Game Count

Bolinger Creek to Gardiner Creek
January 1949

The area covered in this report includes the ma main Selway drainage and tributaries from Bolinger Creek up river to an including Gardiner Creek drainage. To facilitate the study, Moose Creek and Bear Creek drainages were considered as sub units.

The Selway river is of comparative low elevation ranging from about 1800 feet at Bolinger Creek to about 2500 feet at the mouth of Running Creek. The side slopes into the main drainage are very steep and elevations of 5 to 6 thousand feet are reached in 5 or 6 miles travelf from the river.

The crew consisted of Jack Parsell(Ranger for Moose Cr Creek district)Lester Gissell, Conservation Offiser, Chas Gallaher Conservation Offiser and August Halmadge, Vern Thornton, and Warren Peterson, men hired to work on the study. Gissell and Peterson were assigned to the Moose Creek drainage, Parsell and Thornton to Bear Creek , Gallaher and Halmadge along the River above Moose Creek. From Bear Creek up- river Parsell, Thornton.Halmadge workes as one crew. When the study was connected with Wilkins Crew at Gardiner Creek Parsell return to Hamilton on the snow cat. Halmadge was flown from Shearer to Grangeville Gallaher and Thornton returned to Moose Creek and helped Gissell and Peterson work down river from Moose Creek.

The entire crew was flown into Moose Creek at the beginin of the study. From there travel was on foot much of it with snowshoes.Game had well broken trails along the river and for some distance up the major streams. No game was found above Elbo Bend 15 miles above Moose Creek Ranger Station. Game was found about 3 miles above Rhoda Creek cabin on the North Fork of Moose Creek and about the same distance on Rhoda Creek . Bear Creek, Paradise Creek and CubCreek were covered for a distance of about 10 miles from BearCreek Station and there was little evidence of game wintering above this distance. From Bolinger Creek to Gardiner Creek is about 37 miles by trail. To cover this area many side trips were required. These trips varied from 8 to 14 travel for each days work.

In the early days this area was principally a mule deer range. Only a few elk were found in the entire area. When the railroad surveys were made and it was thought a road was to be built through the mountains to Montana several homesteads were taken alnong Moose Creek and on the Selway River above Bear Creek. These early settlers attempted to raise cattle for a livelyhood but at one time or another they were all caught by a tough winter and lost most of thier herds. Most of these were starved out and only a few that

had land suitable for rasing hay to feed a few head through the winter were left.These eventually died offand thier grazing rights were relinquished. The only people living on the area at the present time are dude wranglers who maintain pack and saddle stock to carry on thier operations . These outfits are located at the forks of Moose Creek, Old Pettibone Ranch, North Stra Ranch and at the mouth of Running Creek.

Old timers report that soon after the market for elk teeth were gone the elk population begin to increase. Along came the big fires of 1910 ,1919, 1934 etc. Large areas were burned over which grew back to brush and provided ample feed for winter. Cougar were hunted for the bounty and thier numbers decreased. Sometime in the 2o's the Game Department started placing salt in the natural licks. These conditions were ideal for elk and by 1930 thier population had increased to large numbers. Mule deer were still seen by the thousands but in the winter of 1931&32 deer took a tremendous loss and it was estimated that 60 to 75% of the population had died. Mule deer population has been up and down since that time but in general has shown a steady decline and today only a few hundred head remain on the area. Elk numbers continued to increase and it is thought that only in the last two or three years has the herd shown any decline.

Below is shown the data as to numbers collected on the study.

Actual count for entire area

Mature Bulls	Spikes	Cows	Calves	Unknown	Est. unseen
408	37	1483	433	665	660

Total Count 3026

DEER

Mule deer	Whitetail deer	Est. unseen both species
364	192	355

Total Count 556

Moose Creek Drainage

Mature Bulls	Spikes	Cows	Calves	Unknown	Est. unseen
68		222	70	77	126

Total 437

Deer

Mule deer	White tail	Est. unseen Whitetail
3	33	120

Bear Creek Drainage

Mature Bulls	Spikes	Cows	Calves	Unknown	Est. Unseen
41	4	128	48	67	140

Total Count 288

Deer

Mule Deer	Whitetail Deer	Est. unseen
20	39	20

Total 59

Moose Creek to Gardiner Creek

Mature Bulls	Spikes	Cows	Calves	Unknown	Est. Unseen
244	28	1012	274	457	290

Total count 2015

Deer

Mule Deer	Whitetail Deer	Est. unseen
252	120	180

Total 372

Moose Creek to Bolinger Creek

Mature Bulls	Spikes	Cows	Calves	Unknown	Est. Unseen
65	5	111	32	95	105

Total Count 308

Deer

Mule deer	Whitetail	Est. Unseen
85	0	35

From the above data it is seen that 14% of the elk counted were last years calves. 1483 cows were counted and only 445 bulls. this would seem to indicate that the bulls were ranging high and were not counted. However it is known that a large percent off the losses a year ago were bulls and may be a factor in the small number counted this year. Only a small number of spikes were counted. They begin droping thier horns in December and it is possible that some of these were classed as cows.

