

# 2025-2026 Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources Elk Report



Helicopter herbicide applications have proven themselves as a highly efficient method for removing invasive plants such as Autumn Olive and *Sericea lespedeza*. The area above, on Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area, was sprayed in fall of 2024 and then burned in the spring of 2025, resulting in improved forage for elk and other wildlife.

Photo Credit: John Hast, KDFWR



<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Elk in Kentucky .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Elk Hunting Permits.....</b>	<b>2-3</b>
General Quota Hunt Permits .....	2
Youth Permits.....	2
Commission Permits.....	2
Landowner Permits.....	2
Voucher Cooperator Permits.....	3
Elk Restoration Permits.....	3
Out of Zone Elk Permits.....	3
<b>Quota Drawing Process and Statistics .....</b>	<b>4-5</b>
How Permits Are Drawn .....	4
Odds .....	5
License and Permit Fees.....	5
<b>General Information about the 2025-2026 Season .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Season Dates.....	6
Bag Limits .....	6
Area Permit Allotment .....	6
<b>2025-2026 Harvest Results.....</b>	<b>7-8</b>
Total Harvest by Year .....	7
Weapon Type Harvest Summary.....	7
Success Rates by Unit .....	7
Success Rates by Weapon Type .....	8
Age at Harvest/Death Data.....	8
<b>Kentucky Top 10 Trophy Bulls .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Changes for the 2025-2026 Elk Season.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Disease Surveillance .....</b>	<b>9-10</b>
Brainworm.....	9
Chronic Wasting Disease .....	10
<b>Current Research .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Education .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Habitat.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Contacts.....</b>	<b>12-13</b>

## Introduction

The Bear and Elk Program is administered under the Wildlife Division of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. The Department is overseen by a nine-member commission who are nominated by Kentucky's sportsmen and sportswomen. The nominees chosen by the sportsmen and sportswomen are sent to the Governor, who appoints the Commission members for each district. The department employs about 450 full-time staff, which includes conservation officers, wildlife and fisheries biologists, conservation educators, information and technology staff, public relations and administrative professionals.

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife receives no tax dollars from the state's General Fund. Agency funding is provided through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, boating registration fees, and federal grants based on the number of licenses sold in the state.

The Bear and Elk Program is tasked with managing the elk herd in the state to provide ample hunting opportunity while balancing the needs of consumptive and non-consumptive user groups. The Elk Program is made up of one program coordinator, John Hast and four biologists: Dan Crank, Tristan Curry, Austin Eversole and Mark Peterson. Program staff are based out of KDFWR headquarters in Frankfort as well as across the elk zone in eastern Kentucky.

## Elk In Kentucky

Elk are native to Kentucky and were present until the mid-1880's, when the population was eliminated due to habitat degradation and overhunting. This is why the Kentucky elk program is considered a restoration, not an introduction. Kentucky's present elk herd is a free ranging, wild herd established from 1,543 wild elk captured out-of-state and released into southeast Kentucky between December 1997 and March 2002. Contributing states included Utah, Kansas, Oregon, North Dakota, Arizona, New Mexico, with the majority of elk captured in Utah. Release sites were located in Harlan, Knott, Leslie, Letcher, Martin, Perry, and Pike counties. The elk restoration zone covers 16 counties in the southeast region of the state (approximately 4.1 million acres).

The current elk population is estimated at over 10,000 animals according to two different models (Life Table and Statistical Population Reconstruction). Kentucky has the highest elk population of any state east of the Mississippi River.

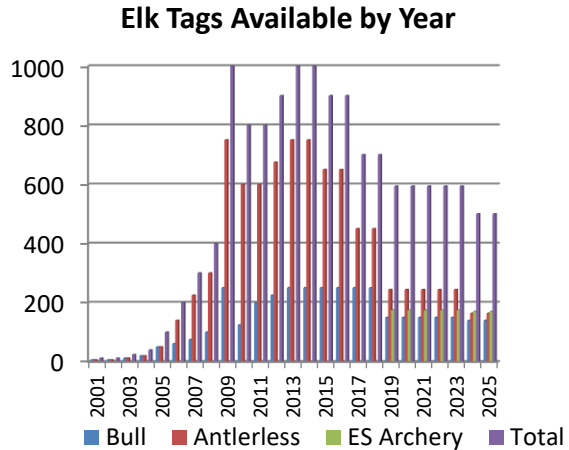
The first elk hunt was conducted in 2001. Six bulls and six cows were harvested, with all hunters filling their permit. The same number of permits were issued in 2002 and 2003. In 2004, the number of permits was increased to 40. Beginning that year, legal deer hunters were also allowed to harvest elk outside the elk zone in order to control populations, keeping elk numbers low in agricultural areas or poor elk habitat. The number of elk permits have fluctuated nearly every year since 2004, with a total of 500 permits available in 2025.

