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I'm a biologist & cover a wide array of conservation & outdoor topics.

Colorado's Elk Creek Ranch: America's Ultimate Sporting Community



The stunning main lodge at Elk Creek Ranch houses a restaurant, bar, wine cellar, and poker room. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

For nearly 20 years, the sparsely populated western slope of northwest Colorado has harbored one of America's most exclusive—and little known—sporting communities. Simply put, Elk Creek Ranch is a 25,000-acre sportsman's playground like none other.

At its core, it's a fly angler's utopia, complete with 33 miles of private trout water and numerous lakes where rainbows and browns grow to beastly dimensions. For dry fly purists, the waters of the legendary White River that run through the ranch are famously generous. Mornings often start in the ranch's fly shop for breaking reports on insect hatches and fly suggestions. It's where word of emergers and acquisitions replaces daily stock tips.

Over the years, the magic and beauty of the valley have attracted some of the country's wealthiest—including Henry Kravis, Michael Bloomberg, and the Walton family as well as celebrities like golfer Greg Norman, a dedicated sportsman.

"Colorado offers some of the world's most stunning real estate," says long-time owner, Rob Walton, former chairman of Walmart and conservation philanthropist, "and when you set foot on Elk Creek Ranch, you're looking at the best of the best—especially if you're a sportsman."



The ranch controls 33 miles of prolific private trout water. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

The ranch also happens to reside within North America's largest elk migration corridor, one of the reasons Teddy Roosevelt regularly visited the area, ultimately becoming the leading voice in creating the 2.3- million-acre White River National Forest, which sits adjacent to Elk Creek Ranch.

The abundance of elk and deer provides the 53 members of the property with world-class big game hunting opportunities. Archery, muzzleloader, and rifle seasons span from September through much of November. The ranch employs 15 seasoned guides, most of whom have hunted and fished the valley for decades and know it intimately.

For shotgunners, wild populations of blue grouse can be found throughout the ranch's timberlands as well as in the millions of acres of surrounding state and federal lands. Pheasant hunting is also on the menu here and, to get tuned up before heading to the uplands, a sprawling and cleverly designed sporting clays course provides shooters with all manner of humbling challenges. The course and nearby equestrian center were part of Elk Creek's acquisition of Greg Norman's 10,000-acre Seven Lakes Ranch in 2021.

Winter months might find residents hopping on snow machines and heading to the mountains where they'll strike off on foot behind hounds in search of the region's plentiful (some would say over-abundant) mountain lion population. Black bear is yet another marquee species available to

hunters here, the area sporting some of the highest densities of the animals found anywhere in the West.



The 25,000 acres of Elk Creek Ranch is home to one of the West's largest elk migration corridors. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

After a day on the water or on the mountain, returning to the ranch's stunning timber lodge for a sundowner and a gourmet dinner is simply part of the natural order of things at Elk Creek. Michelin level chefs avail themselves of the local wild game, ranch-raised beef, and fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables to celebrate the harvest with a local flair. Elk tenderloin and roast mallard anyone?

A members' wine cellar allows owners to store a collection of their favorite wines in a temperature-controlled unit, and an adjacent dining room is popular for the combination of tastings and dinner. Management regularly surveys owners to mine for suggestions to stock the ranch's expansive wine cellar, so if the apocalypse happened tomorrow, residents at Elk Creek would have a long-term supply of vintages to pair with the ranch's endless bounty of fish and game. Indeed, it's not so much about surviving at Elk Creek as it is thriving.

When you spend a day on the mountain here, then step inside the grand main lodge, you are immediately overcome with a rhapsody of aromas ranging from grilling steaks to a hint of woodsmoke from a roaring fireplace. As George Sears once offered and Elk Creek ascribes, "We don't go into the woods to rough it...we get it rough enough at home."

Elk Creek Ranch feels like it has been manifested from a sportsman's dream. It's what every hunter and angler prays heaven is like. For many members, it's the reward of years of toil in business in distant urban centers, an antidote to the demands of schedules.



Rainbow and brown trout grow big at Elk Creek. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

While some owners choose to build homes on the ranch, others opt to stay in one of several beautifully appointed private cabins that look like they were manifest from the pages of *Town & Country*.

"The mission of Elk Creek Ranch is to maximize members' hunting and fishing experiences as a shared community, while removing the hassle of having to manage such a massive ranch," says Colton Brown, Elk Creek's General Manager.

"When I first came out here," says long-time owner Mike Haley, "I said this could be the Augusta National of fly fishing...and I stick by that. It's like having your own large private ranch without all the headaches."

Creating such a unique community started with a vision decades ago to assemble some of the West's most spectacular land and water assets, forever conserving

them as a refuge for the sporting life and the fish and wildlife found here. Buttoning up water rights and access issues is never easy in the West, but over time and thanks to far-sighted and opportunistic leadership, Elk Creek accomplished that, and the legacy property will stand in perpetuity as the challenges to replicate such places become ever-more daunting.

Admission doesn't come cheap (lots selling for \$1.5 to \$2.5 million) but for those with the means, the ranch has become a valued part of any portfolio where you can enjoy time outdoors with your family and friends as your investment accrues.



The abundance of trout water means fishing pressure is low. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

"Elk Creek is a one-of-a-kind property," says the ranch's board chair Mark Schryver. "In an ever-changing and uncertain world, it's a safe refuge where the best of the sporting life is celebrated daily and where owners can decompress from a frenetic world."

While the seasonal diversity of Elk Creek's hunting and fishing offerings are simply unmatched, mountain biking, off-roading, ATV and horseback riding, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, swimming, and paddle boarding also are leisure options. And if that's not enough physical activity for you, a fitness center will help you burn off some of the extra calories that are inevitable when indulging here.

Located within a two-and-a-half-hour drive of the ranch are many of the country's most celebrated ski destinations—including Steamboat Springs, Aspen, Vail, Beaver Creek, and Snowmass, which is why Colorado has become one of the most popular four-season destinations in America.

As the turf of millionaires and billionaires, accessing the ranch for the private jet crowd is especially easy. Only 20 minutes away is the 2,500-person village of Meeker (with grocery stores, restaurants, hospital, hardware, and supplies) and the town's airport that features a 6,500-foot runway capable of handling most full-size corporate jets. For those who would rather chopper to the property, a helipad sits outside Elk Creek's main lodge, which also serves as a potentially life-saving feature should the need for medical evacuation arise.



The Village at Elk Creek with a variety of private cabins available for lodging. COURTESY ELK CREEK RANCH

"The real value proposition to Elk Creek Ranch for people like me who like to hunt and fish and be in the western outdoors," says Scott Casto, who has owned here for more than a decade, "is to bring friends and family together in an environment where they can have fun and share something they've never experienced before."