

**ELK ON THE URBAN FRINGE: A CREDIBILITY CHALLENGE
FOR WILDLIFERS ^{TWS}**

Michael J. Thompson and Robert E. Henderson
Wildlife Division, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804

Plausibly 100,000 free-roaming elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) habitually occupy human settlements or activity centers across western North America on an occasional or seasonal basis. If elk that are conditioned to human presence realize increased survivorship by occupying residential areas and other refugia during hunting season, then numbers of conditioned elk probably are increasing more rapidly than other segments of the Rocky Mountain subspecies. While wildlife managers advocate retention of natural habitats to prevent elk displacement from urban fringe areas in Montana, elk populations are expanding beyond management control in the face of extraordinary human population growth along the Front Range of Colorado. Land developers and governing bodies may find it increasingly difficult to accept the concept of elk habitat loss, and wildlife managers may find the concept increasingly difficult to explain, as the public gains awareness of conditioned elk responses. We present a conceptual framework for understanding and assessing elk responses to urban expansion, based on literature review and experiences with open space

conservation in and around Missoula, Montana. Conflicting observations of elk tolerance and intolerance in response to humans and habitat alterations may be reconciled by understanding that elk adapt behaviorally to maximize reproductive fitness. Elk behavioral responses to human developments may be predicted with improved reliability if managers correctly identify the most important factors that influence reproductive fitness under a given set of circumstances. Input in planning processes should be linked with clearly communicated goals, recognizing that elk survival may be less at issue than diverse human desires.