## Elk Hunting Permits

### General Quota Hunt Permits

The majority of Kentucky elk permits are issued by way of a computer-randomized drawing. Applicants must apply online between August 1 and April 30 each year. They may apply for three permits from the three permit types (either sex archery/crossbow, bull firearm, or antlerless firearm), but no more than once for each type. Both resident and non-resident hunters may apply for the elk

permit drawing. A maximum of 10 percent of the available permits may go to non-resident applicants. During the month of May, applicants' names are drawn at random by a separate Kentucky government agency (the Commonwealth Office of Technology [COT]) and then randomly assigned a permit type based on their application choices. Hunters that are drawn for any of the three permits are not eligible to apply for another permit for three years.



### Youth Permits

Hunters that are 15 years of age or younger may apply for the youth-only drawing. There are currently 26 youth-only either-sex permits. Youth may also apply for the general drawing three times like any other applicant, giving them four chances overall. However, they are only eligible to draw one permit.

### Commission Permits

Ten either-sex Commission permits were available for the 2025-2026 season. These permits are assigned each year by the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission members to conservation groups. Those groups then auction or raffle the permits in order to raise money for conservation projects.

### Landowner Access Permits

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife has a program that allows large land holders in the elk zone to enter their land into management agreements in order to provide hunters additional public access to huntable land. Landowners are issued an either-sex elk permit for every 5,000 acres enrolled in the public access program. The landowner may transfer or sell the permit to whomever they choose. Land enrolled in this program is open for public hunting under all statewide regulations, unless denoted otherwise. A total of 209,676

acres were enrolled at the start of the 2025-2026 season. A total of 33 landowner permits were issued for the 2025-2026 season.

**Voucher Cooperator Permits**

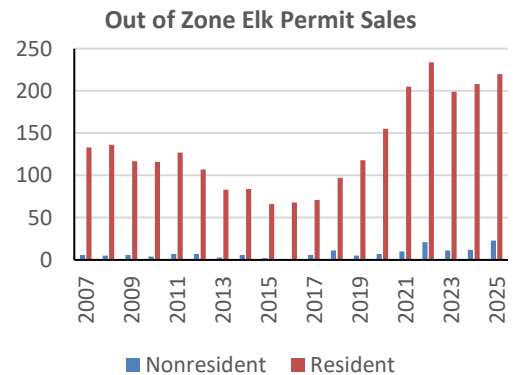
Beginning in 2015, landowners with 100 acres or more could enter their property into a program called the Voucher Cooperator Elk Permit Program. The program links people who own or lease elk hunting land with hunters who have drawn an elk permit. Hunter access is accomplished by offering landowners/lessees an either-sex, transferable elk permit when they accumulate 10 points (each harvested elk equals 1 point regardless of sex). Hunters may apply to hunt one of these areas through the Regulated Area drawing system after the area draw is complete. This program resulted in no permits being transferred to landowners for the 2025–2026 season.

**Elk Restoration Permits**

Beginning in 2017, landowners who allow trapping of elk for restoration purposes are eligible to gain points toward obtaining a transferrable either sex elk permit for use on their property or property they lease. They must accumulate 10 points to receive a permit (1 point for an elk regardless of sex). All trapping is performed during the winter months. No permits were issued for the 2025-2026 season as no elk have been captured since February 2022.

**Out of Zone Elk Permits**

Elk may be taken from any county outside the 16 county Elk Restoration Zone by hunters who possess an annual Kentucky hunting license and an out-of-zone elk permit. Hunters must follow deer season and equipment regulations, but are not required to possess a deer permit. No elk were harvested out of zone in 2025.

