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# South Dakota WILDLIFE REPORT

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## Elk Population Status Update

### *2026 Biennial Report*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Native to South Dakota, elk (*Cervus elaphus*) are the largest hunted member of the deer family (Cervidae) residing in the state. Extirpated in the late 1800s, the re-establishment of elk in South Dakota is a wildlife management success story. Today several thousand elk roam free, primarily in the Black Hills forested region along with several smaller herds occupying prairie and/or agriculture landscapes. Public demand for elk hunting opportunities is strong, with hunters submitting 42,378 applications for 2,648 available elk licenses in 2025.

Elk hunting seasons in South Dakota provide an important recreational opportunity for resident sportsmen and women, and also provide a means to manage elk populations. The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks (GFP) serves to connect people and families to the outdoors through effective management of our State's parks, fisheries, and wildlife resources. South Dakota's elk resources demand prudent and increasingly intensive management to accommodate numerous and varied public demands and growing impacts from people (SDGFP 2021). More specific information on elk management objectives and strategies in South Dakota can be found in the South Dakota Elk Action Plan at <https://gfp.sd.gov/management-plans/>, while additional information regarding elk management, research, and history can be found in the Management of Elk in South Dakota at [https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/docs/elk\\_management\\_sd.pdf](https://gfp.sd.gov/UserDocs/docs/elk_management_sd.pdf).

The following report provides a statewide overview of elk surveys and assessments conducted by the GFP and an update on the population status of elk in the Black Hills.

## **POPULATION SURVEYS AND ASSESSMENTS**

### **Population Assessments**

The majority of elk herds in South Dakota occur within the Black Hills. The current Black Hills winter population objective (excluding Custer State Park and Wind Cave National Park) is 6,000-8,000 depending on habitat conditions (SDGFP 2021a). The current population objective for Custer State Park (CSP) is 500-600 wintering elk depending on habitat conditions. These goals were developed after thorough analyses of elk population data, available habitat resources on public land, private land depredation issues, and substantial input from a wide variety of publics with an interest in elk management in South Dakota.

The primary surveys and data assessments used to evaluate elk population abundance and trends in the Black Hills include the following: 1) hunting season evaluations (harvest surveys, harvest age structure, disease testing), 2) herd composition surveys, 3) survival monitoring, 4) aerial sightability surveys, and 5) population modeling.

Survey data are lacking for most prairie units and elk densities are primarily managed to abate agricultural damages on private property while at the same time to provide recreational hunting opportunity.

### **Hunting Season Evaluations**

Elk hunting licenses in South Dakota are limited in most management units and issued through a lottery draw system. For all limited elk hunting units and seasons (excluding CSP), up to 50% of elk licenses allocated in each management unit are available to those who qualify for landowner/operator preference. Based on current South Dakota Administrative Rules (ARSD), the 2024 and 2025 hunting seasons in the Black Hills began with the archery season open September 1-30 (ARSD 41:06:43). The firearm season for “any elk” licenses ran Oct 1-31 (ARSD 41:06:26:01). Antlerless firearm hunting seasons were October 15-31, Dec 1-16, and Dec 17-31. Contingency licenses are made available for Black Hills units after the harvest seasons have been set if weather and range conditions necessitate a reduction to the grazing pressure on the landscape. In 2025, 54 elk contingency licenses were issued. Hunting seasons in CSP (ARSD 41:06:27, 41:06:28, 41:06:47, 41:06:48) are similar but may vary depending on Park objectives. Prairie elk hunting seasons (ARSD 41:06:59) vary and are a collaborative effort between GFP and private landowners to manage elk populations in agricultural settings.

There are currently eight elk management units in the Black Hills (Units H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H7, H9, and CSP; Figure 1). Several of these units are further subdivided by area and season date for purposes of antlerless harvest management. In addition, there are currently eight prairie elk management units with hunting seasons [Units 09, 11, 15, 27, 35A, 35B, 49, WRA, and ERA (proposed by GFP Commission); Figure 1].

Management objective directions (increase, maintain, or decrease) are set every two years when season recommendations are brought forward to the GFP commission (Figure 1). Elk management objectives for each management unit are based on elk population assessments, habitat conditions, and social considerations. Management objectives on the prairie can vary substantially between areas.

### **Harvest Surveys**

All elk hunters, regardless of hunting success or participation, are currently surveyed to assess overall harvest and hunter success. In addition, all successful hunters are required to check-in any harvested elk to a GFP representative within 24 hours (ARSD 41:06:04:19). Hunter surveys are emailed to all elk license holders to obtain information on the number of hunting recreation days, sex and age (adult/calf) of elk harvested, type of land hunted (public vs. private), number of elk shot but not recovered, and mean satisfaction of the hunt. All license holders who list an email in their licensing profile receive an email at the end of the season followed by two reminder emails over a 2-week period.

