

Elk Use of Wallows and Potential Chronic Wasting Disease Transmission

Authors: VerCauteren, Kurt C., Burke, Patrick W., Phillips, Gregory E., Fischer, Justin W., Seward, Nathan W., et al.

Source: Journal of Wildlife Diseases, 43(4) : 784-788

Published By: Wildlife Disease Association

URL: <https://doi.org/10.7589/0090-3558-43.4.784>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Elk Use of Wallows and Potential Chronic Wasting Disease Transmission

Kurt C. VerCauteren,^{1,3} Patrick W. Burke,¹ Gregory E. Phillips,¹ Justin W. Fischer,¹ Nathan W. Seward,¹ Bruce A. Wunder,² and Michael J. Lavelle¹ ¹United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services, National Wildlife Research Center, 4101 LaPorte Avenue, Fort Collins, Colorado 80521-2154, USA; ²Colorado State University, Department of Biology, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1878, USA; ³Corresponding author (email: kurt.c.vercauteren@aphis.usda.gov)

ABSTRACT: Deposition of prions into the environment by infected animals may contribute to transmission and spread of chronic wasting disease (CWD) among free-ranging cervids, and identification of such environmental sources may provide an avenue for managing CWD. We evaluated the role that wallow use by elk (*Cervus elaphus*) may play in CWD transmission by monitoring wallows with animal-activated cameras throughout their period of use. We monitored 39 wallows from 5 August 2005 to 14 October 2005. Elk visited 20 sites; we recorded 22 events when only male elk wallowed and 374 additional events when male and female elk had naso-oral contact with wallow contents. Because wallows are foci of male elk activity, behaviors at wallows could potentially contribute to the maintenance and transmission of CWD. Our findings, however, suggest that because wallows are only used an average of one or two times a season they may not be important in CWD transmission. The data also suggest that mineral licks could be more important in CWD transmission because they were used more frequently and by three species that contract CWD.

Key words: *Cervus elaphus*, chronic wasting disease, elk, transmission, wallow.

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a naturally occurring transmissible spongiform encephalopathy that affects North American cervids such as deer (*Odocoileus* spp.), elk (*Cervus elaphus*; Spraker et al., 1997), and moose (*Alces alces*; Kreeger et al., 2006). Chronic wasting disease is a serious concern for wildlife managers, hunters, and the farmed-cervid industry throughout North America (Williams et al., 2002). Pathologic isoforms of prions, the infectious agents of CWD, are shed in saliva (Mathiason et al., 2006) and potentially in feces (Salman, 2003) and urine of cervids (Seeger et al., 2005). Chronic wasting disease prions may accumulate in

the environment and persist ≥ 2 yr in soil (Johnson et al., 2006), thereby complicating efforts to eradicate CWD (Miller et al., 2004).

Communal use of relatively small areas, such as wallows, by cervids may facilitate transmission of CWD by serving as reservoirs for prion accumulation. Wallows are bowl-shaped depressions (Ripple et al., 1988), usually filled with muddy water, and are typically created near springs (Struthsaker, 1967) or within mineral licks (Murie, 1951). Although wallows are most easily identified after recent use, they can be recognized for years as small pools (Murie, 1951).

The behavior of wallowing is common among a variety of species in North America including bison (*Bos bison*; McMillan et al., 2000), elk (Struthsaker 1967), and moose (Altmann, 1959). During the breeding season (rut), male elk create a wallow or refresh an existing wallow with their antlers and hooves (Geist, 2002). They then urinate (Geist, 2002), occasionally ejaculate, and lie down, rubbing their sides, neck, antlers, and muzzle in the resultant odoriferous mud (Struthsaker 1967). Likely functions of wallowing include claiming territory (de Vos et al., 1967), cooling (Murie, 1951), repelling insects (Graf, 1956), and self-marking (Geist, 2002). Multiple elk may use a single wallow (Struthsaker 1967) and individuals occasionally revisit wallows (Geist, 2002). Communal use of wallows may increase the risk of CWD transmission through the shared use of a site contaminated with bodily excretions potentially including CWD prions. Our objectives were to examine the use of

wallows by elk and to determine if activity at wallows were likely to facilitate CWD transmission.

We conducted our study in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) in north-central Colorado (40°47'N, 105°75'W). Chronic wasting disease in elk was first recognized in RMNP in 1981 (Spraker et al., 1997). Prevalence rates of CWD in elk in game management units (GMUs) immediately adjacent to the region of RMNP where we conducted the study (GMUs 19 and 20) were 1.2 and 1.7% respectively (Miller, 2006). Our study area encompassed about 23 km² of meadows, coniferous forest, and alpine tundra ranging in elevation from 3,018 m to 3,463 m. We predicted locations of wallows based on topography and the presence of springs by reviewing topographical maps and aerial photography. We conducted ground searches during June and July 2005 to locate potential wallows. We considered depressions 1–2 m in diameter, >0.1 m in depth, and devoid of vegetation as potential wallows.