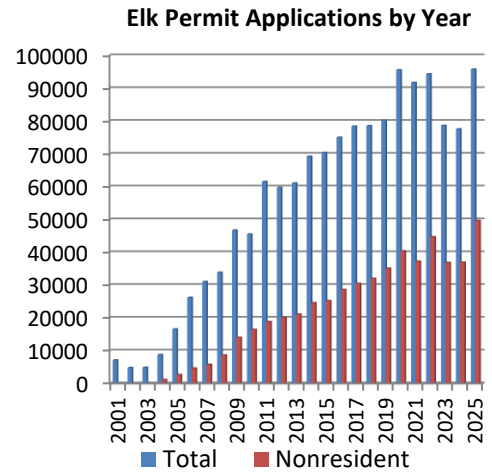


## Quota Drawing Process and Statistics

### How Permits Are Drawn

Elk applications go on sale August 1 of year before drawing and can only be purchased online at [fw.ky.gov](http://fw.ky.gov). Hunters can apply for three different permit types. The application period ends at midnight on April 30. After the application period, a computer drawing conducted by the Commonwealth Office of Technology (COT) randomly selects the hunters from the pool of applicants and then a third-party

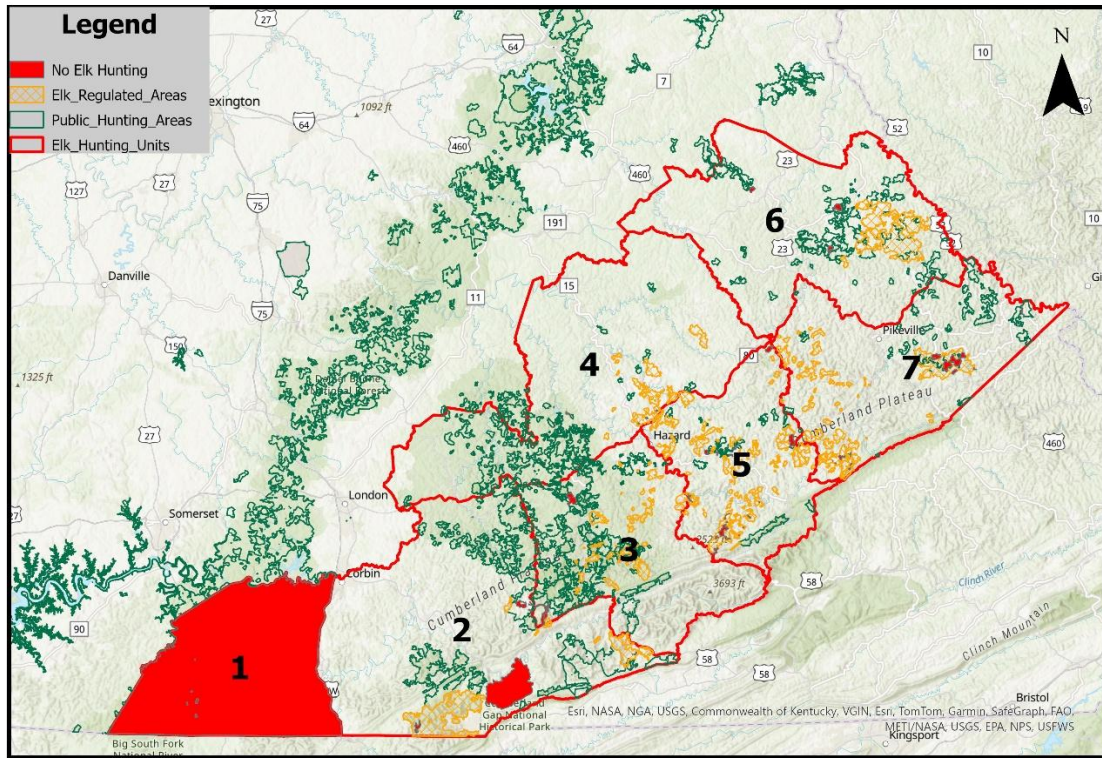
auditor ensures the authenticity of the results. All drawn hunters have until June 15 to purchase their permit. If they fail to do so, those permits are then redrawn from a pool of resident hunters who have applied the greatest number of years without being drawn for an elk tag, termed the Loyalty Redraw. Thirty permits (8 bull gun, 10 cow gun, and 12 either-sex archery) were not purchased in 2025, so they were redrawn randomly to the Loyalty applicant pool.