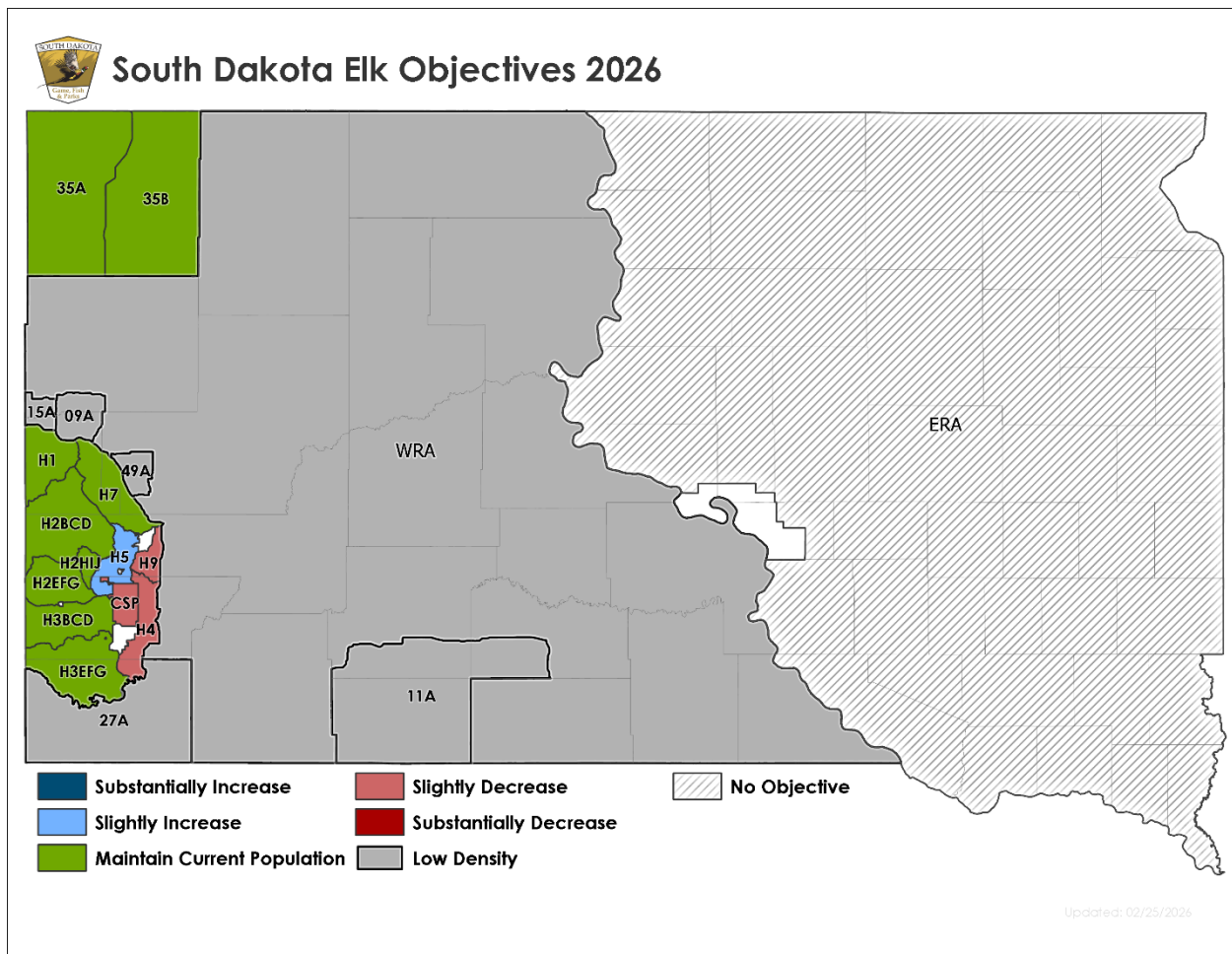


Figure 1. Population objective directions for elk units in South Dakota, 2026 (ERA is currently proposed by GFP Commission).

Returned hunter surveys are summarized and harvest statistics are generated for each unit. Proportional statistics from the sample are then accepted as representative of the unit population of hunters and applied to the total number of hunters in that unit. Hunters who do not respond to the survey are included in the hunter population when estimating harvest statistics. Confidence intervals are calculated to monitor precision. Harvest information specific to each season, unit, and license type are published annually (Huxoll 2026).

Over the past 10 years, peak elk harvest occurred in 2016, 2017, and 2025 at 1,187, 1,149, and 1320 respectively (Figure 2). Significant increases in antlerless license types and subsequent cow harvest were obtained during these years to meet population management objectives (Figures 2 and 3). The availability of “any elk” license types has steadily increased as harvest objectives for success and bull age structure have allowed (Figure 3). From 2023 to 2025, the average number of “any elk” and antlerless elk licenses sold each year has been 801 and 974, respectively.

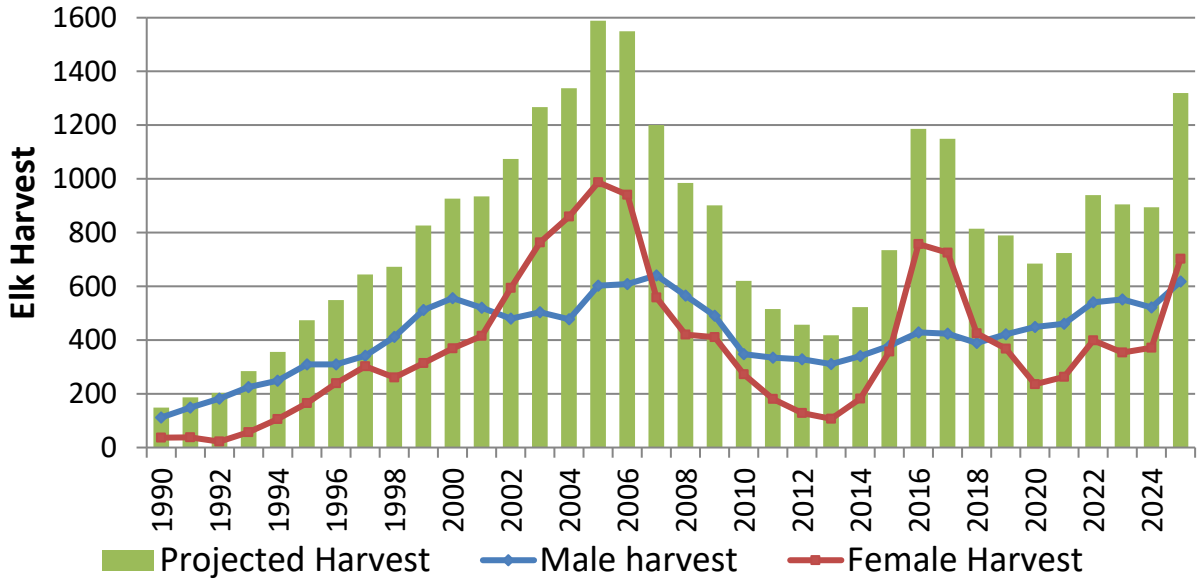


Figure 2. Harvest of elk from all hunting seasons in the Black Hills, 1990-2025.

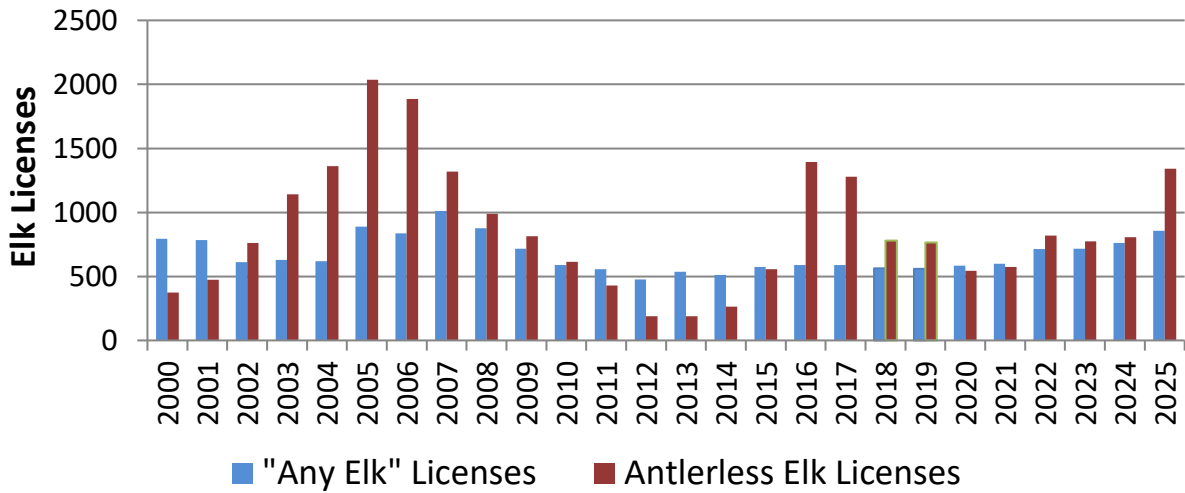


Figure 3. Total Black Hills elk license sales (firearm and archery) for antlerless and “any elk” license types, 2000-2025.

