

Mt. Jumbo Elk Spotters Report

OCTOBER 2024

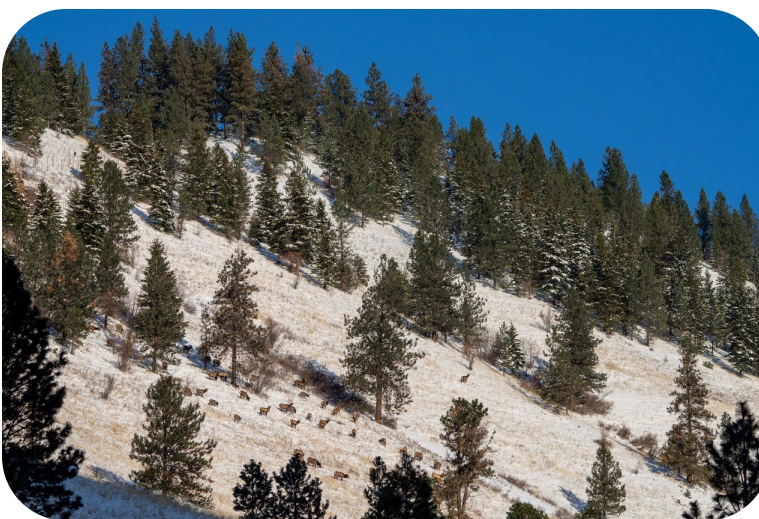
WINTER 2023-2024

Prepared by Michael Sharp, Outreach and Stewardship Coordinator

Background

THE ELK

Each winter a herd of 50-100+ elk migrate from the Rattlesnake Wilderness and Recreation Area to the slopes of Mount Jumbo in the Missoula Valley. Protecting this herd of elk has been a management priority of the Missoula community since efforts to preserve habitat on Mt. Jumbo started in the 1990s. The first seasonal closure to restrict human and elk contact on Mt. Jumbo was implemented in 1996. Since then, local land managers have sought to increase their knowledge of how elk use Mt. Jumbo to better inform and adapt their management activities.



Elk above East Missoula in November, 2023.

Photo by Paul Queneau

THE PROGRAM

The Elk Spotters program is one aspect of a monitoring plan to understand the status and trend of elk use of Mt. Jumbo. Starting in 2013, members of the Missoula community have voluntarily collected data on the

presence and abundance of elk through the winter months. This data helps to support annual decisions about the seasonal closure and informs our understanding of longer term trends in elk behavior.

2023-2024 Program Participation

From October 2023 through May 2024...

- ◆ 19 dedicated Missoula Community members participated in the program
- ◆ 233 observations of elk were made



SEASON TIMELINE

October 26th, 2023

Elk Arrive - 6 elk reported at 9:45 AM

December 1, 2023

Jumbo Closes - Mt. Jumbo closes to public use

January 11, 2024

High Count - 109 elk reported, the high of the year.

January 13, 2024

Coldest Day -

Low temperature of -22°F

March 19, 2024

South Zone Opens 4 days later than regular 3/15 opening

April 10, 2024

Elk Depart - the last 16 elk were reported at 7pm

May 1, 2024

North Zone Opens on the regular 5/1 opening date

PAGE 2

By the Numbers

10/26/23

date that elk first arrived on Mt. Jumbo

109

maximum number of elk counted for the year on January 11, 2024

36

number of days before Mt. Jumbo closes to public use that elk first arrived on the mountain

4/10/2024

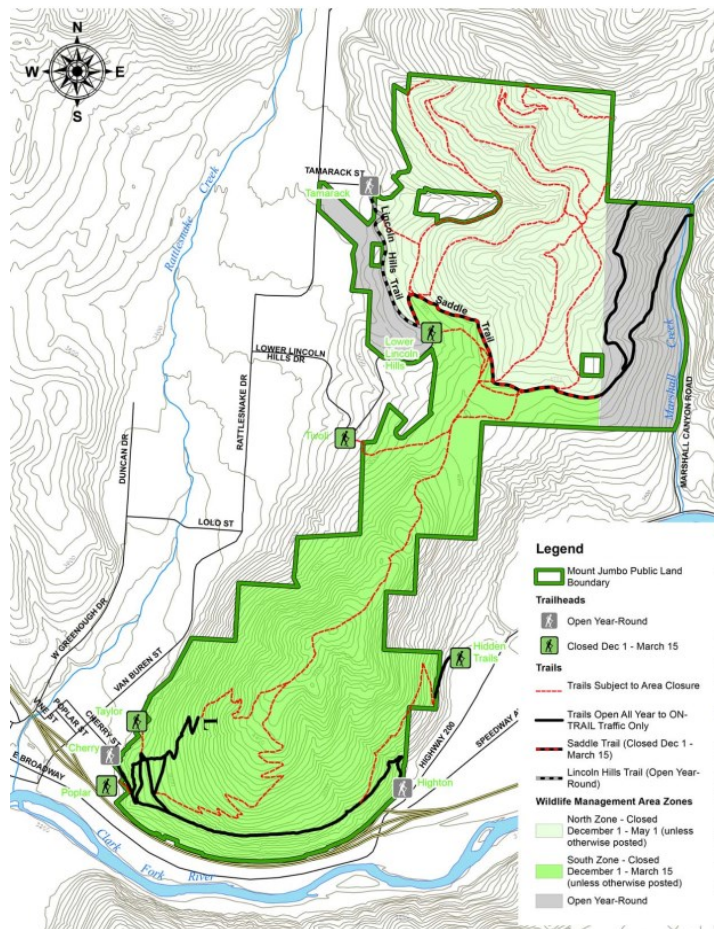
date that elk are last seen in the South Zone of Mt. Jumbo