We collected data at wallows 24 hr/day, 7 days/wk using animal-activated digital cameras (Reconyx Silent Image, La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA). We installed cameras approximately 10 m to the south of wallows (to reduce the likelihood of overexposed images); cameras were attached low on trees (0.5 m above ground) to minimize damage by elk rubbing their antlers. We programmed cameras to take 99 images over a 2-min period upon activation with no lag between activations. Time, date, and temperature were recorded on each image. Images were stored on 512-MB compact flash cards capable of storing as many as 12,000 images, or 120 activations. We replaced flash cards and batteries twice/month.

We viewed images using Silent Image Map View Professional Software (Reconyx Silent Image). We defined each activation in which an animal was recumbent within a wallow a “wallowing event.” Furthermore, we recorded a “contact event” for

activations in which an animal did not lie down but made naso-oral contact with wallow contents. If >5 min lapsed between the end of an activation and beginning of another, it was considered independent unless we could confirm the same elk initiated both activations. We used unique physical characteristics (e.g., antlers) to differentiate among animals for estimating minimum numbers of individuals using wallows. To eliminate the possibility of recounting individuals, we used the maximum number of indistinguishable animals (e.g., unmarked cows and calves, typical mature bulls) captured in one image as the minimum number of individual animals using a wallow, likely resulting in conservative estimates. Lastly, when discernable, we documented urine spraying and naso-oral contact by wallowing individuals.

We calculated scaled activity indices to account for inconsistencies in camera operation (due to effects of differing levels of animal activity on battery life) and to standardize values. We first defined the wallowing period as the total number of hours cameras were functioning between first and last events for a given wallow. We then calculated a wallowing index (*WI*) for each wallow based on the wallowing period divided by 24 hr (D =total number of days the cameras were functioning). Lastly, we divided the total number of wallowing events (*WE*) by *D* ($WI=WE/D$). Additionally, we used a similar method to describe general use involving nonwallowing naso-oral contact with wallow contents (contact index, *CI*), but focused on the number of days that cameras were functioning between the first and last contact events (contact period). We divided the total number of contact events (*CE*) by days ($CI = CE/D$).

We monitored 39 focal sites (32 wallows and seven mineral licks in which wallowing occurred) from 5 August 2005 to 15 October 2005. Most wallowing events (17 of 22; 77%) occurred between 2:00 PM and 9:00 PM and occurred between 29 August

and 8 September 2005 (16 of 22; 73%). The 22 wallowing events occurred at 13 sites and we documented a minimum of 16 male elk wallowing. The minimum number of animals involved in wallowing events ranged from one at nine sites to three at two sites. We were able to ascertain the act of urine spraying during 36% of the wallowing events and naso-oral contact in 86%. Most wallowing events ($n=16$) occurred in distinct wallows and the remaining six occurred in mineral licks. We also noted six events when elk established new wallows <5 m from previously existing wallows. Three pairs of events likely involved the same individual wallowing for two consecutive events though we could not confirm identities. We recorded one wallowing event at seven sites, two events at four sites, three events at one site, and four events at one site. We once documented two young males wallowing concurrently. The total WI was 0.09 (range: 0.04–0.31; $n=13$). The site with the highest WI (M2; 0.31) was a mineral lick that also received a high level of contact events.

Prevalence rates of CWD in mule deer in the RMNP vicinity have been higher in adult males than in sympatric adult females (Wolfe et al., 2004) and a similar trend has been documented in elk (Colorado Department of Natural Resources, 2003). We found that only males wallowed, and males having \geq four points/antler represented the majority of elk wallowing (21 of 22; 95%) and 14 events (65%) involved males having \geq five points/antler. Thus, most animals we documented wallowing represent the sex and age class most likely to contract CWD.

In addition to wallowing-specific behaviors, we also documented 374 contact events in which elk (52% males) made naso-oral contact with contents of sites. Furthermore, 63 mule deer (86% females) and 2 female moose made naso-oral contact with contents of sites. Contact events occurred at 20 sites, including all sites where wallowing occurred. The total

CI was 0.39 (range: 0.00–3.25; $n=20$). The minimum number of animals involved in contact events ranged from zero at four distinct wallows to 17 at a mineral lick.