Public demand for firearm elk hunting licenses in the Black Hills is high, with 13,471 hunters applying for 1,865 available licenses in 2025 (Table 1). Hunters spent an average of 5.78 days pursuing elk in the 2025 firearm season and harvested a total of 1,164 elk. Harvest varies across each hunting unit, but Unit 2 has a higher elk population and elk harvest than all other hunting units combined (Figure 4).

Overall firearm hunter success rates for all license types in the Black Hills in the past 10 years has ranged from a low of 61% in 2024 to a high of 66% in 2016. Success for hunters in 2025 averaged 62%. The South Dakota Elk Action Plan (SDGFP 2021a; Objective 2H) established a minimum 75% hunter success threshold for hunters with an “any elk” Black Hills and CSP firearm license type. Black Hills firearm hunters with “any elk” licenses experienced an average success rate of 78% in 2025, thus exceeding the minimum thresholds established in the Elk Action Plan. Harvest success can vary substantially between years and units (Figure 5), but average success for hunters with “any elk” firearm licenses across all units in the Black Hills ranged from 61% to 100% in 2025.

Table 1. Black Hills Firearm elk harvest, 2016-2025 (Huxoll 2026).

Year	# Apps 1 <sup>st</sup> Choice	Licenses Sold	Harvest			Success Rate	Avg. Days Hunted	Average Satisfaction
			Bulls	Cows	Total			
2016	12,692	1,745	363	724	1,087	62%	4.59	5.42
2017	12,201	1,581	364	682	1,047	66%	4.77	5.50
2018	11,871	1,124	315	402	717	64%	5.08	5.36
2019	12,396	1,108	332	354	686	62%	5.00	5.48
2020	13,198	926	360	224	585	63%	5.35	5.33
2021	12,656	954	370	249	619	65%	5.70	5.40
2022	13,447	1,265	426	381	808	64%	5.78	5.51
2023	12,999	1,232	435	344	779	63%	6.13	5.41
2024	13,742	1,290	427	355	783	61%	6.36	5.05
2025	13,471	1,865	487	676	1,164	62%	5.78	5.31

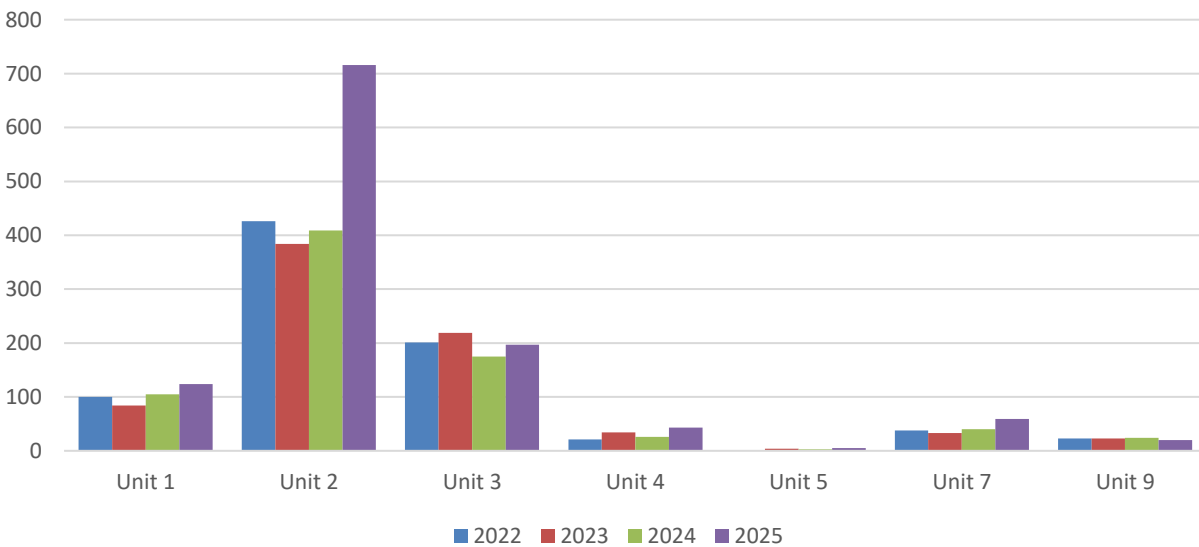


Figure 4. Black Hills firearm elk harvest for each elk hunting unit, 2022-2025.

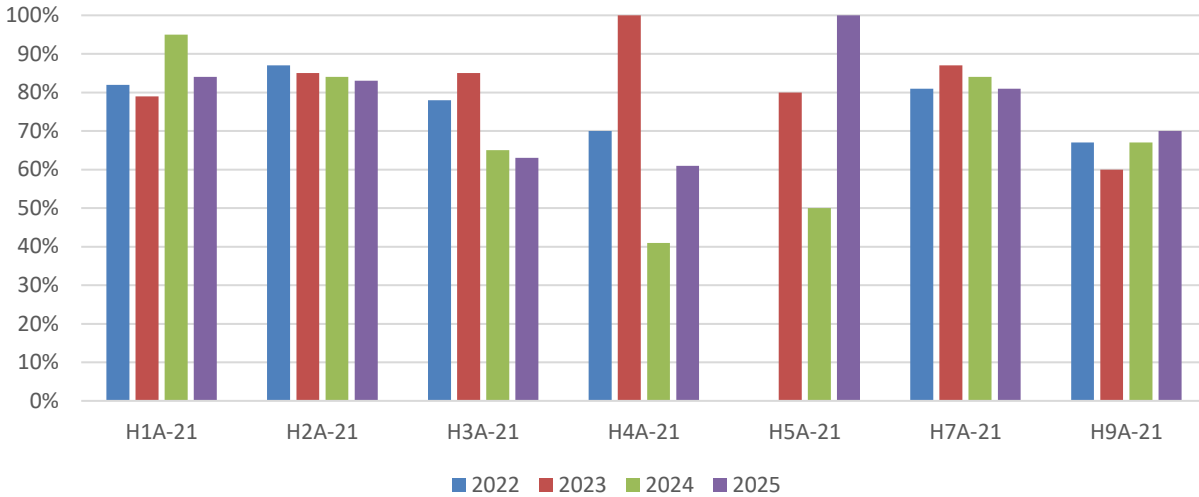


Figure 5. Black Hills firearm “any elk” license harvest success for each elk hunting unit, 2022-2025.

Similar to firearm seasons, public demand for archery elk hunting opportunities in the Black Hills is high with 6,682 hunters applying for 333 available archery elk licenses in 2025 (Table 2). Hunters spent an average of 11.91 days pursuing elk in the 2025 archery season and harvested a total of 126 elk. The Black Hills Unit 2 maintains the highest numbers of elk, ultimately producing higher archery harvest in this unit compared to all other Black Hills elk units combined (Figure 6).

