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Northern Michigan's Elk Herd Thrives for 100+ Years



GAYLORD, MICHIGAN – While many visitors to the Gaylord area enjoy catching a glimpse of our prestigious elk herd, few know the local history of these magnificent animals.

Once native to northern Michigan, elk went extinct in our region in the late 1800s. Our current herd can be traced all the way back to 1918, when seven Rocky Mountain elk were relocated to the Gaylord area from the western United States. After growing steadily to near 1,500 elk in the early 1960s, their numbers plummeted to only 200 in the mid-1970s due to poaching and reduced habitat quality.

Over the past four decades, extensive public and private wildlife management has greatly contributed to the success of the current elk population. An aerial survey in 2016 found an estimated population of 1,300 animals, which makes this one of the largest free-roaming elk herds east of the Mississippi.

The majority of these animals call the Pigeon River Country State Forest home. Stretching over 114,000 acres through three counties, this habitat consists of both managed open areas and natural forests. Through cutting timber, planting crops and controlled burns, the Pigeon River Forest creates unspoiled surroundings for these creatures.

2018 marked the 100th anniversary of the reintroduction of elk to the Gaylord area. In celebration of the herd's longevity and success, the State of Michigan retired the popular loon license plate and replaced it with an elk. Funds from the sale of elk license plates will continue to help wildlife management.



Elk Viewing In The Gaylord Area

Elk inhabit the Pigeon River Country State Forest year-round, but certain times are better for viewing than others. The best month is September when the males (bulls) are trying to establish dominance for mating rights with the females (cows). They are highly active during this time, making loud vocalizations (bugling), and breaking brush with their antlers to impress cows and intimidate their rivals.

Typically, Elk are active throughout the daylight hours. Several elk viewing areas have been established within their habitat. These are not the only sites where you can see elk, but they are located in known elk-gathering spots. Most viewing locations are accessible by road, but some may require a hike. The official viewing sites are marked by the DNR, although elk range far and wide in the area and may not always be present. The best viewing is done from your car since elk are accustomed to seeing cars. Use binoculars or spotting scopes for best results. Do not approach elk. Despite their generous size, they are timid animals and will not tolerate much disturbance.

Spectacular Viewing Areas:



1. The small, cleared parking area and field on Fontinalis Road, about three miles north of Sturgeon Valley Road near the Cheboygan County line.

2. At the DNR-signed elk viewing area on East Sturgeon Valley Road, about eight miles east of Vanderbilt.

3. Less than one mile north of the Osmun Road and Clark Bridge Road intersection in the Pigeon River Country State Forest.

Gaylord's City Elk Park

For a guaranteed sighting, the City of Gaylord maintains an elk herd and provides viewing areas for the public to stop and watch these impressive animals. Under the City's care, roughly 60 elk call the park home.

A new viewing area, complete with a universally accessible viewing platform, ample parking, a pavilion, restrooms and playground area will be completed in 2025.

The herd is contained on 108 acres. City staff feed the animals corn, hay and sugar beets, plus vitamins. The herd started with 3 elk obtained when a local nature center closed. Currently, several of the bulls weigh well over 800 pounds and stand roughly 6' tall. The bulls will don their massive horns during the fall and winter, dropping them in the spring.

Those interested in observing elk can receive maps and information on popular viewing areas through the Gaylord Information Center at 319 West Main St. or online at www.gaylordmichigan.net.