Of the sites monitored, only 13 were visited for wallowing purposes during the study, suggesting that not all wallows are used annually. We found no visual evidence of wallowing until the third week of August and none after 19 September. The rut typically begins 2 wk prior to the autumnal equinox (22 or 23 September; Hudson and Haigh, 2002), which coincided with the beginning of a weeklong period in which we recorded no wallowing activity. Thus, the duration of potential exposure to prions through the act of wallowing was only about 3 wk.

Based on existing literature, the behaviors associated with wallowing elk lend to a probable scenario for disease transmission. However, the low frequency of wallow use that we documented combined with the low number of individuals wallowing suggests the risks associated with wallowing were low within our study area. Our data on use of mineral licks accentuate the greater potential for disease transmission therein.

In addition to wallowing within mineral licks, we noted communal use involving naso-oral contact with lick contents within and among susceptible cervid species. Naso-oral contact included drinking, consumption of soil, or inhalation and these are all actions that may lead to disease transmission. Oral contact with contaminated materials is an effective means for contracting disease by grazing and foraging animals and may result in the dissemination of prions in saliva (Bartz et al., 2003; Mulcahy, 2004).

The potential for the transmission of disease agents increases when individuals concentrate and share resources (Miller et al., 2004). Wallowing can lead to resource sharing and has been hypothesized to result in transmission of anthrax in bison (*Bison bison*; Dragon et al., 1999), *Cryptosporidium parvum* oocysts and

Giardia in feral hogs (*Sus scrofa*; Atwill et al., 1997), and paratuberculosis in farmed elk (Manning et al., 1998). Dependent on environmental stability, infectious agents shed in bodily excretions could potentially reside in wallows. Consequently, animals may coat their pelage with contaminated mud and potentially ingest infectious agents through grooming (DeJoia et al., 2006). Furthermore, the frequency of grooming by elk peaks in autumn (Moor- ing and Samuel, 1998), increasing the risk of contracting prions (Wolff and Van Horn, 2003).

A better understanding of CWD transmission among wild cervids is needed. In particular, the roles of direct animal-to-animal transmission relative to environmental transmission routes should be quantified. If transmission via environmental contamination predominates, then the ability to manage CWD could hinge on whether it occurs uniformly or patchily within cervid habitats. Assuming effective environmental decontamination and pharmacologic management tools can be developed; identification of spatial hotspots of transmission could make some form of spatially focused management of CWD feasible in wild populations. The behaviors we documented at both wallows and mineral licks make them logical candidate sites for disease transmission. Our data, combined with existing literature, suggest use of wallows by elk has limited potential to contribute to the spread of CWD and other diseases when compared to mineral licks.

We thank T. Terrell of the US National Park Service for facilitating research and access to Rocky Mountain National Park. Reviews by T. Atwood and J. Root strengthened the manuscript. All procedures were approved by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA)-Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service-Wildlife Services-National Wildlife Research Center's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. Mention of companies or commercial products does not

imply recommendation or endorsement by the USDA. Product names are mentioned solely to report factually on available data and to provide specific information.

LITERATURE CITED

- ALTMANN, M. 1959. Group dynamics in Wyoming moose during the rutting season. *Journal of Mammalogy* 40: 420-424.
- ATWILL, E. R., R. A. SWEITZER, M. D. G. C. PEREIRA, I. A. GARDNER, D. VAN VUREN, AND W. M. BOYCE. 1997. Prevalence of and associated risk factors for shedding *Cryptosporidium parvum* oocysts and *Giardia* cysts within feral pig populations in California. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* 63: 3946-3949.
- BARTZ, J. C., A. E. KINCAID, AND R. A. BESSEN. 2003. Rapid prion neuroinvasion following tongue infection. *Journal of Virology* 77: 583-591.
- COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES. 2003. *Division of Wildlife tested 26,000 deer, elk for CWD in 2002, prepared to test more in 2003*, <http://dnr.state.co.us/news/press.asp?pressid=2249>. Accessed 4 January 2007.
- DEJOIA, C., B. MOREAUX, K. O'CONNELL, AND R. A. BESSEN. 2006. Prion infection of oral and nasal mucosa. *Journal of Virology* 80: 4546-4556.
- DE VOS, A., P. BROKX, AND V. GEIST. 1967. A review of social behavior of the North American cervids during the reproductive period. *American Midland Naturalist* 77: 390-417.
- DRAGON, D. C., B. T. ELKIN, J. S. NISHI, AND T. R. ELLSWORTH. 1999. A review of anthrax in Canada and implications for research on the disease in northern bison. *Journal of Applied Microbiology* 87: 208-213.
- GEIST, V. 2002. Adaptive behavioral strategies. In *North American elk: Ecology and management*, D. E. Toweill and J. W. Thomas (eds.). Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., pp. 389-433.
- GRAF, W. 1956. Territorialism in deer. *Journal of Mammalogy* 37: 165-170.
- HUDSON, R. J., AND J. C. HAIGH. 2002. Physical and physiological adaptations. In *North American elk: Ecology and management*, D. E. Toweill and J. W. Thomas (eds.). Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., pp. 199-257.
- JOHNSON, C. J., K. E. PHILLIPS, P. T. SCHRAMM, D. MCKENZIE, J. M. AIKEN, AND J. A. PEDERSON. 2006. Prions adhere to soil minerals and remain infectious. *PLoS Pathogens* 2: 1-7.
- KREEGER, T., D. L. MONTGOMERY, J. E. JEWELL, W. SCHULZ, AND E. S. WILLIAMS. 2006. Oral transmission of chronic wasting disease in captive Shira's moose. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 42: 640-645.