### Elk Unit Drawing

After receiving their elk permit, all hunters have the option to then apply for a particular Elk Hunting Unit and Regulated Area. Hunters may enter a party application (up to 3 people) when applying for an Elk Hunting Unit, but may not apply as a party for a Regulated Area. If drawn for a Regulated area, hunters are assigned to the Elk Hunting Unit that it is located in by default, and hunters have the ability to hunt that Regulated Area in addition to any other public or private land they have permission to hunt within that Elk Hunting Unit. Regulated Areas may include Wildlife Management Areas, Hunter Access Areas, and Voucher Cooperator properties. Elk hunting on these areas is restricted by KDFWR and landowners to control hunting pressure and harvest on each individual property. After this drawing is held, hunters may move in or out of these regulated areas via an automated online system. Twenty-four properties totaling 190,904 acres were managed as Regulated Areas in 2025, creating hunting opportunities for 157 hunters.

# 2025-26 Kentucky Elk Map



## Odds

The odds of drawing a permit for the 2025-2026 season are shown in the table below. Odds are calculated based on how many applicants were in each permit type and the number of permits issued.

Type	Resident Odds	Non-resident Odds
Bull Firearm	1/159	1/1487
Cow Firearm	1/89	1/747
Either Sex Archery	1/78	1/952
Either-sex – Youth	1/44	1/221

## License and Permit Fees

### Residents

Elk Quota Hunt Application: \$10/application

Elk Permit: \$100 Bull, \$60 Antlerless

General Resident Hunting License: \$27

Non-residents

Elk Quota Hunt Application: \$10/application

Elk Permit: \$550 Bull, \$400 Antlerless

General Non-resident Hunting License: \$150

**General Information about the 2025-2026 Season**

**Season Dates**

Either-sex archery and crossbow: Sept 13 – 26 and Dec 6 – 12, 2025.

Firearms Bull week 1: September 27 – October 1, 2025

Firearms Bull week 2: October 4 – 8, 2025

Firearms Cow week 1: November 29 – December 3, 2025

Firearms Cow week 2: January 3 – 7, 2026

**Bag Limits**

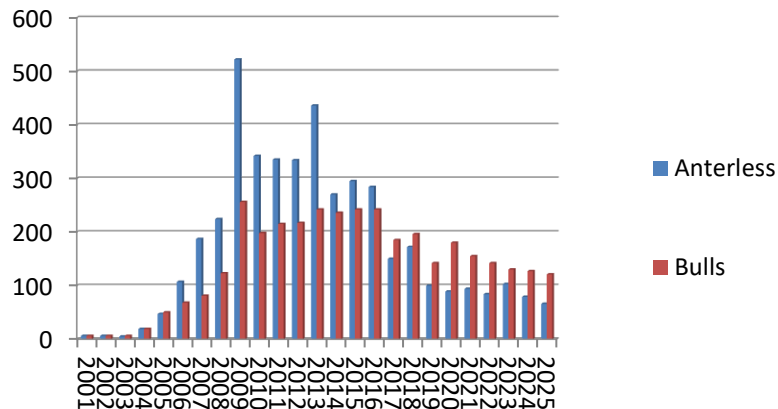
Elk hunters may take only one elk per year.

**Unit Permit Allotment**

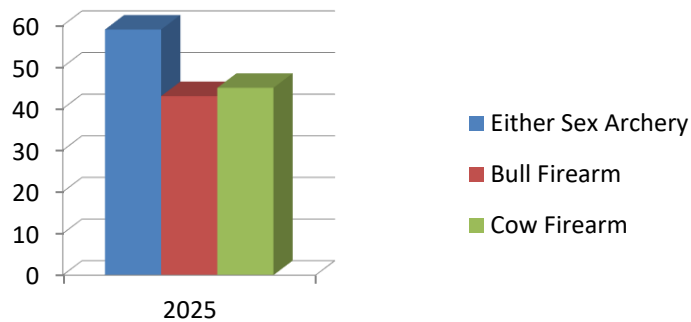
	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7	Total
Either Sex Archery	30	38	34	23	25	20	170
Bull Firearm Week 1	10	21	15	10	9	5	70
Bull Firearm Week 2	10	21	15	10	9	5	70
Cow Firearm Week 1	21	28	5	5	11	12	82
Cow Firearm Week 2	21	28	5	5	11	12	82
Youth	4	6	3	3	5	5	26
Total	96	142	77	56	70	59	500