Overall archery success rates the past 10 years have varied from a low of 26% in 2017 to a high of 45% in 2020 (Table 2). Success for those archery hunters with an “any elk” license in 2025 ranged from a low of 0% in Unit 5 (1 license) to a high of 56% in Unit 2 (123 licenses).

Table 2. Archery elk harvest in the Black Hills, 2016-2025 (Huxoll 2026).

Year	# Apps 1 <sup>st</sup> Choice	Licenses Sold	Harvest			Success Rate	Avg. Days Hunted	Average Satisfaction
			Bulls	Cows	Total			
2016	4,965	280	57	25	82	29%	11.11	5.40
2017	4,892	269	50	20	70	26%	11.29	5.60
2018	5,006	219	65	19	84	38%	11.70	5.50
2019	5,382	216	77	14	91	42%	11.08	5.61
2020	5,884	204	80	12	92	45%	11.24	5.90
2021	5,966	219	82	14	96	44%	11.18	5.89
2022	6,319	269	89	18	107	40%	12.27	5.87
2023	6,375	258	103	10	114	44%	11.64	5.66
2024	6,855	278	77	17	94	34%	12.66	5.46
2025	6,682	333	100	26	126	38%	11.91	5.51

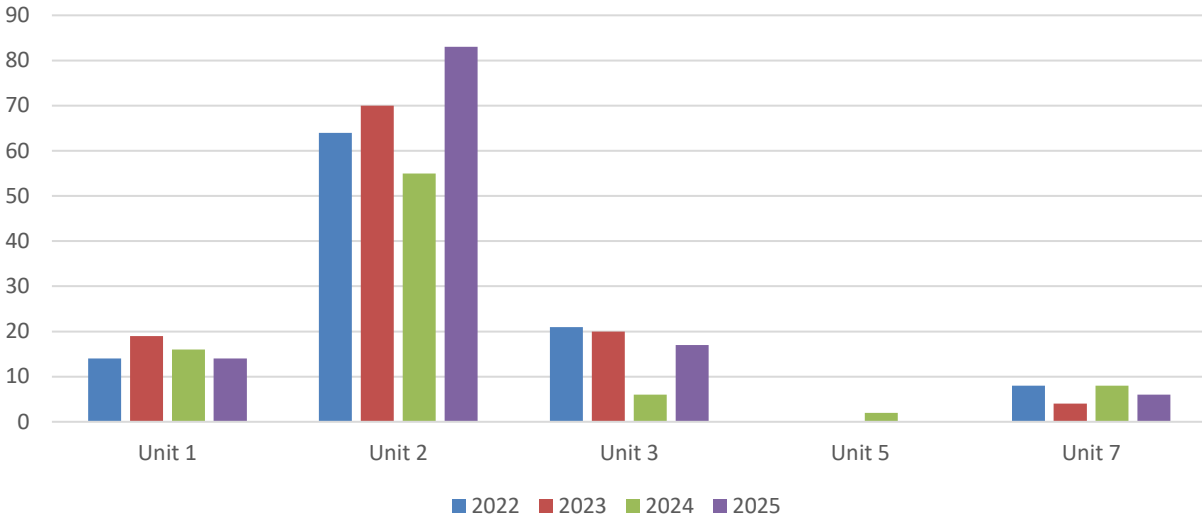


Figure 6. Black Hills Archery elk harvest, 2022-2025.

The 2025 elk season in Custer State Park began with the CSP archery season which was open September 1-30 (ARSD 41:06:28). The “any elk” CSP firearm season was open October 1 – October 31 (ARSD 41:06:27). There was no “antlerless-only” CSP firearm season in 2025. Public demand for elk hunting opportunities in CSP greatly exceeds supply, with 10,386 hunters applying for 25 firearm licenses and 5,402 applicants for 10 archery licenses in 2025 (Table 3). Hunters spent an average of 11.5 days and 6.1 days pursuing elk in the 2025 archery and firearm seasons, respectively.

Twenty-five firearm hunters in 2025 with an “any elk” license in CSP averaged 89% success and exceeded the minimum 75% success threshold established in the South Dakota Elk Action Plan (SDGFP 2021a; Objective 2H). Success for “any elk” firearm license holders over the past 4 years has ranged from a low of 89% (2025) to a high of 100% (2022-2024). Archery hunter success in CSP was 88% in 2025 for the 10 licenses issued (Table 3), but success has ranged from 33-100% the past 9 years (Table 3).

Table 3. Elk harvest in Custer State Park, 2017-2025 (Huxoll 2026).

Hunting Season	Year	Applications	Licenses	Harvest		Success	Avg. Days Hunted	Average Satisfaction
				Bull	Cow			
Archery	2017	3,704	3	1	0	33%	9.7	5.7
	2018	3,772	3	2	0	50%	11.0	5.5
	2019	4,055	3	3	0	100%	5.0	7.0
	2020	4,353	3	1	0	33%	13.7	6.5
	2021	4,456	3	1	0	33%	11.3	6.33
	2022	4,904	4	2	0	50%	20.0	5.5
	2023	5,028	4	2	0	50%	16.8	7.0
	2024	5,498	5	3	0	50%	10.3	5.5
	2025	5,402	10	9	0	88%	11.5	6.5
Firearm "Any Elk"	2017	8,828	9	8	0	88%	2.3	6.71
	2018	8,670	9	8	0	86%	5.7	5.71
	2019	8,949	9	8	0	89%	2.8	6.25
	2020	9,385	9	8	0	89%	5.8	6.89
	2021	9,215	8	8	0	100%	1.6	6.86
	2022	9,672	11	11	0	100%	4.0	6.75
	2023	9,725	11	11	0	100%	3.4	6.86
	2024	10,456	15	15	0	100%	5.3	5.79
	2025	10,386	25	22	0	89%	6.1	5.53
Firearm Antlerless Elk	2011-15	Closed	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2016	3,138	20	0	18	90%	2.2	6.2
	2017	3,436	29	1	24	86%	2.1	5.83
	2018	3,175	23	0	4	19%	3.35	2.19
	2019-25	Closed	-	-	-	-	-	-

The Prairie Elk season dates generally follow dates similar to the Black Hills, beginning as early as September and going to the end of December (ARSD 41:06:49). The number of licenses issued substantially increased in the past 4 years, primarily to address a growing elk population and depredation concerns. Hunters spent an average 8 days to harvest a total 184 elk in 2025. Average hunter success was 45% in 2025 for prairie elk hunters in South Dakota (Table 4).

Table 4. Prairie Firearm Elk harvest, 2016-2025 (Huxoll 2026).

