UPSTATE OUTDOORS

Could elk be migrating from North to South Carolina?

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Many Upstate residents enjoy the prospect of seeing wildlife around their residences. The Upstate is home to deer, turkey and even the occasional bear that comes out of the mountains, but have you ever considered the possibility of seeing an elk?

According to Bob Santanello, chairman for the Upstate Chapter of The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the prospect that elk exist in the wild in South Carolina is not only plausible, it's likely.

"I think there's a good chance some elk may already be here," said Santanello. "Rumors have persisted for some time of elk sightings around the Caesar's Head and Jones Gap State Park areas in northern Greenville County. To date, we have not verified this with any game wardens or park rangers, but we frequently hear from folks who say they have seen them up there."

An experimental program to reintroduce elk to the Cataloochee Valley of North Carolina began in 2001. What started as 40 transplanted animals nearly 20 years ago has grown into a herd of an estimated 300 to 400 animals.

Elk once roamed the southern Appalachian Mountains and elsewhere in the eastern United States but were eliminated by over-hunting and loss of habitat. As the crow flies, Cataloochee is less than 100 miles from the South Carolina state line.

In 1990, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, an organization committed to the future of the animals, suggested that the National Park Service reintroduce an elk herd back into the southern Appalachians. Officials chose the Cataloochee Valley because of its relative isolation. The first 25 elk arrived in February 2001, imported from the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area on the Kentucky-Tennessee border after being relocated from Alberta, Canada. Another 27 animals were added in 2002.

"These animals are known to migrate thousands of miles," said Santanello. "The Cataloochee Valley is a natural funnel, and the animals are not fenced in. It's beginning to get kind of territorial up there. The big bulls are running off the smaller males, so they take a couple of cows and go look for somewhere else to live."



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Elk are a common site in the Cataloochee Valley area of North Carolina, but expansion of the herd may be pushing the offspring of these animals in South Carolina.

Santanello said it's easy to tell which animals were transplanted, because the bulls all have collars and most of the cows have tags in their ears. To further support the animal's migrations, he said there was a surprise earlier this spring in the Cataloochee Valley.

"We had a mature bull show up with no collar, and he wasn't one of ours," said Santanello, pointing out that populations of elk currently exist in West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

September and October are ideal months to view elk in the Cataloochee Valley. Pre-rutting activity (prior to mating season) begins in September and peaks at the first of October. Bull elk make their legendary bugling calls to challenge other bulls and attract cows. Bugling may be heard a mile or more away.

» The Upstate SC Chapter of The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation will be holding its 20th annual Big Game Banquet to benefit the Upstate Chapter. The event will be held at The Poinsett Club in Greenville on Saturday. There will be raffles for guns, a live auction and world class wild game food prepared by the Poinsett Club chefs. Craft beer will be available from Blue Ridge Brewing Co. Doors open at 5 pm. A range of ticket packages are available by contacting Edward Wilson at 803-528-3574. Doors open at 5 pm.

Phillip Gentry is the host of "Upstate Outdoors" at noon Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM. This week's scheduled guest is John Cox, winner of the Forest Wood Cup championship bass tournament. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.