22

number of days after the South Zone closure lifted on 3/19/24 that elk leave the South Zone

26

number of days after the regular opening of 3/15 that elk leave the South Zone



MT. JUMBO CLOSURE ZONES

North Zone:

Closed December 1st - May 1st (unless otherwise posted)

Pastel green area on map. Includes all areas and trails north of the North Loop Road

South Zone:

Closed December 1st - March 15th (unless otherwise posted)

Lime green area on the map. Includes all areas and trails south of the North Loop Road.

The "L" and U.S West trails are open year-round

Behind the Scenes

Using vegetation data to determine closure dates

SPRING 'GREEN-UP' SURVEYS

Each year, Conservation Lands Program staff and Montana FWP review weather conditions, available food resources, and elk observation data to determine if a closure extension is necessary to protect the overwintering elk herd.

Beginning in early March, Conservation Lands Program staff conduct "green-up" surveys to assess forage availability in the North Zone, where elk take refuge once the South Zone re-opens to recreationists. The 'Spring Greenup' protocols include new-growth threshold measurements, used to determine when there is enough forage available in the North Zone to support the elk herd. New growth is measured across Mt. Jumbo's populations of native bunchgrasses at different locations and aspects. Once adequate growth is measured on South and Southwest aspects, the South Zone closure is lifted.

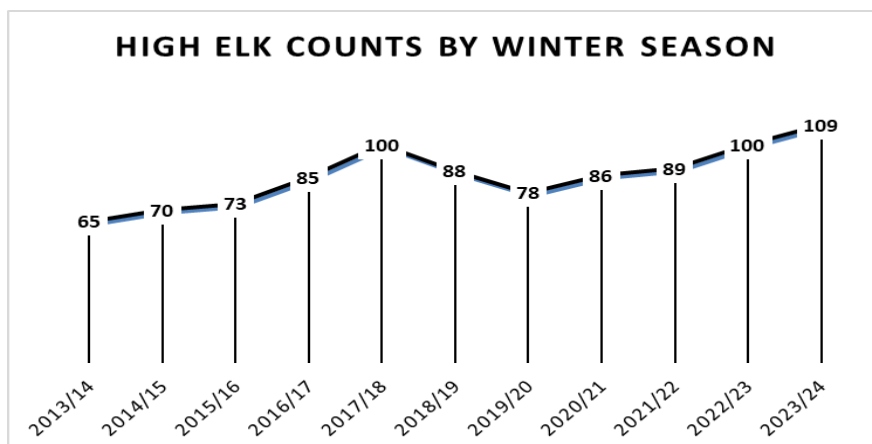


Conservation Lands Program Staff assessing native grass growth in March, 2024. Accurate measurements of native forage availability help to determine re-opening dates that protect Mt. Jumbo's elk.
Photos by Peter Whitney



In Context

How does the 2023-2024 season compare to previous years?



Looking Ahead

What's in store for the 2024-2025 season?

- ⇒ Missoula Parks and Recreation is looking forward to working with the **Rattlesnake Elementary School** in their first season as Elk Spotters!
- ⇒ Join us in welcoming Hillary Cimino, Conservation Lands Program Inventory & Monitoring Specialist. Hilary will lead monitoring efforts focused on Mt. Jumbo's wildlife habitat, wintering elk population, and support the Elk Spotters program.
- ⇒ **Have you noticed** multi-colored poles near the top of the Holly St. Bowl on Mt. Jumbo's West Face? These snow stakes will be installed each Winter, helping City staff to monitor snow loads and assess urban avalanche risk on Mt. Jumbo.



Elk navigate snow on Mt. Jumbo.

Photo above by Kurt Wilson, Missoulian

Photo below by Paul Queneau



Thank you Elk Spotter Participants! We look forward to another season spotting elk.

Are you interested in becoming an Elk Spotter or know someone who is? Please contact sharpm@ci.missoula.mt.us