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>Licenses</b>	<b>Harvest</b>			<b>Success</b>	<b>Avg. Days Hunted</b>	<b>Average Satisfaction</b>
	<b>Sold</b>	<b>Bulls</b>	<b>Cows</b>	<b>Total</b>			
2016	148	32	27	60	40%	4.76	4.68
2017	149	41	34	75	50%	6.43	4.81
2018	139	59	51	109	79%	5.55	5.58
2019	140	41	50	91	65%	5.73	5.43
2020	251	56	87	143	57%	5.97	5.02
2021	257	57	71	128	50%	6.57	5.05
2022	270	74	55	128	48%	7.19	4.73
2023	258	78	53	132	51%	6.78	4.84
2024	334	91	73	164	49%	8.34	4.68
2025	405	101	83	184	45%	8.00	4.65

Harvest Age Structure

Successful hunters are required to check-in harvested elk to a GFP representative within 24 hours (ARSD 41:06:04:19), at which time the middle two incisor teeth are removed from the harvested elk for aging purposes. Numerous check stations throughout the Black Hills are also established during the elk season to provide better convenience for hunters. Age structure data are used to assess herd status and evaluate harvest strategies. In 2025, approximately 1,307 usable teeth were submitted by hunters. All Black Hills bull teeth visually determined to be >1 year of age were sent to Matson’s Laboratory (Manhattan, MT) to be aged using cementum annuli techniques. Black Hills cow teeth are aged visually using tooth wear and replacement techniques.

Of the 536 Black Hills firearm and archery bull teeth aged, 72% were assessed to be 4 years of age or older (Figure 7). For CSP, 97% of the bulls harvested (30) in 2025 were 4+ years of age. The South Dakota Elk Action Plan (SDGFP 2021a; Objective 2I) establishes that GFP will manage the Black Hills and CSP elk hunting seasons (firearm and archery combined) for an average bull harvest age structure of 60% bulls 4+ years of age. Both CSP and the Black Hills elk seasons are over the age objective and have been for several years (Figure 7).

### Black Hills and CSP Archery/Firearm Bull Harvest

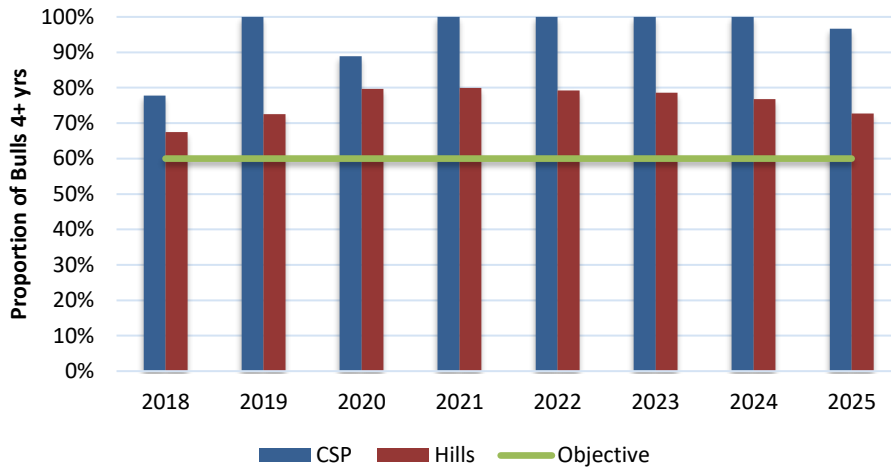


Figure 7. The proportion of bulls harvested that are 4 years of age or older in Custer State Park and the Black Hills firearm and archery elk hunting seasons, 2018-2025. The management objective of 60% is identified by the green line.

### CWD Testing of Harvested Elk

The first documentation of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in free-roaming wildlife in South Dakota was in 2001 in a white-tailed deer in Fall River County. The first free-roaming elk that tested positive for CWD was found in 2002 within Wind Cave National Park (WICA). Since 1997, CWD has been found in a total of 342 elk from a sampling effort of 9,226 elk in and around the Black Hills (197 CWD positive elk were collected from within WICA, and 48 CWD positive elk have been collected from CSP). Research has been conducted over the last four years in the Black Hills with an objective to collect samples for CWD testing. In the past two years, 459 elk have been tested with 48 returning positive for CWD (18 positive CWD results are from WICA). The locations of CWD positive elk over the last 2 years are in multiple areas of the Black Hills with higher concentrations in and around WICA and the eastern side of the Black Hills (Figure 8). Research conducted in Colorado suggests that in areas of high CWD prevalence, CWD can reduce survival rates of cow elk and decrease elk

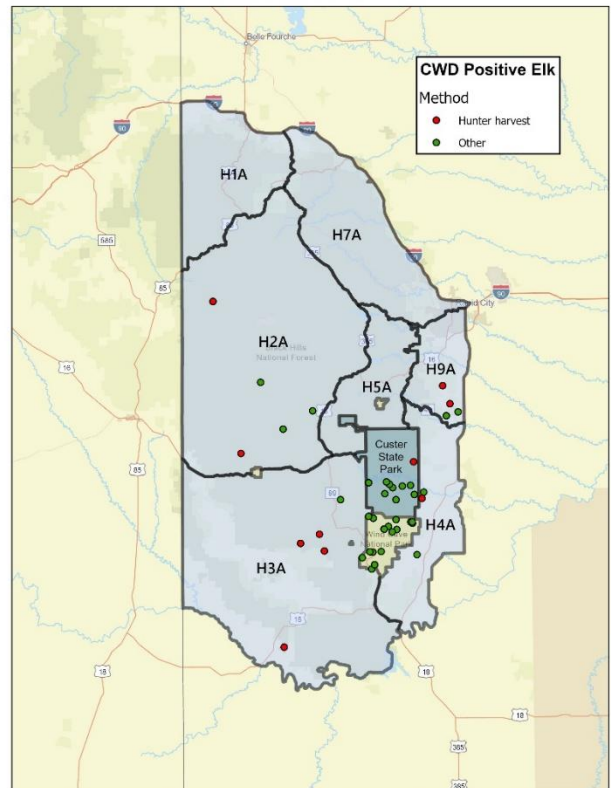


Figure 8. Map of CWD positive elk collected from hunter harvest or other collection methods, 2024/25-2025/26.

population growth (Monello et al. 2014). The long-term impacts of CWD on elk populations in South Dakota are concerning but remain largely unknown.

### **Herd Composition Surveys**

Pre-hunting season herd composition surveys are completed by driving roads or hiking in areas of known elk concentrations in August. Surveys are concentrated in locations across the Black Hills according to where elk are distributed and can be observed. All elk herds that are observed in their entirety are classified to numbers of calves, cows, and bulls. Location and date of observations are also recorded in order to reduce double-counting occurrences. Herd composition survey data are analyzed to assess sex and age ratios.

Adult sex ratios are calculated as bulls:100 cows, but potentially could under-represent antlered bulls as large calf/cow groups are likely more detectable during this time of year. Elk survey protocol during previous years allowed surveys to be completed in both August and September, but annual differences in ratios could be reflective of monthly observations if sampling strategies differed between years.

Age ratios are calculated as calves:100 cows and are used as an indicator of fall recruitment into the population. An annual recruitment rate is derived using fall age ratio data along with previously gathered survival rates of radio-collared calves from October through May (Simpson 2015).

