



**Background:**

Bobcat Ridge is home to a migratory herd of over 300 elk in the winter (November-March) and about 60 elk in the summer. The concern is that a potential resident herd may be forming leading to resource damage. Colorado Parks and Wildlife manages all wildlife in the state and the

City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department manages Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. The goal for the elk herd is to prevent a resident herd from developing, and better partner in regional herd-health management.

Currently, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the City of Fort Collins do not actively manage the elk herd at Bobcat Ridge:

- There is no hunting allowed
- Licensed hunters are not permitted to travel through Bobcat Ridge to access adjacent National Forest land.

**Why is a resident elk herd a concern?**

- Pressures created by predators, weather, and hunting are not routinely moving elk, potentially leading to:
  - Overgrazing/browsing, causes plant species diversity to decline making it difficult for other wildlife to compete.
  - Creation of permanent game trails through overuse. These trails may be used by visitors, further fragmenting the habitat.
- Once established, a resident elk herd is difficult to manage and remove.
- Elk may strain surrounding farm and ranchland by damaging crops and fencing.
- Elk are aggressive during calving and rutting seasons, a potential concern for visitor safety.
- Once constructed, Chimney Hollow Reservoir (south of Bobcat Ridge) is expected to displace about 600 elk, adding to the population at Bobcat Ridge.

**Examples of nearby lands with hunting regulations:**

- Larimer County allows carry-through at Eagle’s Nest and Hermit Park open spaces.
- Larimer County’s Red Mountain Open Space allows hunting.
- Lory State Park allows hunting.
- Soapstone Prairie Natural Area allows a limited pronghorn hunt.
- Boulder County is grappling with a resident elk issue at Rabbit Mountain Open Space where hunting is not allowed. Their resident herd started with 40 elk and has since grown to over 250 animals in five years.

**Options considered:**

**1. Change nothing but continue to evaluate the elk herd for signs of permanent residency.**

Pros

Continued opportunities for year-round elk viewing as a visitor experience.  
Limits city ability to effectively manage elk herd.

Cons

Risks the establishment of a resident herd causing resource damage; once a herd is established, it is difficult to remove.

**2. Allow licensed hunters to travel through Bobcat Ridge to access the National Forest while monitoring changes in herd dynamics and range health.**

Pros

Puts pressure on elk to encourage natural movement and migration which may prevent the establishment of a resident herd.

City does not need to manage for an onsite hunt.

Creates a new recreation opportunity in the area.

Brings policy into consistency with Gateway Natural Area.

Cons

Management of hunter access/parking may be difficult since evening and overnight parking is not permitted.

Potential user conflict (concern about viewing firearms or harvested animals).

Hunting opportunity may not be utilized (due to distance from trailhead).

Hunter pass-through may not prevent a resident elk herd from forming.

**3. Offer a limited permit elk hunt (rifle or archery) on Bobcat Ridge Natural Area while monitoring changes in herd dynamics and range health.**

Pros

New recreation opportunity.

More likely to be utilized than pass-through opportunity.

Less chance of establishing a resident herd.

Restores a historic use of the site.

Cons

May require a brief natural area closure.

Potential visitor conflict (firearms, harvesting animals).

Safety measures would need to be carefully developed to coordinate hunting with existing heavy visitation.

This option requires the most investment of City resources and an increase of ranger responsibilities.

**Draft Recommendation:**

Natural Areas recommends option 2; allowing hunters with a valid state hunting license to access the National Forest through Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. This alternative would put pressure on the elk during hunting seasons, distributing them to other areas, contributing to region-wide herd management efforts of Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and potentially preventing a resident herd from forming at Bobcat Ridge. During other parts of the year, Bobcat Ridge will continue to host a migratory herd.

It is proposed that this access be piloted for three seasons at which point Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the City will look at the effects and evaluate next steps.