

By Steve Alder, of “Idaho for Wildlife”, Lewiston, Idaho. Photos provided by Steve Alder and Lewis Turcott of Orofino, Idaho. Lewis and Steve camped for a full week in Feb 2009 to provide this report.

The following pictures were taken during the beginning of February 2009. The location was along the North Fork of the Clearwater River in North Central Idaho. Historically the elk had a difficult time in heavy winters just to survive without the addition of the wolf in their ecosystem. During these rough winters, the elk are concentrated and forced into narrow canyons at lower elevations where they attempt to find adequate feed and struggle through the winter. During these winters, the elk are reduced to a small percentage of their traditional range and are very concentrated. The elk can be literally trapped in these narrow canyons during deep snow conditions as the snow prohibits the elk from escaping the wolf. Another condition that hinders the elk from escape is the deep crusted snow after the snow thaws and freezes again. The elk's hooves fall through the crusted snow allowing easy killing by the wolves. In past years, we have documented dozens of “surplus” or “Sport killed” elk that were just killed and uneaten. Now with the elk numbers at an all time low, we are observing less surplus killing than previously as the wolves are running out of their traditional prey base as the elk numbers in this region are declining very rapidly.

The saddest aspect of the kill involves the extraction of the unborn calf, (Fetus). Without exception over the many years of photographing wolf killed elk, we have never observed one cow elk that didn't have the fetus removed. In fact we have found cow elk still alive with the fetus ripped out! After a cow elk is downed by the wolves, the first thing we have observed is that the wolves extract and eat the fetus. Sometimes they will take a bite out of a rear quarter but many times they will leave the remainder of the carcass until a later date. In essence each time a cow elk is killed, two elk are gone and calf recruitment ceases. A prominent Canadian wolf biologist verified this fetus extraction ritual a few years ago while I was researching this subject. At the time, IDFG biologists denied these findings as false and unfounded and indicated that our wolves are not pulling fetuses.



When we first saw these elk, they were circled up in a defensive pattern with their rear quarters up against each other and in a perfect circle. One must truly respect the elk for this defensive coordination and unfortunately I didn't have my video camera ready in time to capture it on film. A large pack of wolves was on the left bank of the river and once the wolves saw us they ran up the mountain to the left and went out of sight. Once the wolves ran off, the elk left the river and began feeding as they seemed to relax as if they knew we were not going to bother them as we had caused the wolf pack to leave.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for the suffering, trauma and stress the elk must endure because of the wolf. Basically this is their existence: They feed up the South Slopes of the river for what food they can find and the wolves' attack the elk herd every few days usually killing an elk and the remaining elk run to the river for safety where they may stand in the freezing water sometimes for days! Then the entire nightmare repeats itself!



Wolves had forced these elk into the river and the ice banks were so deep the elk could not get back on the bank of the river!