In 2025, 1,626 elk were classified throughout the Black Hills and 483 in CSP during the fall herd composition survey. Age and sex ratios, along with binomial (95%) confidence intervals using individuals as the sampling unit were calculated for each Black Hills and CSP. Herd composition in the Black Hills was 22 bulls:100 cows (95% CI: 19-25) and 47 calves:100 cows (95% CI: 42-53, Figures 9 and 10). The long-term 15-year bull ratio is 26 bulls:100 cows, while the 3-year average (2023-25) that is used in modeling predictions of future populations is 28 bulls:100 cows. The long-term 15-year fall recruitment average is 47 calves:100 cows, while the 3-year average is 50 calves:100 cows. In CSP, herd composition was 51 calves:100 cows (95% CI: 42-62) and 15 bulls:100 cows (95% CI: 11-20) in 2025 (Figures 9 and 10).

### **Survival Monitoring**

Obtaining knowledge of adult cow elk survival rates is useful for understanding population dynamics and projecting elk trends in the Black Hills. Annual rates of change within an elk population are influenced primarily by adult female survival. From 2015 to 2022, adult cow survival in the Black Hills has been monitored annually by maintaining a representative sample of radio collared cow elk. From 2024 to 2026, GFP captured and monitored additional cow elk as part of a larger research project.

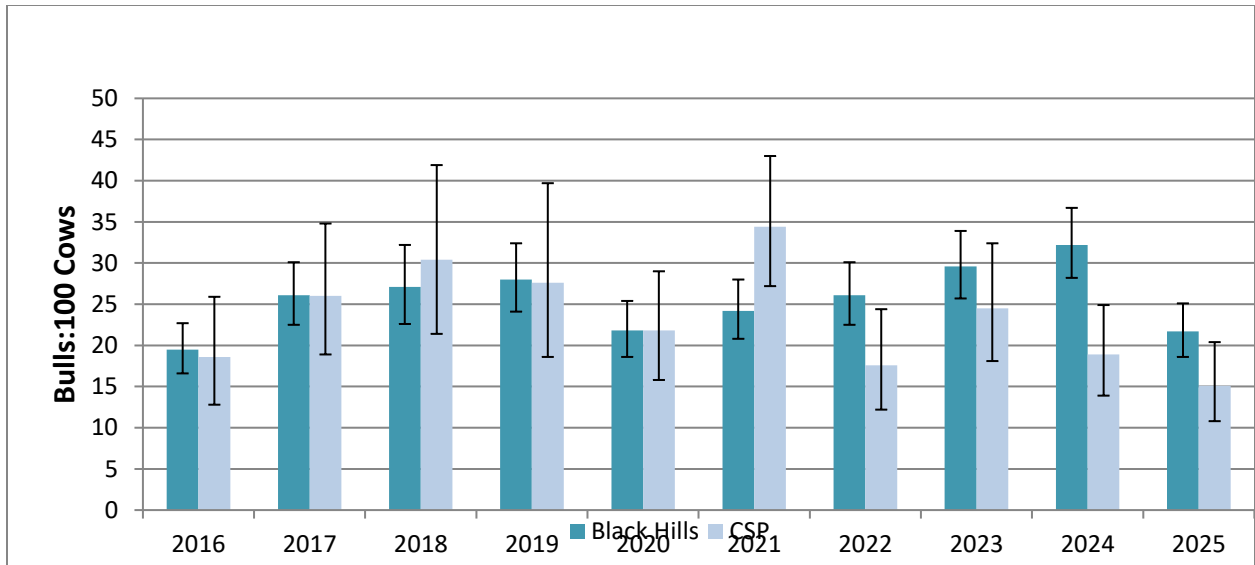


Figure 9. Fall sex ratios of elk (with 95% error bars) in the Black Hills and CSP, 2016-2025.

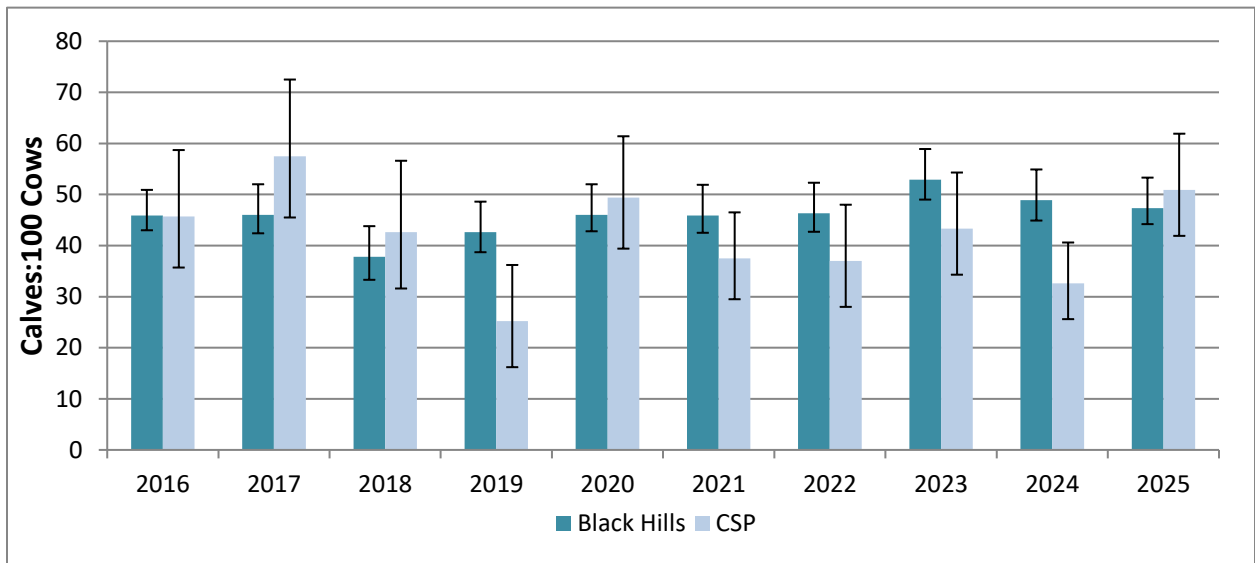


Figure 10. Fall age ratios of elk (with 95% error bars) in the Black Hills and CSP, 2016-2025.

Within the Black Hills, adult cows were captured via helicopter dart gunning and chemically immobilized using a combination of butorphanol, azaperone, and medetomidine (BAM; ZooPharm, Laramie, WY). Monitoring alive or dead status occurs within 12-16 days post-capture and all mortalities (<16 days post capture) are labeled as capture-related mortalities, except for vehicle mortalities or predation. All mortalities are investigated to verify death of the animal via physical evidence and collect Chronic Wasting Disease samples. Hunter harvest is an important metric used in population modeling and collar reporting by hunters is a vital

step in obtaining the most accurate data possible. Survival rates are calculated from time-to-event data using a hierarchical piecewise constant hazard model, smoothed among monthly intervals. The multinomial distribution partitioned hazards to estimate cause-specific mortality rates that are used in population projection models (Table 5; Walsh et al. 2018).

