

About graziers, mega fauna and Albert the elk



Born unfree: Albert the elk, an animal in limbo.

Photos: Rollie Henkes

Dear Friends:

Stories this issue remind us of the vital ecological functions of the graziers that once ruled the tallgrass prairie.

One of those magnificent beasts paid me a visit last summer. I'm not sure if the elk did much for the ecology in these parts, but he did create quite a stir in the neighborhood. Sporting those outrageous antlers, the bull was something to behold, nose in the air, striding stately through CRP fields along timber edges. Cars would pull over.

But his presence soon became problematic. My neighbor,

who has a beef-cow herd, was more than a little nervous when he found the elk's hoof prints in his garden one morning. On my regular walks down these back roads, the chance of having an 800-pound bull elk between me and my front door gave me the willies.

Not to worry, I was told. No born-free lord of the prairie, this was obviously a farm-raised elk looking for a handout. Yet, with the rut season approaching, "Albert," as I came to call him, wasn't to be trusted.

Area elk farms were contacted, but no one claimed the

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animal. Concerns about public safety and potential health issues brought the Iowa Department of Agriculture and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources into the matter. Cases of chronic wasting disease (CWD) had been confirmed in elk populations. The fact that he was accompanied by two females added to concerns. The authorities ruled that elk from an unknown farm with unknown disease status had to be dispatched.

One morning I walked up my lane to find Iowa DNR Conservation Officer Bill Collins resting a high-powered rifle on the hood of his SUV. He had already shot one of the females in my neighbor's CRP field. While I stood there, Collins retreated down my lane for a better angle at the other female. He pulled the trigger, and she crumpled in the brome grass.

"I got off a heart shot," he said. "I didn't want to shoot her in the head because of the test for CWD." Adrenalin still flowing, Collins was chomping furiously on a wad of gum. "I just hate killing an animal like this," he said. "I've always wanted to harvest an elk, but this isn't the way I wanted it to happen."

Later, DNR workers loaded the two animals on a flatbed truck and took them to a plant to be slaughtered. After the brains were tested for CWD (the results were negative), the meat was donated to the Iowa Department of Corrections. Meanwhile, Albert had slipped away, and as in the old Kingston Trio ballad, "His fate is still unlearned." Judging from rumors, however, his brief taste of freedom came to the same unfortunate end as the females.

Elk business. The days are long gone when Meriwether Lewis, in 1804, saw "immense herds of buffalo, deer, elk and

antelopes in every direction." Most elk in the Midwest today, like Albert, roam behind 8-foot fences on farms. According to elk-farm-industry figures, about 70,000 elk populate some 1,200 elk farms in the U.S. Breeding stock, meat and antlers removed in the velvet stage account for most of the industry's revenues. However, the discovery of CWD in elk, deer and moose took a big bite out of the velvet antler market for U.S.



"So when's lunch."

and Canadian elk farmers. Korea banned imports of North American velvet antler in 2001.

The demand to shoot trophy elk in private hunting preserves, or game farms, has provided another revenue stream for the industry. But here, the industry finds itself up against animal rights activists and many wildlife and conservation

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interests. They decry what they call "canned hunts" as inhumane, and see game farms as reservoirs of disease and undesirable genetics that could get into wild herds. Some states, including Wyoming and Montana, ban game farms. Elk industry spokesmen counter that well-managed and amply sized private hunting preserves provide no less of a rich hunting experience than that of hunting on public land.

Cash cows. Escapees such as Albert exacerbate the tension between interests that treat elk as a business on private land and those that want to preserve the animals' wild heritage. But even free-ranging elk can't escape those tempted to make a buck off them. Introduce wild elk into an area, and you've got a tourist attraction. Build the herd large enough for public hunting, and even more money flows to area businesses. In northern Wisconsin the community of Clam Lake, the self-proclaimed Elk Capital of Wisconsin, has added elk watching to the fishing, snowmobiling and other outdoor recreational opportunities for visitors to enjoy. Clam Lake's elk stem from an introduction into the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the Wisconsin DNR. Introduced in 1995, the herd has grown to 80 or 90 head.

With a herd of more than 6,500 free-ranging elk, Kentucky boasts the "largest elk herd east of the Mississippi." The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife has issued 300 elk-hunting licenses for the current season. It's estimated that elk-related tourism and hunting could pump more than \$35 million into the state's economy over the next five years.

The public stands to be rewarded with memorable experiences in exchange. Elk and bison roam 700 acres of native prairie on the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge near Prairie City in central Iowa. Drive on marked roads through the refuge and you might be transported back in time. Experts at the refuge offer insights into the ecological benefits of elk and bison. "Selective grazing by these animals helps maintain habitat for birds and other wildlife," Karen Viste-Sparkman, biologist at the refuge, tells you.

From bird watching to elk watching, conservation interests and community business leaders know all too well the payoffs from ecotourism and outdoor recreation. A wildlife-adoring public will support conservation efforts while forking over money for the lodging, food, guns, binoculars, tents and other stuff to enhance their experience.

Unwelcome. The rub comes when the objects of their affections threaten ecosystems as well as impinge on private property. Wildlife biologists and public agencies and non-profit groups face a delicate balancing act as they strive to re-establish wild elk herds into the fringes of their historic range in midwestern and eastern states. In the 1940s attempts to establish an elk herd in a public wildlife preserve in northern Minnesota backfired. The animals proceeded to multiply and destroy crops in neighboring fields near the town

of Grygla. Area farmers are still mad about it. Elk are mega fauna-non-grata in some areas of Pennsylvania as they spill out of their intended range in the Alleghenies to forage in agricultural lands.

It brings to mind the impact of that other mega fauna turned cash cow: white-tailed deer. But that's another story. ~ Rollie Henkes, Wood River Farm



"May I help you?" "No thanks, just browsing."

Touche'

A married couple was driving down a country road in stony silence after having had an argument. As they passed a barnyard of mules, goats and pigs, the husband asked sarcastically, "Reatives of yours?"

"Yes, the wife replied, "In-laws."

Here lies Lester Moore

Four slugs from a 44

No Less, no more

~ from a gravestone in Tombstone, Arizona

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