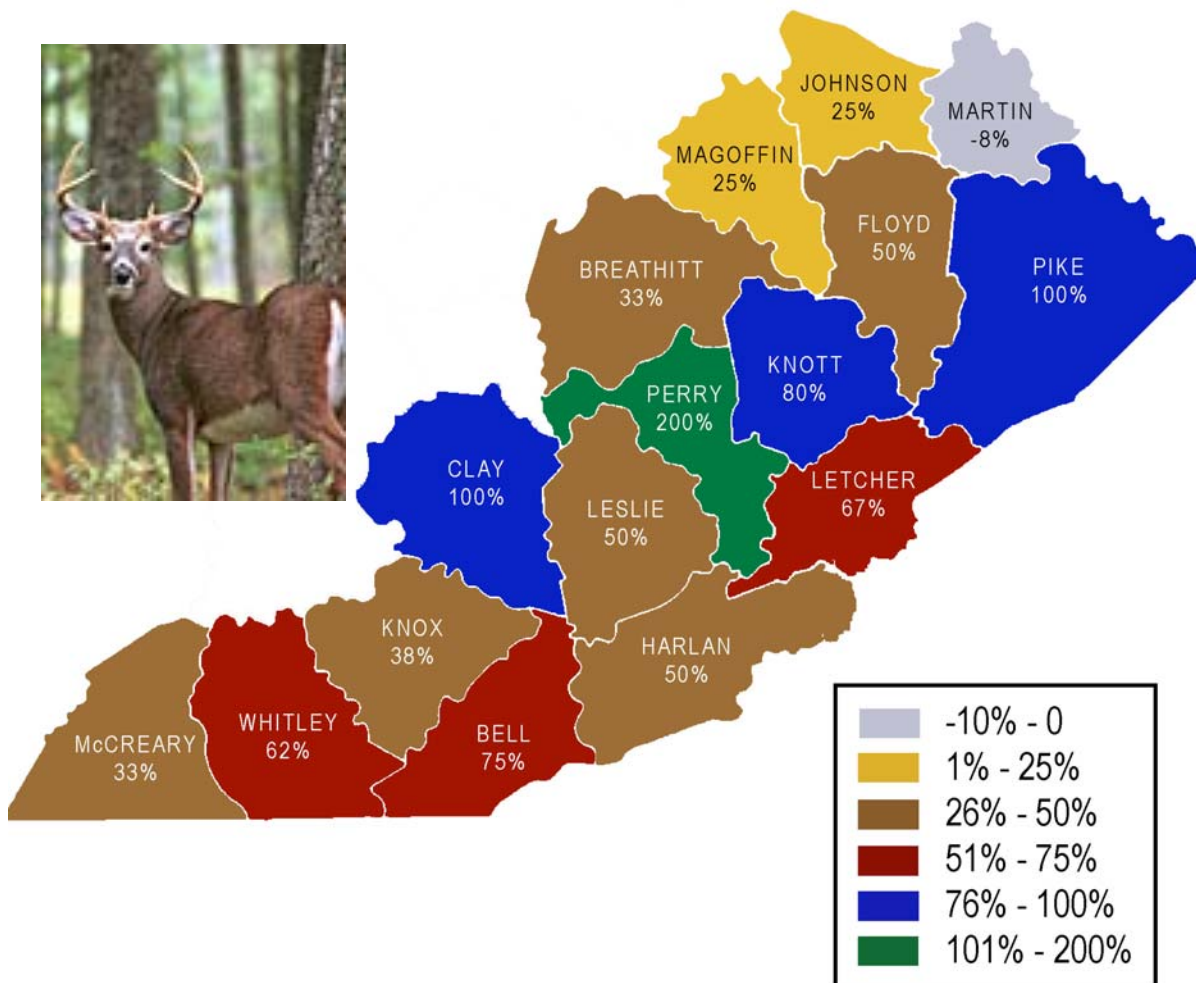


Chapter 5
MORE THAN JUST ELK ARE GROWING IN NUMBERS

In an article¹⁹ by Tina Brunjes, big game coordinator with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Eastern elk disappeared from Kentucky before the Civil War and by 1945, Kentucky’s deer herd numbered less than 2,000. With proper management, the number of deer across Kentucky has grown to nearly a million and consistently rank in the top 4 in the nation for trophy animals taken each year.

But there was a fear that by restoring elk in eastern Kentucky the deer herd would decrease since some feared that both species would be competing for the same food and space. That has not been the case. Ten years ago, when elk were released into the 16-county restoration area, there were 28,800 deer in those counties. According to Dave Baker with KDFWR, those numbers have grown to approximately 42,650 with nine of the counties more than doubling in numbers and, in the case of Perry County the number of deer has tripled, since 1996.