The summer range of the game studied is slightly over a million acres. This winter the early snows have forced the game into a very small area and not more than 50,000 acres are available for winter use.

There is no known migration routes except from higher to lower elevations. This winter it appears that elk moving from summer to winter range continued down stream farther than usual. Elk that in normal years would winter on Moose Creek moved down river below Three Links. A heavy concentration of elk was noted from Bear Creek to Running Creek and it is likely that many of these would normally winter farther up stream.

The entire area is National Forest Lands and the only industries are the the dude ranches mentioned above.

The snows this year have cut the winter range to approximate 50,000acres inaverage years the areaavailable for winter use would be much greater.

Much of the area has been burned over and grown up to brush, the principal species being ceanothus,willow,maple cherry, and service berry. In the areas that have not been burned the south slopes are open yellow pine type and very little browse is found. The North slopes are covered with heavy stands of fir reproduction and the bottoms consists ofheavy stands of white fir and cedar. At one time the burned areas have supported a heavy stand of brushand provided ample feed fo a large number of animals. Through heavy use, the coming in of evergreen repoduction, erosion and other factors the carrying capacity of the range has been greatly reduced. Open areas are showing , many of the individual plants have been killedcompletly and in the North Star drainage at lest 50% of the individual plants are dead. This year the elk have gone over the browse time after time and at the time the survey was made all major species of browse had been browsed beyond the current years growth. Where ever it was available fir and cedar was the main diet of the elk. Many of the fir thickets along the creek bottoms had been stripped of all needles as far as the animals could reach.

December and January were unsually cold months and temperatures fell between 20 and 30 below zero. Snow came early in December and depths were nearly as great on the river as at 5000foot elevations.38 to 40 inches of snow was found at Three Links . This condition continued up river past Moose Creek. Five feet was found at Elbow Bend and 6½ feet at Rhoda Creek cabin. On the river above MooseCreek the depth of the snow decreased and 18to20 inches were found at BearCreek. The same amount was recorded at the mouth of Running Creek. About four feet was found at 5000 feet in the Bear Creek area.

Complete data is not at hand as to the increase of game here or the annual take by hunters.

Coyotoes were evident over the entire area and numerous deer kills were observed. Most of the kills seen were mule deer. A carcass would be completly eaten in one night and with occassional snows it was impossible to determine the number killed.

However the mule deer population is at such a loww ebb it was the general opinion that the herd would be practically exterminated by predators and winter kill this winter.

Three cougar track and one cougar were seen during the study. While it could not be definitely determined it was believed that three calf elk carcasses found had been killed by these animals.

Only one scabby bull was seen by the entire crew and the game animals appeared to be free from disease. The dead animals found were all frozen so hard that no postmorten examinations were made.

It is evident that feed is not ample for the number of animals using the range in a hard winter and a large loss can be expected this winter.

From our observations it appears that the entire area available for game use was being utlized. North slopes that in average years would be grazed very little were receiving extensive use. No areas suitable for use were found that were not being utlizied.

More study is needed this coming spring, when condition are more favorable for range observations and winter losses can be determined before number to be taken length of seasons etc. can be determined.

Due to the topaghraphy of the terrian it seems unlikely that there is much that can be done for better distribution of game during a hard winter. In normal years there is a possibility that salting, hunting pressure, and closed area might be of some benefit. To determine the right combination of these factors will require a long range study on the ground.

Trapping and transplanting elk from this area does not appear to be practical at this time.

Improvement of winter range on this area has many possibilities. In fact it must be done if we are to even maintain the present population of elk. It would be very desirable to increase this number. Controlled burning and reseeding hold the greast possibilities. To determine the locality and to what extent this would be practical will require study and cooperation with Forest Officals . I would reccomend that at least one full time man be assigned to this area To study actual conditions on the ground details worked out and actual work started on an experimental basis as soon as possible.

Chas Goodloe

Above does not include elk between Gardiner Co. & Waldo Co.
Jack Parnell