

An elk, the first seen in South Carolina in centuries, gazes across a field in northern Pickens County.

PROVIDED/CALEB CASSELL

STATE SEES FIRST ELK IN CENTURIES

'Historic moment' for Pickens Co.

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For the first time since the Upstate was Cherokee territory, a wild elk has been seen roaming the woodlands of South Carolina.

Northern Pickens County is abuzz with sightings of the bull elk, whose wanderings are being traced on social media.

It's not the species that once inhabited this area but more likely one that found himself ousted by the dominant males of a herd of Rocky Mountain elk that have been re-established in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, said noted outdoorsman and Pickens County resident Dennis Chastain.

"This is a historic moment that some of us knew would eventually come," Chastain said. "This is the first wild elk to roam the woods and wild places in South Carolina since they disappeared in the early 1700s."

Capt. Robert McCullough of the state Department of Natural Resources said the agency is monitoring the animal's movements.

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PICKENS COUNTY RESIDENT



PROVIDED/CARL WALSH

A wild elk has been spotted in Pickens County.

Elk

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"We've been following it like everybody else on Facebook and different things where people have been posting pictures, and we're getting reports," he said.

"Right now it hasn't caused a major problem or anything."

Caleb Cassell said he came across the elk, which is significantly larger than the indigenous deer, as it was walking down the middle of Eastatoe Creek Road.

"He's a younger elk I'd say he got kicked out of the herd in Cherokee and is wandering, looking for another herd and has gotten lost," Cassell said.

Carl Walsh, president of the South Carolina chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, took pictures of the animal, which he estimated is about 2 ½ years old, on private property in the Rocky Bottom area.

"If you had settled in South Carolina back in the late 1600's you would have had an abundance of elk. But our forefather shot them all out for clothing or food," he said. "And we haven't had an elk in 275 years."

He believes the bull, which is unafraid of humans, will keep looking for a female until he finds one, although he may have to return to North Carolina to accomplish that.

"Hopefully next time he'll bring a female with him and we can establish a small herd here in South Carolina," Walsh said.

Walsh and Chastain worked with the Legislature several years ago to get a bill passed to make it illegal to shoot elk in South Carolina, but this is the first time the law has come into play.

"We've had reports before," McCullough, of the DNR said. "This is the first time I'm aware of that we have confirmed one that had wandered down."

DNR is warning people not to approach the elk.

"People get a false sense of security, because elk don't mind being approached," said Justin McVey, a wildlife biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. "But they are still wild animals and can be very dangerous. All it would take is for that elk to swing its antlers, and it could really hurt somebody."

Tammy Wactor, a wildlife biologist with SCDNR, said the young bull elk may weigh up to 700 pounds, and she urges motorists to be careful driving on roads in the area where the animal has been seen, especially at sunrise and sunset.

The first official sighting of the elk was on Friday at Camp McCall, a South Carolina Baptist Convention camp on U.S. 178 in northern Pickens County. On Saturday, it was seen at the Sunset Post Office on State 11, and on Sunday in the Nine Times Community, also in northern Pickens County. On Sunday, it also was seen at The Reserve at Lake Keowee golf course, which is near State 133 in Sunset.

Numerous social media postings have been made with photos of the elk, some with people feeding the animal, DNR said.

Chastain, who is also a local historian, said, it's "Unlikely that the woodland buffalo and red wolf, or the Carolina parakeet, the passenger pigeon or the Eastern cougar will ever be restored in Pickens County, but it is pretty cool see the mountain elk come home after 300 years missing in action."