INCREASE IN NUMBERS OF DEER SINCE ELK WERE INTRODUCED



Because of the work of Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife and partnerships with RMEF, Daniel Boone National Forest Service, Kentucky Department of Parks, other agencies, coal companies, and private landowners, both deer and elk are thriving as are other game species such as eastern wild turkey, ruffed grouse, gray squirrel, raccoon, rabbit and bobwhite quail. *See article on the following page for more on land reclamation for wildlife growth.* The population of Black bear is also growing in eastern Kentucky especially in the Letcher and Harlan Counties although, at this time, there is not a bear hunting season.

A few of the non-game species of interest include resident and migratory songbirds, bats, raptors, numerous small and mid-sized mammals and imperiled aquatic species. Furbearers include coyote, red fox, gray fox, bobcat, beaver, river otter, muskrat, weasel and mink.



Three species increasing in numbers in the Coalfields of Eastern Kentucky



Wildlife viewing and hunting are just a part of the \$4.8 billion annual economic impact that hunting, fishing, boating and wildlife watching has on the Commonwealth – accounting for about half of the state's \$9 billion tourism industry and creating over 60,000 jobs for Kentuckians.

*EXCERPTS FROM ARTICLE BY DAVID LEDFORD, APPALACHIAN INITIATIVE DIRECTOR
FOR THE ELK FOUNDATION PUBLISHED IN THE NOV/DEC 2005 ISSUE OF BUGLE²⁰*

2005 MINE RECLAMATION FOR WILDLIFE SUMMIT

In fall 2003, the Elk Foundation and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Resources began the process of developing and implementing a landscape-scale habitat conservation plan for the state's 4.1 million-acre, 16-county elk restoration zone...Partners include the Kentucky Department of Natural Resources, Department of Abandoned Mine Lands, U.S. Forest Service, University of Kentucky, Office of Surface Mining and Kentucky Coal Association, and a growing number of mining and land companies.

One of the primary conservation targets identified through this process was to improve habitat on already reclaimed mine lands. As elk were released into southeastern Kentucky from 1997 to 2002—the first to roam there in more than 150 years—many were fitted with radio collars to help biologists monitor and study their movements. They collected more than 20,000 radio locations from 450 collared elk. The data clearly demonstrated that elk spent the majority of their time either on or near reclaimed mine lands and tended to avoid large areas of closed canopy forest. This really did not surprise anybody, but it drove home the fact that the Elk Foundation needed to form some strong partnerships with the mining industry, paying particular attention to how we might reclaim this historic country where Daniel Boone once hunted elk.

The truth is, elk are fat and happy on today's reclaimed mine sites. But with a few basic changes in reclamation, we could create great habitat for songbirds, grouse, quail, and a host of other—and the elk would be even fatter and happier.

For a good while after the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act became law in 1977, reclamation practices involved extreme soil compaction and planting vegetation such as Kentucky 31 fescue, *Serecea lespedeza*, autumn olive, black locust and other light seeded (seeds dispersed by wind) tree species. Much of the focus in the late 1970s and early '80s was on agricultural reclamation for grazing cattle and horses. Fescue and *Serecea lespedeza* were just two of the "miracle" forages promoted as boons to agriculture. Time has proven they are far from miraculous as grazing forage and downright noxious when it comes to wildlife. Nobody knows the exact numbers, but thousands of acres of surface mines were reclaimed with this undesirable vegetation.

The Elk Foundation and the Kentucky Department of Fish and Resources are working together to restore high-quality habitat to some of these old reclaimed mine sites. In 2004, the department received an \$862,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Service to restore habitat on private lands for imperiled species. To qualify for the grant, the department had to come up with a non-federal match. The Elk Foundation agreed to provide a \$400,000 match to this grant spread over three years. Together, we are eradicating fescue and *Serecea*, and replacing them with native grasses, forbs, trees and shrubs. In other words, we are spending \$200 to \$400 per acre to kill everything that was planted during reclamation, and replant with native vegetation that provides high quality habitat. While all of this work is being done in the name of "imperiled" grassland and shrub-scrub songbirds, the elk, deer, turkeys, quail, grouse, rabbits, snakes, cotton rats and bobcats that share the habitat will benefit from it, too.

The benefits to revising mine reclamation for wildlife are huge. Abundant populations should lead to the creation of wildlife and outdoor-recreation tourism industries —industries that may provide much needed economic development and diversity in the coalfields and in the communities that support them.