

Tree loss from bark-beetle infestation impacts elk habitat

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Although elk typically adapt to forest disturbances such as forest fires and logging, a new *Journal of Wildlife Management* study found that during the summer, elk avoided areas with extensive tree mortality that has occurred due to the bark-beetle epidemic in the northern portions of the Rocky Mountains in the United States.

Avoidance of beetle-killed [forest](#) by elk during the summer has led to a decline in preferred habitat for elk that will be of importance to many wildlife and land managers responsible for managing [elk populations](#) in areas impacted by the bark-beetle epidemic.

"Although it is common following forest disturbances for elk to seek out and capitalize on the resulting increases in highly palatable and nutritious forage, during the [summer months](#), elk in our study area fairly consistently avoided beetle-kill. This result is somewhat counter to how we typically think elk respond to forest disturbances," said lead author Bryan G. Lamont, of the University of Wyoming. "It appears there are some subtle, but real differences between disturbances such as [forest fires](#) and the bark-beetle epidemic."

Lamont noted that for elk in the study, the increases in the number of downed trees and loss of canopy cover seemed to outweigh the meager increases in understory in bark-beetle affected areas. "Ultimately this means that if elk are avoiding beetle-kill areas, this translates to much less forest habitat that elk typically would utilize during the summer," he said.

More information: Bryan G. Lamont et al, Multi-scale habitat selection of elk in response to beetle-killed forest, *The Journal of Wildlife Management* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/jwmg.21631](https://doi.org/10.1002/jwmg.21631)

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