

March 18, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "Majestic as they are, elk remain vulnerable"

Elk are magnificent animals. If you are fortunate to observe them in their natural habitat—at Yellowstone Park, say, where you might catch them wandering brushy hillsides or exploring the terraces of cascading pools—you'll be impressed by their size and grace. Next to moose, they are the largest species of deer on the American continent.

The YMCA at its silent-auction of artworks currently displays the superb photograph of a bull elk standing among trees and bushes, head raised in alert. In these surroundings his tawny coat and many-tined antlers turn mimicry: among the browns and greens, they look for all the world like sun-dappled underbrush.

My son and his spouse are avid hunters. Every season they harvest an elk, some antelope, occasionally a moose, along with wild geese. Even while working as wildlife veterinarian, Walter was not abashed about his hunting. When I voiced squeamishness, he pulled me up short.

"A well-placed gunshot is mercifully swift compared to slow starvation," he said. "Wyoming has more wildlife than it can handle."

I have seen photos of elk hunted by wolves, and their demise is not pretty. Wolves sometimes but not always go for the jugular. When they bring down an elk from behind, they start tearing into its flesh and feeding on the animal's hindquarters while the elk yet lives.

As a species of deer, elk migrate into areas of high altitude in the spring, where retreating snows afford browsing and grazing. In autumn they go the opposite direction, looking for wooded areas and sheltered valleys for protection from the winds. During spring and fall the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) elk herds take part in the longest elk migration in the continental U.S. Many elk winter in and around Jackson Hole where they might remain for up to six months. There they are fed in the national and state refuges that sprung into existence at public outcry over mass starvations. Elk that reside in the northern sections of GYA might migrate into lower altitudes in Montana.

Compared with other states, Wyoming is sparsely populated; from the elk point of view, however, it's frightfully overcrowded hereabouts. Large-scale coal mining and gas- and oil drilling operations have displaced herds from their ancestral grounds. Like bison and moose, elk must range over vast stretches of land. Elk eat twenty pounds of vegetation daily. During the summer, as they eat ahead toward the lean months of winter, that figure can come to forty pounds for a bull elk, who might have lost 20 percent of his body mass during mating season.

As years of drought intensify food scarcity, an elk herd might become so desperate, it will eat whatever it might find, including foodstuffs they normally, instinctually shun: the noxious lichen. Once ingested, the fungus acts as a slow-moving poison in each individual system, paralyzing the unfortunate animal and starving it to death or else condemning it to predator scavenging. Last year many elk perished thus in the Wamsutter area. In 2004, and again in 2008, Wyoming lost hundreds of elk to lichen-related demise. I know of at least one instance where wildlife wardens resorted to mass shootings with tears in their eyes, so intense is the mute

suffering of the stricken animals.

Elk are vulnerable to brucellosis, a bacterial disease that affects pregnant cows and causes abortions. The disease is readily transmitted to domestic cattle; hence, ranchers take a dim view of elk that mingle with their herds. In actual fact, elk are the guiltless victims of bacteria brought to their shores by European settlers who arrived with infected domestic animals. Prior to European contact, the American continent was free of brucellosis.

Six African scholars, two each from Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, recently arrived as six-week guests, here to observe Wyoming ways of dealing with brucellosis. Coming from tropical countries, they had quite a time adjusting to Wyoming altitudes and wintery climates; fortuitously, the Wyoming African Student Association reached out to help. The visit is sponsored in part by a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture and University of Wyoming.

“Brucellosis is a big problem where we live,” they tell us. “It is often transmitted to humans.” Left untreated, the flu-like symptoms can last for years. In severe cases, spine deformation leaves the sufferer barely able to function. I recently heard of a Wyoming veterinarian who developed a bad case while vaccinating domestic cows with a variant meant to protect them against contracting the disease. An unexpected kick sent the needle deep into the veterinarian’s own flesh. He ended up with surgery on the affected leg.

“We are excited to host the African scientists,” says Frank Galey, Dean of UW’s Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. “They will spend time with our researchers in Laramie and tour the GYA to gain an understanding of our brucellosis issues. It’s our goal that mutually beneficent collaborations will result from this visit.”

Also in the works for the African veterinarians cum scientists: an official visit to Wind River Indian Reservation. At the moment UW is hosting a brucellosis research workshop in which local and visiting scientists share experiences and challenges.

You will hear more about this rare and unusual visit in another column. Meanwhile, let’s hope some spring snowstorm doesn’t cut short the scholars’ encounter with Greater Yellowstone Area cattle and elk.