

INFORMATION FOR THE PRESS



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NEW WILDERNESS AREA
TO PROTECT ELK HERD

The wild, rugged Sun River area within the Lewis and Clark National Forest, Montana, home of the country's third largest elk herd, was today designated as a Primitive Area by F. A. Silcox, Chief of the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Extending from and lying immediately east of the Continental Divide, this new Primitive Area covers 240,000 acres of Federal land on Sun River, a tributary of the Missouri. There are no roads or permanent human habitations within the tract. The area is said to be unsurpassed in the variety of attractions it offers to sportsmen, naturalists, students of Indian lore, and recreationists. Approximately 35 miles long by fifteen in width, its eastern boundary is 75 miles west of Great Falls and the tract is about the same distance northwest of Helena, the State capital.

Within its boundaries are stupendous limestone peaks, reefs, and precipices, including the famous "Chinese Wall" which, with a sheer drop of more than 1,000 feet, extends for 15 miles with only one place where it can be crossed. Among limestone cliffs and crags, on which ancient Indian carvings may still be seen, mountain sheep and goats make their homes. Literally honeycombed with game trails which were well known to Indians long before the advent of white men, this area is also the home of the Sun River elk herd, third largest in the United States.

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The Sun River elk herd, which in 1910 numbered 300, had increased, with the abundance of summer range and the protection afforded, to more than 5,000 head by 1930, according to Forest officials. This huge increase, however, was more than the limited amount of winter range could support, except during unusually open winters with light snows, so the herd split about this time, in search of winter sustenance. Many of the elk, invading pastures and robbing haystacks, seriously damaged valley ranches to the east until irate farmers forced them back to their home on Sun River. Others traveled west, crossed the Continental Divide and established themselves on the South Fork of the Flathead River in the Flathead National Forest.

According to local forest rangers, there are more than 3,000 elk in the present Sun River herd, despite the fact that winter range is still a serious problem.

Without settlements, residences, ranches, or roads, the Sun River Primitive Area affords, Forest officers say, an ideal opportunity to explore country almost as wild today as when it was crossed and recrossed by Flathead, Blackfeet, and Nezperce war parties long before the coming of white men.

Within this territory the Forest Service will neither construct roads nor issue permits for their construction. Other projects will be confined to those needed for adequate fire control, and no private structures or developments providing for occupancy or use will be allowed.

"The Sun River area is still so unspoiled by the advance of civilization and offers so many natural attractions," the Forest Service states, "that it will be administered by Forest officers in such a manner that eastern as well as local people may enjoy conditions as near primitive as it is possible to keep them."