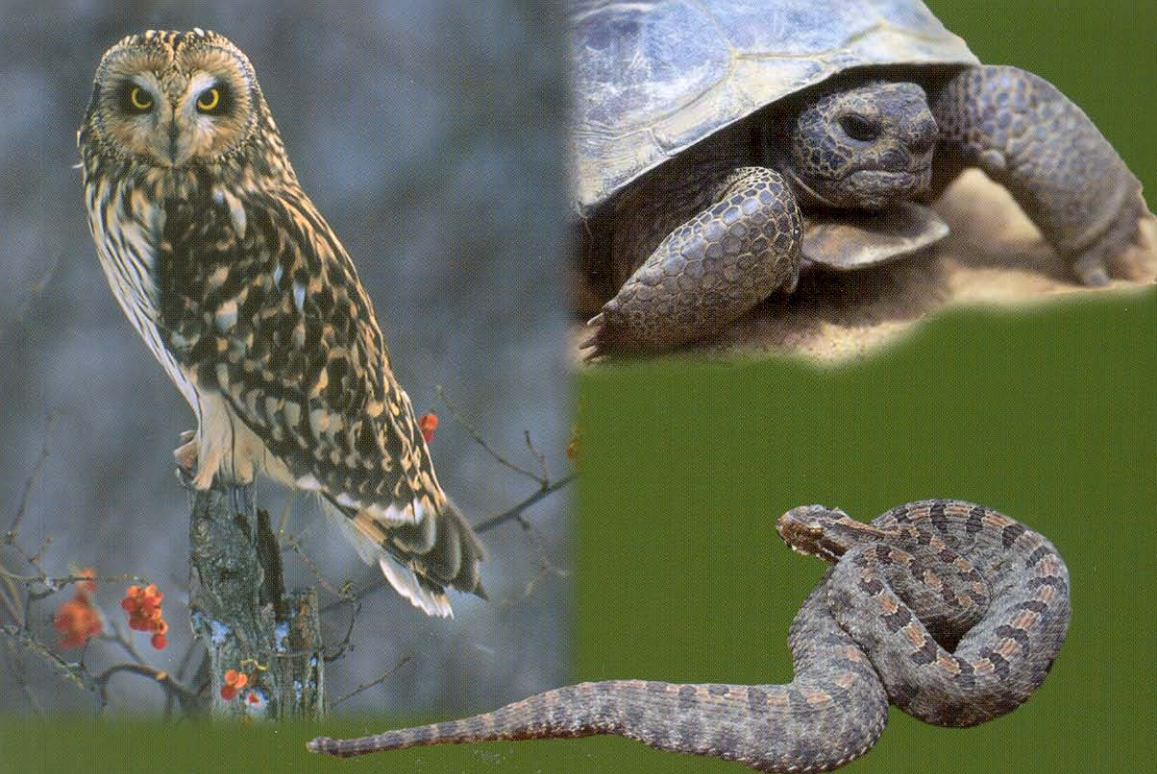




ALABAMA WILDLIFE

VOLUME THREE

**Imperiled Amphibians,
Reptiles, Birds,
and Mammals**

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ELK

Cervus elaphus Linnaeus

OTHER NAMES. Wapiti, Red Deer, North American Elk (Hall 1981, Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1982, Thomas and Toweill 1982).

DESCRIPTION. In North America, the moose is the only member of the family Cervidae larger than the elk (adult males, 200-300 cm [80-120 in.] long; weights 265-490 kg [580-1,080 lb.]). Females average smaller than males. Dorsum grayish brown to dark brown; venter dark brown to black; head, mane, neck, and legs dark brown to black; large white or yellowish rump patch (Hall 1981, Choate *et al.* 1994). Females rarely have antlers, but mature males have large antlers with long, round beams that extend back and up, usually with six tines (Thomas and Toweill 1982, Choate *et al.* 1994). Alabama originally was inhabited by the eastern North American elk, *C. e. canadensis* (Curren 1977, Hall 1981), which is now extinct.



Photo—Troy L. Best

DISTRIBUTION. With exception of coastal areas, once occurred throughout most of what is now the United States, southern Canada, and central Mexico (Curren 1977, Peek 1982, Thomas and Toweill 1982). Except for the southern one-third of Alabama, may have occurred statewide. In 1916, 55 elk (*C. e. nelsoni*) from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, were released in Tuscaloosa, Sumter, Pickens, and

Calhoun Counties, Alabama. Last known elk from that reintroduction was killed in 1921. Poaching, diseases, and intolerance of severe crop depredation were primary reasons for lack of re-establishment in Alabama (Howell 1921, Thomas and Toweill 1982).

HABITAT. Once occupied a wide variety of ecosystems in North America, including dense, coastal, coniferous rain forests of the Pacific Northwest, nonforested, inland valley bottomlands of California, dry forest and chaparral mountains of the Southwest, cool shrub forests of the northern lakes region onto the northern prairie, and in eastern North America, they occupied mixed conifer-hardwood forests. Only areas unoccupied were arid deserts of the Southwest and humid habitats along the eastern coast (Thomas and Toweill 1982).

LIFE HISTORY AND ECOLOGY. For most of the year, males and females segregated, but during rut (August-November) males maintain harems of adult females and calves. One calf (rarely twins) is born in May or June after about an eight-month gestation period. At birth, calves weigh about 13 kilograms (30 pounds) and hide for two to three weeks after birth, except when nursing. Females with calves usually stay apart from other elk until calves are able to travel. Females and males may breed at one year of age, but males more than three years old usually most successful in reproduction. Females may exhibit reduced fertility after eight years of age, but there is no evidence that fertility of males decreases with age. Seem especially sensitive to human activities. With overcrowding, disease and stress increase, especially on winter feeding grounds. May live more than 20 years, but average life expectancy is much lower. Females usually live longer than males. Other than legal harvesting, impor-

tant causes of death are malnutrition, diseases, pathogens, predation, and accidents. Depending on availability, elk consume a wide variety of plants including grasses, forbs, browse, and bark. Most populations migrate between summer and winter ranges (Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1982, Peek 1982, Thomas and Toweill 1982, Choate *et al.* 1994).

BASIS FOR STATUS CLASSIFICATION. Because elk were popular game animals and often damaged agricultural crops, they were hunted to extinction in eastern North America. By the early 1800s, elk were extirpated from the eastern United States, including Alabama (Peek 1982, Thomas and Toweill 1982, Choate *et al.* 1994). Elk reintroduced into Alabama were extirpated in the 1920s (Thomas and Toweill 1982).

Prepared by: Troy L. Best