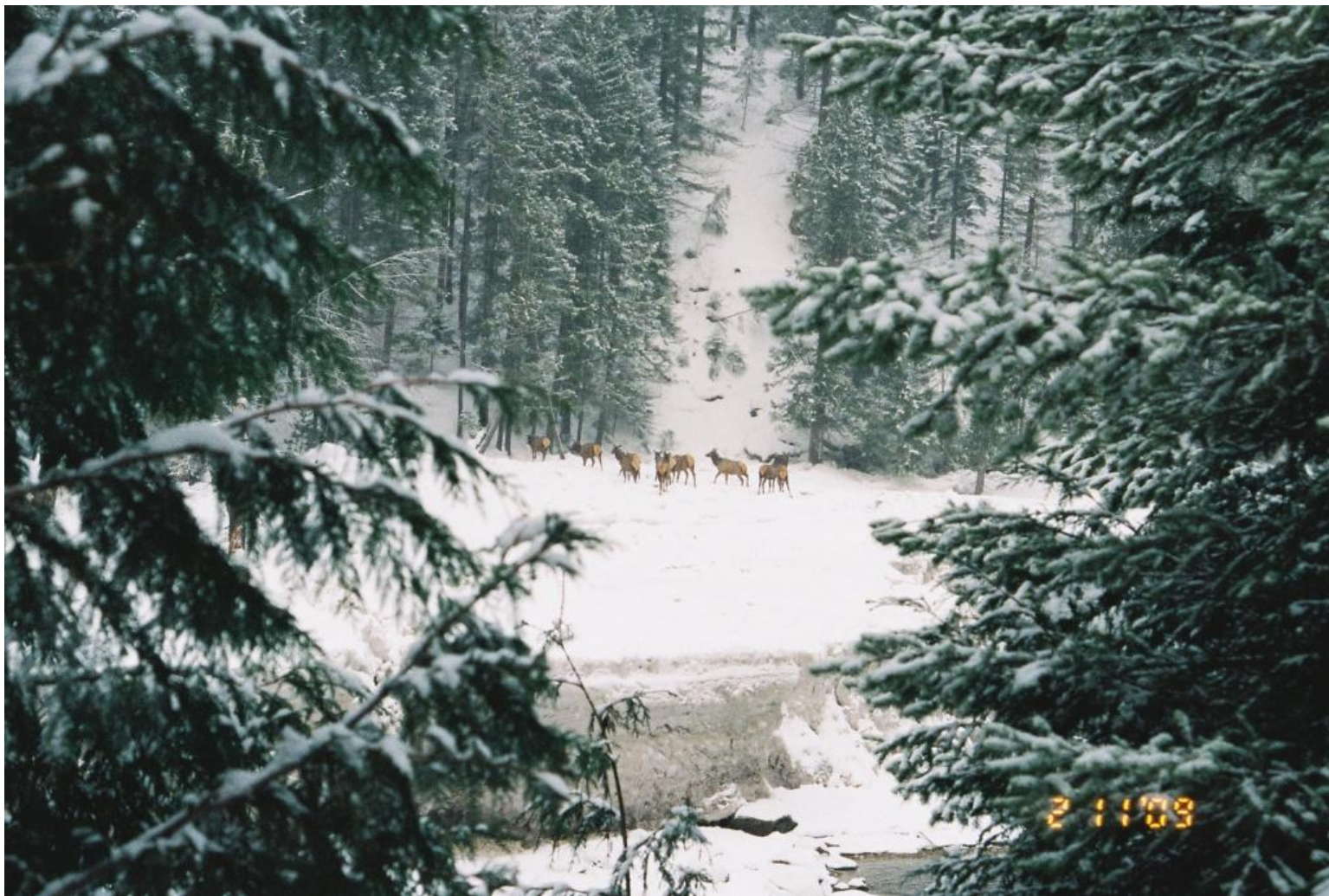
The ice is 15-20 feet thick in some areas of the river.



We have found where wolves run elk off cliffs and sometimes into deep ravines where they are easily caught and killed. Once the elk gets to the river they are much safer and the wolves know this.



These elk had been chased into the river by wolves and when we appeared they began feeding and appeared to relax with the wolves temporarily gone.



white tail deer



The bloody trail left after the wolves finished dragging their prey around for some fun. We have found many deer kills where it was obvious the deer were “played” with during or after the kill.





We found this recently collared elk and immediately called the IDFG on the Satellite phone to report the kill, location and the tag identification numbers. The IDFG had located a pack of 15 wolves in Cayuse creek, a tributary to the North Fork and collared 5 wolves in that pack. Then IDFG collared 5 more wolves in another pack of 11 approximately where this elk was found. We guessed this elk had been tagged and collared within the prior 2 days. We removed the \$2,000 collar and returned it to the IDFG office within a few days. Apparently the wolf collars cost approximately \$4,000!





Above are 2 of the 4 elk found and killed by wolves near Big Island on Dworshak reservoir. A spike bull that was found was severely injured and still alive, but died soon. All 4 elk were last year's calves. We find very few calf elk as they are much easier to catch and kill by the wolves.



Last years photo of a bull that was chased onto thin ice and drowned. We verified this with the recent tracks.



January 2009 wolves chasing elk on Anderson Ranch causing multiple elk to fall through the ice, (See below).



January 2009 at Anderson Ranch reservoir where Elk were chased by a pack of wolves onto the ice and drowned