## Harvest Results

Total Harvest by Year



Weapon Type Harvest Summary

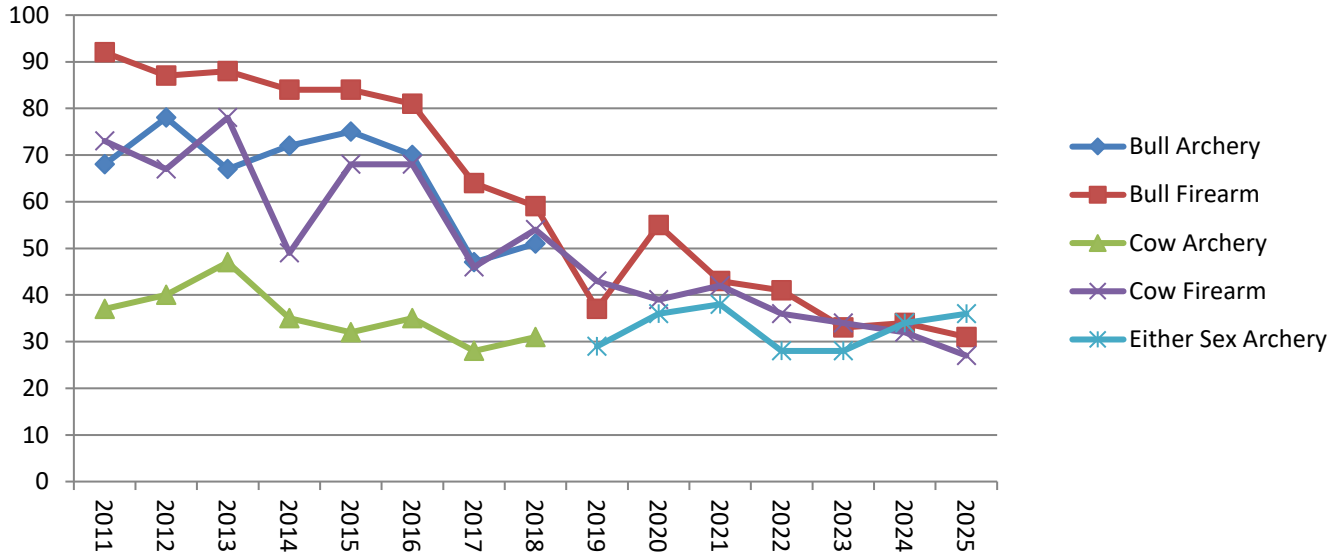


Success Rates by Unit\*

	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6	Unit 7
<b>Either Sex Archery</b>	50%	40%	24%	27%	24%	50%
<b>Bull Week 1</b>	60%	30%	33%	10%	22%	80%
<b>Bull Week 2</b>	40%	38%	25%	44%	0%	0%
<b>Cow Week 1</b>	24%	18%	20%	40%	36%	50%
<b>Cow Week 2</b>	24%	25%	20%	0%	36%	42%
<b>Youth</b>	75%	50%	67%	33%	40%	60%
<b>Overall</b>	40%	31%	27%	28%	24%	48%

