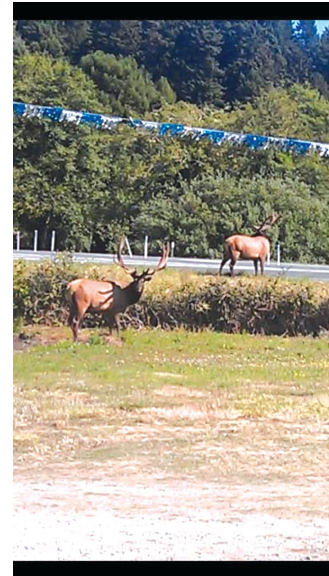


Elk cut short Blueberry Hill's crop

August 10, 2019



Farmers Rick and Jessie Shepherd said they've long had a tenuous relationship between their commercial blueberry crop and the area's elk herds.

But after this past week, the score at Blueberry Hill Farm is pretty much Elk = 1, Blueberries = 0.

"We usually get into the late part of the season before we're out (of blueberries)," said Jessie Shepherd. "It doesn't usually happen this early. They've completely wiped us out."

A sign taped to their production facility at 3290 Kings Valley Rd. in Crescent City, as well as a message on their phone line, informs their customers that this year's stock of blueberries has been devastated. Shepherd said she's trying to salvage as much as she can by offering 5-pound frozen bags for as long as they last.

Rick Shepherd said the blueberry bushes on their 5-acre farm usually bloom in the spring and ripen beginning in July. The fresh supply then can last a week or two into September.

“The last couple of years, however, we can’t get through August,” he said by phone from the deck of a salmon trawler off the coast of Brookings, where he’s also a commercial fisherman.

In past seasons, the Shepherds have been able to harvest more than 1,200 pounds of blueberries. Lately, the pair said, they’ve been lucky to pick and package 6,000 pounds to sell.

“We had 8,000 pounds of berries just two weeks ago that we were going to harvest,” said Rick Shepherd, “Now, we have none.”

He said the elk usually infiltrate his farm’s defenseless boundaries to eat both the berries and the leaves, with the bulls causing additional damage and spillage by sweeping their massive horns side to side.

“They usually come in around 10 p.m. I chase them out, but I can’t be out there all night,” he said. “Like this morning at 3 a.m. I chase them off, but as soon as I leave, they come right back in.”

Shepherd said that in their 27 years at Blueberry Hills Farm, they’ve been okay with the amount the elk have taken. But now, the herd’s numbers have grown so large that he no longer knows how to cope with the problem.

For one thing, given the irregular shape of the Shepherds’ acreage, fencing would be too costly and ineffective.

Makenzie Henk, a scientific aid for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s elk project, said her organization is tracking a number of the herds north near Tolowa and south of Crescent City. She said that elk population is increasing by 10% to 15% each year.

“But it’s notoriously difficult in ecology to put a finer number on the total population,” said Henk. “The last population estimation (of elk) in Del Norte and Humboldt counties was 1,600, using minimal count data,” Henk said.

A minimal estimation count isn’t completely scientific, she added, since it relies on the observation of relatively few volunteers and state staff.

Henk recommended that landowners fend off the elk by using deterrents such as scenting and by hazing them with loud noises and flashing lights.

Meantime, she said, farmers and landowners can report elk damage through the wildlife service’s website, www.wildlife.ca.gov/Living-with-Wildlife, and can apply to the state for compensatory funding.