Population models are heavily data driven and reliable abundance and trend estimates require statistically valid survival estimates. From 2015 to 2020, GFP captured and radio collared approximately 260 adult elk in the Black Hills. Captured animals have traditionally been collared with VHF radio collars, but all 35 captured cow elk in 2020 were fitted with GFP collars. In addition, GFP captured and GPS collared 150 cow elk in 2024, 52 in 2025, and 60 in 2026 to provide additional data for a research project on elk movements, habitat use, and survival.

Many of the elk captured and wintering in the Jasper fire area exhibit migratory behaviors similar to what was documented by Simpson (2015), but elk in other herds appear to remain more localized in certain parts of the Black Hills (Figure 11). Over the past 11 years of monitoring collared cow elk, annual survival was highest in 2021 and 2023 at 94% (Table 5). Additional analyses and write-up will occur in the future when elk monitoring has been completed.

Table 5. Black Hills adult (>1-year-old) cow elk annual survival and cause-specific mortality rates, 2015-2025.

Year	Survival	Harvest Rate	Other Mortality Rate	# Monitored
2015	87% (78 - 94%)	7% (2 - 13%)	6% (2 - 12%)	81
2016	76% (67 - 83%)	20% (13 - 28%)	5% (2 - 9%)	102
2017	70% (61 - 78%)	21% (14 - 30%)	9% (4 - 15%)	109
2018	82% (75 - 88%)	10% (6 - 16%)	8% (4 - 13%)	116
2019	85% (78 - 91%)	9% (5 - 14%)	6% (3 - 11%)	141
2020	86% (80-91%)	4% (2 - 7%)	10% (6 - 15%)	151
2021	94% (88 - 98%)	3% (1 - 8%)	3% (1 - 7%)	114
2022	77% (65 - 86%)	11% (4 - 19%)	12% (5 - 20%)	72
2023	94% (83 - 99%)	3% (0 - 10%)	3% (0 - 10%)	40
2024	86% (80 - 91%)	5% (2 - 9%)	8% (4 - 13%)	166
2025	83% (78 - 88%)	7% (0 - 11%)	8% (5 - 13%)	175

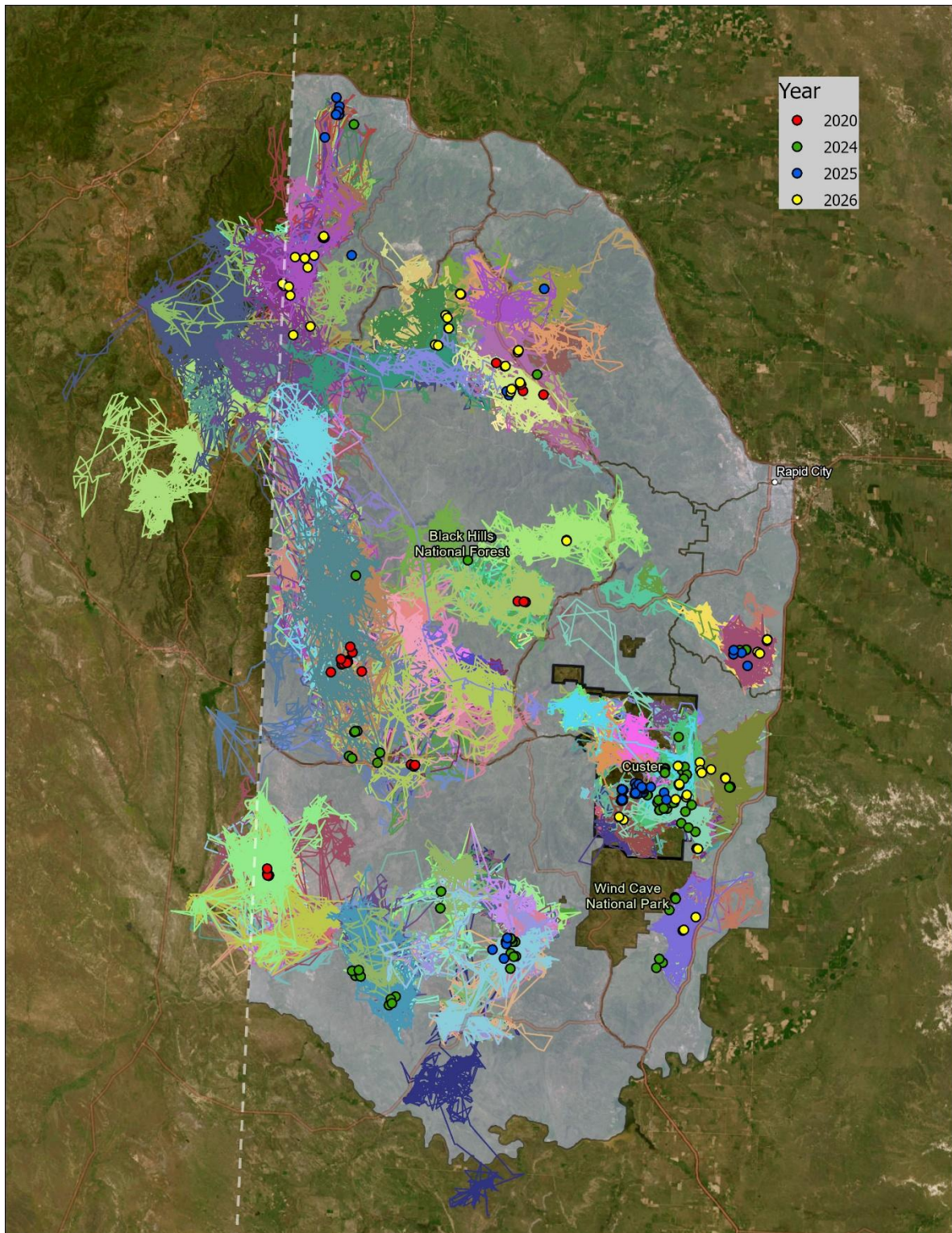


Figure 11. Elk capture locations from 2020, 2024, 2025 and 2026 and their subsequent movements displayed with each colored line representing a unique individual adult cow elk wearing a GPS radio collar in the Black Hills of South Dakota, January 2020 – February 2026.

## Aerial Sightability Surveys

In 2009, efforts began to develop an elk aerial sightability model specific to the Black Hills of South Dakota (Jarding 2010, Phillips 2011, SDGFP unpublished). The resulting model estimated elk sightability as  $\mu = 0.1446 - 0.0361 (\% \text{ visual obstruction}) + 0.1001 (\text{group size}) + 0.0158 (\% \text{ snow cover})$  and is currently used to correct for elk missed during the aerial survey in the Black Hills.

Aerial surveys of the entire Black Hills have been completed in 2013, 2016, 2020 and 2025 (Figure 12). In 2025, based on concerns over aerial hazards and areas void of elk, GFP flew approximately 80% of all delineated flight subunits in the Black Hills. A total of 7,388 elk were counted in 2025 (Figure 13) in the Black Hills hunting units, excluding CSP and WICA National Park. The 2025 sightability model winter estimate of elk in the Black Hills (excluding CSP and WICA) was 7,923 (95% CI: 7,604 – 9,143) elk. Within CSP, 749 elk were counted, and the model adjusted 2025 estimate was 765 (95% CI: 754 – 846).