\*success rates calculated from number of permits sold

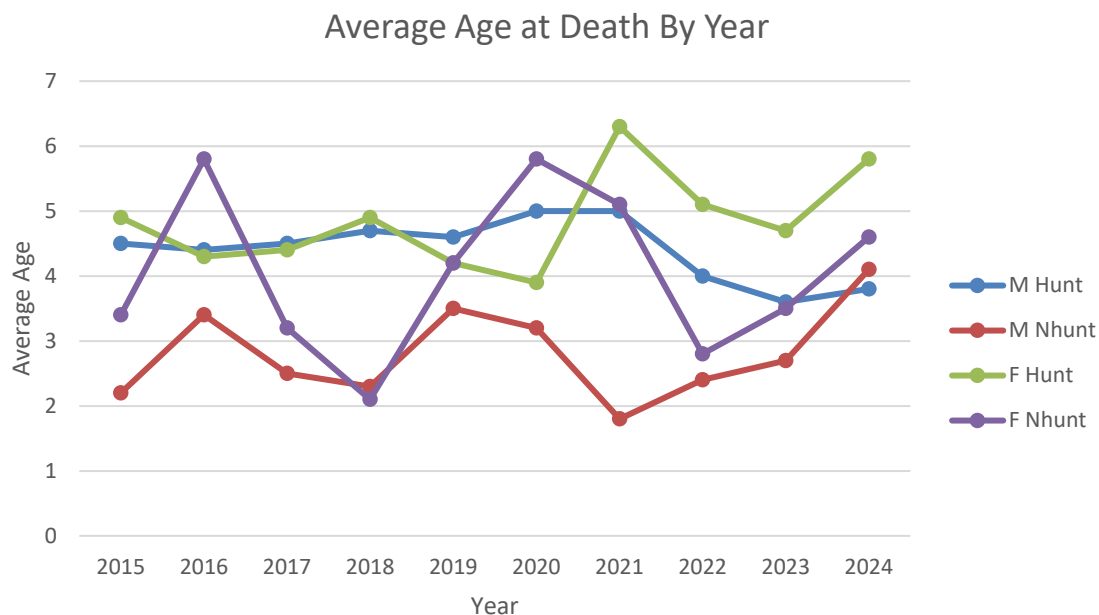
**Overall Success Rates by Weapon Type\***



\*success calculated from number of permits sold

**Age at Harvest/Death Data**

Starting in 2015, all hunters were asked to remove a tooth from their elk and return it in a postage-paid envelope for the purpose of determining the age of their elk. Program staff also collected teeth opportunistically. The chart below shows the average age at death for both hunted and non-hunted categories. Hunted elk samples were collected from hunters during the general elk hunting season. Non-hunted samples were collected from live captured elk or any elk that dies outside the hunting season (e.g., road kills, euthanized, poached, etc.).



### Kentucky’s Top 10 Trophy Bulls

SCORE	Hunter	County	Method	Year
*416 5/8	Lisa Parsley	Martin	Found	2016
392 3/8	Todd Ayers	Pike	Modern Gun	2021
*392 0/8	Sam Billiter	Pike	Modern Gun	2016
*377 5/8	David Giles	Knott	Modern Gun	2015
377 4/8	John Perkins	Martin	Modern Gun	2021
*373 4/8	Anthony Brown	Letcher	Archery	2015
*372 6/8	Terrell Royalty	Knott	Modern Gun	2009
371 0/8	Greg Neff	Bell	Modern Gun	2007
*369 5/8	Bryan Barton	Bell	Modern Gun	2016
*368 4/8	Bill Krider	Knott	Modern Gun	2015

\* Indicates Non-typical

This list includes the 10 largest bull elk scored and reported to Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. The department is compiling a list of the top 100 elk taken in Kentucky. Please send copies of official (signed) score sheets to: Kentucky Trophy Elk List, KDFWR, 1 Sportsman's Lane, Frankfort, KY 40601. Emailed submissions to [info.center@ky.gov](mailto:info.center@ky.gov) also will be accepted.

## Changes for the 2025-2026 Elk Season

301 KAR 2:132

- Opened Paul Van Booven and Fishtrap WMAs to elk hunting
- Moved opening day of cow gun week 2 to the first Saturday in January
- Prohibited hunting over a baited area within 30 days of bait being removed
- Landowner elk permits can only be used on property enrolled in the access agreement

## Disease Surveillance

### Brainworm (*Parelaphostrongylus tenuis*)

Brainworm, or meningeal worm, is the common name for a parasite that affects elk and other deer species. White-tailed deer are carriers of the parasite, but have evolved resistance to the disease. The parasites are limited only to deer species; therefore there is no disease risk to most livestock. Brainworms are small parasitic worms that travel through the body and end up in the spinal cord or brain, where they cause damage to nervous tissue. Elk infected with the parasite may become emaciated, disoriented, and show abnormal behavior such as a loss of fear for humans. Most affected individuals ultimately die from complications caused by the disease. Approximately 4-6% of elk in Kentucky contract the parasite. Brainworm symptoms are similar to those caused by Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), but the two are in no way related. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife biologists actively seek out animals showing brainworm symptoms and collect biological samples for testing. If you see an elk that fits the description, please contact your local biologist. More information can also be found on our website:

<https://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Meningeal-Worm.aspx>

### Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is a disease of high concern to deer and elk across North America. It is caused by a certain type of protein (prion) and causes damage to brain tissue. Kentucky Fish and Wildlife has tested thousands of deer and elk statewide and have not detected the disease. More information can be found on our website:

<https://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Chronic-Wasting-Disease.aspx>

## Current Research

KDFWR and the University of Kentucky embarked on a new camera project in the summer of 2024. Using new methodology, cameras were placed in a grid pattern across Elk Hunting Unit 4 to provide an abundance estimate for elk in this unit. Analysis is currently underway, with results expected in later 2026.