- MANNING, E. J. B., H. STEINBERG, K. ROSSOW, G. R. RUTH, AND M. T. COLLINS. 1998. Epizootic of paratuberculosis in farmed elk. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 213: 1320–1322.
- MATHIASON, C. K., J. G. POWERS, S. J. DAHMES, D. A. OSBORN, K. V. MILLER, R. J. WARREN, G. L. MASON, S. A. HAYS, J. HAYES-KLUG, D. M. SEELIG, M. A. WILD, L. L. WOLFE, T. R. SPRAKER, M. W. MILLER, C. J. SIGURDSON, G. C. TELLING, AND E. A. HOOVER. 2006. Infectious prions in the saliva and blood of deer with chronic wasting disease. *Science* 314: 133–136.
- McMILLAN, B. R., M. R. COTTAM, AND D. W. KAUFMAN. 2000. Wallowing behavior of American bison (*Bos bison*) in tallgrass prairie: An examination of alternate explanations. *The American Midland Naturalist* 144: 159–167.
- MILLER, M. 2006. *Chronic wasting disease in Colorado, 2003–2005*, http://wildlife.state.co.us/NR/rdonlyres/00E03802-49F8-4BD3-8EBA-857106D32554/0/CWDreport2003_2005.pdf. Accessed 5 January 2007.
- , E. S. WILLIAMS, N. T. HOBBS, AND L. L. WOLFE. 2004. Environmental sources of prion transmission in mule deer. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 10: 1003–1006.
- MOORING, M. S., AND W. M. SAMUEL. 1998. Tick-removal grooming by elk (*Cervus elaphus*): Testing the principles of the programmed-grooming hypothesis. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 76: 740–750.
- MULCAHY, E. R., J. C. BARTZ, A. E. KINCAID, AND R. A. BESSEN. 2004. Prion infection of skeletal muscle cells and papillae in the tongue. *Journal of Virology* 78: 6792–6798.
- MURIE, O. L. 1951. *The elk of North America*. Stackpole Company, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 376 pp.
- RIPPLE, W. J., E. E. STARKEY, AND B. J. SCHRUMPF. 1988. Assessing elk trail and wallow impacts in Mount Rainier National Park. Final report. Corvallis, Oregon: Oregon State University College of Forestry.
- SALMAN, M. D. 2003. Chronic wasting disease in deer and elk: Scientific facts and findings. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Science* 65: 761–768.
- SEEGER, H., M. HEIKENWALDER, N. ZELLER, J. KRANICH, P. SCHWARZ, A. GASPERT, B. SEIFERT, G. MIELE, AND A. AGUZZI. 2005. Coincident scrapie infection and nephritis lead to urinary prion excretion. *Science* 310: 324–326.
- SPRAKER, T. R., M. W. MILLER, E. S. WILLIAMS, D. M. GETZY, W. J. ADRIAN, G. G. SCHOONVELD, R. A. SPOWART, K. I. O'ROURKE, J. M. MILLER, AND P. A. MERZ. 1997. Spongiform encephalopathy in free-ranging mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), and Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*) in northcentral Colorado. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 33: 1–6.
- STRUHSAKER, T. T. 1967. Behavior of elk during the rut. *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* 24: 80–114.
- WILLIAMS, E. S., M. W. MILLER, T. J. KREEGER, R. H. KAHN, AND E. T. THORNE. 2002. Chronic wasting disease of deer and elk: A review with recommendations for management. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 66: 551–563.
- WOLFE, L. L., M. W. MILLER, AND E. S. WILLIAMS. 2004. Feasibility of “test-and-cull” for managing chronic wasting disease in urban mule deer. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 32: 500–505.
- WOLFF, J. O., AND T. V. HORN. 2003. Vigilance and foraging patterns of American elk during the rut in habitats with and without predators. *Canadian Journal of Zoology* 81: 266–271.

Received for publication 9 January 2007.