Aerial surveys provide great information on the wintering distribution of elk in the Black Hills (Figure 13). The Black Hills population objective (excluding CSP and WICA) is 6,000 to 8,000 depending on habitat conditions (SDGFP 2021a). Assessing elk unit densities during the fall hunting seasons is accomplished by distributing the Black Hills winter estimate into each elk unit using previous years' average harvest proportions and trail camera survey data. Unit license allocations and unit population estimates and trends are then combined to ensure overall Black Hills elk are managed within the established objective range.

Aerial elk surveys are conducted every four years (SDGFP 2021a), however, due to lack of adequate snowfall the 2024 aerial survey was rescheduled for the winter of 2025. Population estimates from aerial surveys will be compared with modeled population projections to validate modeling efforts in years without surveys.



Figure 12. Photo of elk herd during aerial sightability survey, 2016.

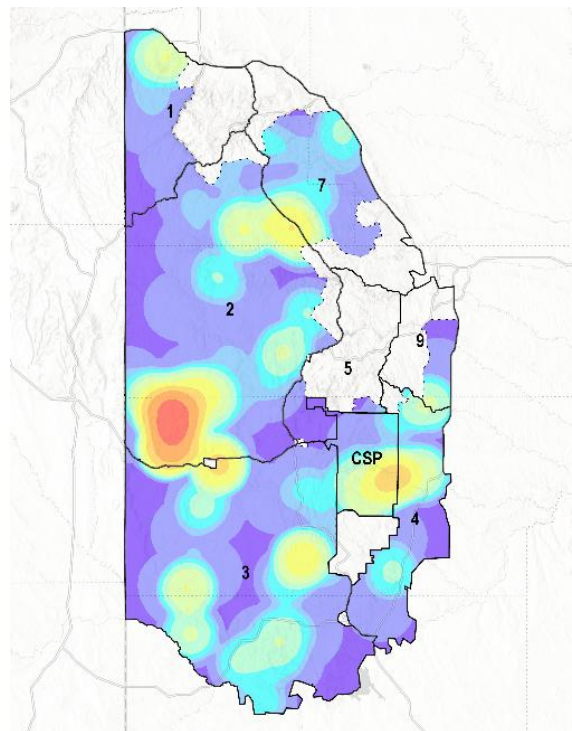


Figure 13. Aerial Sightability survey heat map of elk counts in 2025.

## Population Modeling

Population projection models are used to annually estimate abundance and rate of population change for 3 of every 4 years when aerial estimates are not available. When we have aerial elk population estimates we can use these as a “correction factor” for our population projections models. We used the 2025 aerial estimates (7,923 elk in the Black Hills) as a base starting point for the current population projection. Population projections incorporate herd composition ratios, wounding, non-hunting mortality, and emigration rates, and harvest. A 3-year average of 28 adult bulls:100 adult cows from 2023-2025 fall herd composition data was used to estimate adult bulls and adult cows on September 1 (fall) from the annual ground herd composition survey. Calves were recruited into the fall population by multiplying the adult cows by the 2023-2025 average of 50 calves:100 adult cows. Next, cohort-specific harvest, multiplied by 15% to account for wounding loss, was subtracted from the fall population. Annual (Sep. 1 to Aug. 31) calf non-hunting mortality (27%), adult female non-hunting mortality (7%), and adult bull non-hunting mortality (15%), estimated from radio collared elk in the Black Hills, was used to remove annual non-hunting losses from each fall population cohort. In addition, bull calf emigration rates are used to account for net losses of bull calves from yearling dispersal. To predict how tag recommendations may impact growth rates, change in harvest is assumed to be additive to non-hunting mortality rates. Changes in license type allocations from the previous year were multiplied by 5-year average license type success rates, and the resulting harvest estimates were used with average non-hunting mortality, wounding loss, emigration, and recruitment rates to project the population in future years. Population projection results suggested the overwinter Black Hills elk population of 7,797 by the winter of 2026 which is a slight decrease in the elk population decreased by 1.12% from 2025. At present, the elk tag allocations will ensure the elk population remains between 7,700 and 7,900 individuals in the Black Hills.

The same elk population model projections are used for CSP. Data from aerial surveys in 2025 resulted in an estimate of 765 elk wintering in CSP. The 3-yr average was 19 bulls:100 adult cows and 42 calves:100 adult cows. There were an estimated 782 elk (95% CI: 419-526) in CSP for the winter of 2026. To predict how different tag recommendations may impact growth rates, change in harvest is assumed to be additive, and various harvest simulations are conducted to ensure CSP is maintaining the elk population objective.

## SUMMARY

The GFP conducts several surveys and assessments to better understand elk population abundance and trends in the Black Hills. GFP establishes hunting unit objectives to manage elk densities towards the overall population objective of 6,000 to 8,000 wintering elk in the Black Hills and 500 to 600 wintering elk in Custer State Park, all dependent upon habitat conditions (SDGFP 2021a). Surveys are completed annually or periodically to assess harvest, disease, herd composition, reproduction, survival, and abundance.

Hunter surveys and mandatory elk check-ins are conducted annually to estimate harvest, hunter success and satisfaction, and harvested elk age structure. Minimum harvest success thresholds for hunters with “any elk” licenses in the Black Hills and CSP were established in the South Dakota Elk Action Plan (SDGFP 2021a); success thresholds for both areas are being met and exceeded. In addition, minimum harvest age objectives established in the Elk Action Plan were also exceeded the past four years.

Annual herd composition surveys provide critical information on fall recruitment and bull to cow ratios of the elk herd. Over the past three years, calf-to-cow and bull-to-cow ratios in the Black Hills have averaged 50 calves:100 cows and 28 bulls:100 cows, respectively. Annual capture and radio collaring efforts provide an opportunity to gather important data on survival rates; monitoring of radio collared adult cow elk survival provides insights on the impacts of antlerless harvest rates and population trends. Antlerless harvest varied across study areas of the Black Hills and resulted in an average cow survival in 2025 if 83%. Overall herd growth rates of elk in the Black Hills have been reduced and given observed survival and recruitment the population is expected to stay within the stated objective of 6,000-8,000.

Sightability surveys are completed approximately every four years and provide periodic abundance estimates of wintering elk herds, and important “anchor points” for population models. Aerial surveys completed in the winter of 2025 resulted in an elk estimate of about 7,920 in the Black Hills and 760 in CSP. Population models project the Black Hills elk population in the winter of 2026 to an approximate 7,800 in the Black Hills and 780 in Custer State Park. Assuming future elk population demographics are similar to current observations, along with hunting license recommendations, elk should continue to slowly grow at 1% annually in the Black Hills and decrease slowly at 5% in CSP.

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