Additionally, KDFWR partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the University of Kentucky, and the University of Tennessee to investigate the impact of

habitat work (herbicide and prescribed fire) in the elk zone. This work should be concluded in summer 2026.

**Education**

**KY Elk University Training Module**

An on-line elk hunt training is available through our website that covers topics ranging from pre-hunt preparation to the actual hunt and what to do after an elk is harvested (<http://app.fw.ky.gov/elk101/default.aspx>).

**KDFWR Elk Hunting Webinar Series**

A Youtube webinar series is available for free that covers all aspects of elk hunting. Topics range from pre-hut planning, hunt strategies, and how to use mapping software to name just a few.

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6CXB-VLn6EPRg7ddQB\\_msKYH5SqX2Frb](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6CXB-VLn6EPRg7ddQB_msKYH5SqX2Frb)

**2015-2030 Elk Management Plan**

The transition from elk restoration to sustainable elk management has resulted in creating a comprehensive Kentucky Elk Management Plan. KDFWR had two goals in writing this Plan: we wished to provide an overview of past and current management of the Kentucky elk herd, and to provide a vision for future management of the herd. The result is the 2015-2030 Kentucky Elk Management Plan, which is available on our website:

<https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Documents/20152030ElkManagementPlan.pdf>

A Plan of work that covers short term goals for the plan can be found here:

<https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Documents/Elk/ElkFinal2020-2024PlanOfWork.pdf>

**Elk Info Page**

Other information regarding Kentucky elk restoration and management can be found on our Elk Info Page at <https://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Pages/Elk.aspx>

**Habitat**

One of the goals set forth in the KDFWR 2030 Elk Management Plan is to improve habitat in the elk zone. The decrease in surface mine activity in the elk zone has led to the loss of early successional habitat and the increase of non-native species like *Elaeagnus umbellata* (Autumn olive). In an effort to increase early successional habitat, the elk program staff has been utilizing prescribed fire. A total of 12,054 acres have been burned since 2018. In 2021, KDFWR identified the elk management zone as an area of special interest and started the Eastern Kentucky Habitat Initiative with the goal of burning 2000 acres each year. KDFWR continues to identify new properties to work on and have outlined some key hurdles to address moving forward. As a Wildlife Division priority, Elk Program staff have enlisted

Year	Number of Acres Burned
2018	471
2019	830
2020	0 due to Covid Restrictions
2021	647
2022	963
2023	2714
2024	3267
2025	3162

other certified prescribed burn bosses and burn crews from across the state to meet this goal in the future.

A grant through the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation provided the opportunity to aerial spray a total of 2461 acres on Cumberland Forest Wildlife Management Area in Bell County in September of 2024. Remedy Ultra herbicide was applied via helicopter to control invasive woody species and promote better elk forage. These areas will be targeted for prescribed burning in the future as a secondary treatment to improve habitat conditions.



## Helicopter Spray Plots 2024 Cumberland Forest WMA - 2,461 ac



### Contacts


If you have questions about the elk herd or elk hunting opportunities, please visit the elk webpage at [fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Pages/Elk-Hunting.aspx](http://fw.ky.gov/Hunt/Pages/Elk-Hunting.aspx) or call the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Info Center at 1-800-858-1549 or contact one of the Elk Program Biologists listed below.

