sequential iterations of its strategic plan.
- Each year in Kentucky, an estimated 347,000 people hunt and contribute \$1.5 Billion in economic impact through hunting, and more than 1.3 Million people actively watch wildlife and in so doing also contribute \$1.3 Billion to the state’s economy. Both are important activities for the present and future of wildlife conservation. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state fish and wildlife agencies, and partnering organizations have monitored participation in these and related activities through nationwide surveys dating back to 1955.
- The [North American Model of Wildlife Conservation](#)—the philosophical and legal framework that has governed state and federal management of fish and wildlife agencies in the U.S. since the early 1900s—holds that fish and wildlife are public resources held

in trust by governments for the people, and that opportunities to enjoy these resources should be available to all. Both wildlife viewing and hunting are important wildlife benefits afforded through this conservation framework.

- KDFWR is still strongly committed to providing and expanding hunting opportunities. This should be obvious to anyone who is even superficially aware of the agency's history, operations and spending; one key reason is that hunting, fishing and boating user fees provide the majority of agency funding. The department also has been involved in developing, providing and promoting wildlife viewing opportunities on public and private lands for decades, evidenced by: programs ranging from the Watchable Wildlife campaign; to constructing and operating the Salato Wildlife Education Center at KDFWR headquarters in Frankfort; to providing viewing tours for sandhill cranes, songbirds and elk on state parks or private lands; to construction of wildlife viewing stations on public lands, all spanning decades.

Specifically, why is Kentucky Fish and Wildlife promoting elk viewing?

- KDFWR's [2015-2030 Elk Management Plan](#) (Plan) was finalized in April 2016 after extensive public and staff input. It is intended to serve as a long-term road map for the state's herd. The plan, available on the department's website (fw.ky.gov), reaffirms that the Kentucky wildlife resource belongs to all residents of the Commonwealth. The Plan details wildlife viewing opportunities as an important component of Kentucky's elk herd. Elk private-public partnerships and in-state translocation of elk are specifically included in 3 of the 6 goals of this elk management plan.
- In the course of developing the Plan, public input was gathered from a statewide survey of Kentucky citizens regarding elk management, surveys in 2013 and 2014 of elk hunters drawn for the Kentucky elk hunt, and a 2014 survey of elk hunt applicants not drawn for the Kentucky elk hunt. Further, public input was gathered during a comment period that followed the completion of the Plan's first draft. All public input was combined with biological recommendations from department staff.
- A telephone survey to gauge Kentucky residents' awareness of and opinions about elk restoration and management was commissioned by KDFWR and conducted by Responsive Management, Inc. The survey was administered to 1,273 Kentucky randomly selected residents, and the responses were stratified by whether the residents lived inside or outside the 16-county elk zone. Responsive Management analyzed all data, and calculated sampling error to be no higher than plus or minus 2.75 percentage points. Among its findings, "A majority of Kentucky residents were of the opinion that hunting and non-consumptive uses could co-exist."
- Surveys of elk hunters and applicants for Kentucky elk hunts have shown strong support for the department's management of the elk herd.

Why were elk relocated to the site of the Appalachian Wildlife Center in Bell County?

- In 2006, KDFWR began exploring the feasibility of an elk refuge and interpretive center within southeastern Kentucky's elk zone for purposes of conservation, education, elk-related tourism, research and restoration. Other successful elk refuges include the National Elk Refuge in Jackson, Wyoming established in 1912, and operated by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources opened the Elk Country Visitor Center in 2010 (operated by Keystone Elk Country Alliance, 501(c)(3)).
- In 2010, the Appalachian Wildlife Foundation, Inc. (AWF) was incorporated as a non-profit 501(C)(3) public charity organization with a mission to improve eastern Kentucky

wildlife habitats, with a focus on strip mine reclamation projects. A goal set by the AWF was to develop a wildlife refuge for native wildlife. It is to be modeled after the highly successful elk viewing area in Benezette, Pennsylvania.

- AWF began consulting with Kentucky Fish and Wildlife for assistance early on in its vision-casting and planning.
- In March 2014, AWF announced plans to build the Appalachian Wildlife Center—a facility aimed at conservation education and attracting wildlife-related tourism—in southeastern Kentucky.
- In 2016, private lands biologists with KDFWR met with AWF staff to tour its property, discuss habitat improvement recommendations and write a habitat management plan.
- Public-private partnerships have always been important for restoration of fish and wildlife and providing opportunities (including both open, public access and limited, private access at times).
- Virtually all of the historic fish and wildlife restoration activities (for example, elk, deer, turkey) in Kentucky have included significant focuses on private lands, because the vast majority of the Commonwealth's land is privately owned.
- Despite Kentucky's large and accessible elk population, eastern Kentucky's free-ranging elk herd offers relatively few structured elk viewing opportunities. Prior to the relocation effort, the area around the AWC site was devoid of an elk population. The relocation of elk to the area was intended to bolster the population in the immediate, and eventually the surrounding, areas.
- Managing elk in Kentucky sometimes requires moving small numbers from different sites. When it captures elk for relocation, KDFWR is careful to take only a few individuals from any one herd.
- KDFWR relocated a total of 241 elk to the future site of the Appalachian Wildlife Center from 2017-2019 (11 in 2017, 133 in 2018 and 97 in 2019), from other sites in the Kentucky elk zone. The 2019 relocation concluded the seeding of the elk refuge.
- Early in 2018, KDFWR publicly announced the elk relocation project on the AWF property in numerous ways, including a [news release](#) to traditional media and on the agency website, posting about it on agency social media channels, monthly agency [newsletter](#), the lead article in the Spring 2018 issue of *Kentucky Afield* magazine, and a full-length [Kentucky Afield TV video](#) segment. One of the Facebook posts titled, "[East Kentucky Elk Restoration 2018: Special Delivery - Elk](#)" resulted in 237,000 direct views, and shares by other media sites that resulted in countless more views worldwide.
- The AWF property is not fenced, so any elk relocated to the area move freely, reproduce in the wild and enhance the elk population in the area. Elk naturally range tens of thousands of acres and young elk often disperse to new areas entirely.
- The relocation effort is already helping to grow and spread the elk population in the broader area. To date, KDFWR has documented separate instances of elk previously relocated to the AWF property that have: been harvested by legal hunters off the AWF property; calved over 1 mile outside the AWF boundary; and been trapped more than 10 miles away from the AWF property for a separate restocking effort.

Did KDFWR spend money on the relocation of elk to the site of the Appalachian Wildlife Center?

KDFWR staff are the wildlife conservation and management authorities for Kentucky, so wildlife restoration activities in Kentucky necessarily involve KDFWR. Staff time and materials were used to relocate elk to the AWF property, with both short- and long-term

public benefits (such as those outlined above) in view. In addition to simply capturing and relocating the elk, through this project KDFWR staff were able to collect substantial biological data on elk captured from sites in other counties, providing important metrics on the health of the herd. AWF has secured millions of dollars in private and public funding to develop the Appalachian Wildlife Center, which broke ground in 2016 and continues to develop. The Center will provide quality habitat as a refuge area, as well as public viewing and educational opportunities stemming from the growing and expanding free-range population of elk.



Successful elk relocation in progress within the eastern Kentucky elk zone.