

# UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

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## UW STUDENTS, FACULTY, GAME AND FISH PROBE BAFFLING ELK DEATHS

Researchers from the Wyoming State Veterinary Laboratory and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) along with University of Wyoming students are investigating the mysterious deaths of 193 elk found in the last two weeks southwest of Rawlins.

Students in a wildlife diseases class accompanied Department of Veterinary Sciences faculty and staff members and WGFD personnel to collect blood samples and perform necropsies on some of the downed animals scattered over a 10 to 15-square-mile area.

Tissues from 10 elk are now being analyzed in the state veterinary laboratory to determine the cause of death. Prior to harvesting, the affected animals were found alert but unable to move and exhibiting muscle lesions and edema.

“It’s big,” says UW Toxicology Professor Merl Raisbeck of the sudden die-off. Both he and WGFD officials say it is unusual to see such a large loss of elk at one time.

The University of Wyoming and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperate.

Walt Cook, a WGFD veterinarian, is leading the diagnostic investigation with support from the state laboratory in Laramie.

Raisbeck and Assistant Professor Todd Cornish are testing tissues, blood and environmental samples to look for clues. “Preliminary data doesn’t point to an infectious disease,” Raisbeck says. “We are thinking toxins, but none is showing up so far. These are early days in the investigation.”

Kari Kontour, a senior pre-veterinary major from Casper, was one of several UW students in Professor Beth Williams’s wildlife diseases class who visited the site to perform hands-on research on three of the downed animals.

“The elk were alert and could see us but were weak and couldn’t get up,” Kontour reports. “There were divots on the ground like snow angels showing that they were trying to kick and move.”

The student says she and the other observers could see some muscle lesions in the hind legs of the first elk necropsied. A second elk had an accumulation of gel-like fluid under parts of its skin.

Although Kontour has performed necropsies before on severely rotten animals, she says this is the first time she has participated in fresh field examinations. “It was interesting to see the post-mortem tissue,” she says. “I learned a lot about anatomy, too.”

Kontour appreciates the fact that Cornish used students as part of the field investigation team and says she will go back to the scene if another trip is organized.

“It was sad to see the animals out there, but it was a great learning experience,” she adds.

The discovery of dead and dying elk was first reported to the WGFD earlier this month when a hunter found two live but immobile animals about 15 miles from Rawlins. According to

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spokesman Tom Reed, WGFD officials have since located dozens of carcasses through intensive aerial and land searches. “They are all in good nutritional condition, and there is no evidence that they were harassed or run until exhaustion,” he says.

He notes that of the 193 elk discovered so far, only five were bulls while the rest were cows and calves. The bulls found had either three spikes or two-branch antlers.

“This time of year bulls run in bachelor bands,” Reed says. The lack of afflicted bulls, he adds, “might indicate that either we haven’t found mature bulls yet or that because they are running in different areas maybe they weren’t exposed to whatever is bothering these other elk.”

People are asked to stay out of elk hunting unit 108 while the investigation is ongoing. “We’re exploring all of the options and waiting for results from the state veterinary laboratory,” Reed says. “This is unusual and baffling right at the moment.”

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