Dan Crank 606-435-6225 <a href="mailto:Dan.crank@ky.gov">Dan.crank@ky.gov</a>	John Hast 502-892-4533 <a href="mailto:john.hast@ky.gov">john.hast@ky.gov</a>	Mark Peterson 606-877-8499 <a href="mailto:mark.peterson@ky.gov">mark.peterson@ky.gov</a>	Tristan Curry 606-595-8333 <a href="mailto:Tristan.curry@ky.gov">Tristan.curry@ky.gov</a>
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Austin Eversole  
606-303-2262

[Austin.eversole@ky.gov](mailto:Austin.eversole@ky.gov)

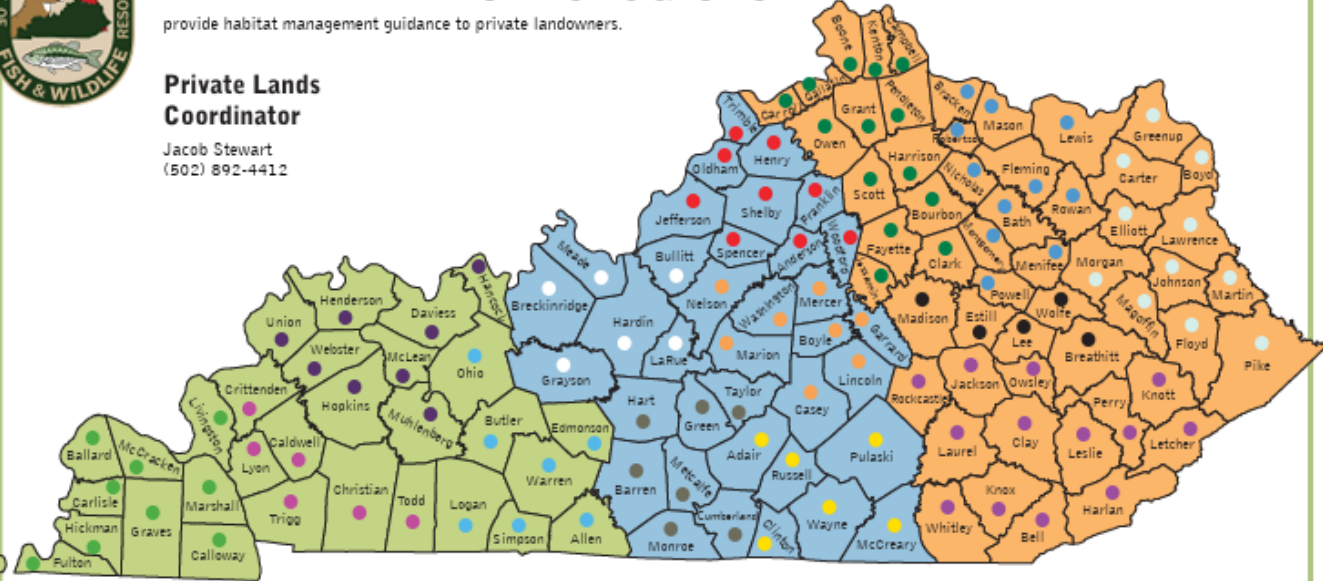
Approximately 95 percent of Kentucky land is privately owned. To successfully manage our wildlife resources, KDFWR works cooperatively with Kentucky’s private landowners. One of the essential ingredients in conserving Kentucky’s wildlife resources is habitat improvement. Wildlife biologists are available to work with interested individuals or groups on properties that they own or have management rights on. To contact your local wildlife biologist for assistance with wildlife management on your property see the map below.



## PRIVATE LANDS BIOLOGISTS

provide habitat management guidance to private landowners.

**Private Lands Coordinator**  
Jacob Stewart  
(502) 892-4412



### AREA 1

Biologists	NRCS Liaison
● Ellen Houston (270) 705-7483	● Riley Dollenbacher (270) 356-6377
● Max Snowden (270) 484-2732	
● Shawn Parsons (270) 339-0024	
● Ben Powers (270) 556-0311	

### AREA 2

Biologists	NRCS Liaison
● Josh Clark (502) 871-0490	● Henry Hardin (270) 589-0712
● Brandon Preston (502) 331-5829	● Cody Jarrett (270) 283-2826
● Jon Anderson (606) 219-7825	○ Takyan Sisoumankhara (502) 229-0259

### AREA 3

Biologists	NRCS Liaison
● Hunter Hopkins (859) 432-0699	● Randall Alcorn (606) 224-5739
● Nick Harpe (502) 892-8822	
● Harley Weaver (606) 207-6423	
● Daniel Skinner (606) 224-5822	

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