



STALKING THE WILD **Elusive Elk** IN THE NORTHERN TIER

Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

THE WEST BRANCH OF THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER and the steep mountains that drop down to its banks are the first signs that I am about to enter another world as I am traveling Route 120 upriver until it pierces one of Pennsylvania's most exciting wild areas. A wooden DCNR sign announces, "Welcome to Pennsylvania's Elk Range," and I know I have entered a special place. Shifting into high alert, I decrease my speed and scan the open areas and forest edges hoping to catch a glimpse of these magnificent creatures with the massive antlers.

Once one of the most widespread members of the deer family in North America, elk had a range that extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from central Canada to northern Mexico. An estimated 10 million elk roamed North America at the time the first European settlers arrived on this continent.

Bill May raises his elk call and creates a strong, believable call in the Northcentral Mountains of Cameron County, an area called the Quehanna Wild Area.

But by 1852, unrestricted hunting had reduced herds in Pennsylvania to a few scattered animals in Elk County, and, by the late 1870s, none remained. In 1913, the state began an endeavor to restore elk to their natural habitat, and due to these ongoing efforts, more than 700 elk are estimated to live in the wilds of northern Pennsylvania today.

For many years, I would travel to the village of Benezette and the Winslow Hill area of Elk County to see these magnificent creatures and listen to their melodic bugling during the fall rutting season. But recently I learned of another location, more wild and with fewer tourists, that promises a stellar elk-watching experience—the Quehanna Wild Area in the Northcentral Mountains of Cameron County.

A decade ago, the Pennsylvania Game Commission began work to lengthen the elk's range by luring them south and east away from more populated areas where they were becoming a nuisance. As part of this project, my longtime friend Bill May managed the commission's wildlife food and cover crew, which cut and maintained 200 individual food plots for elk and a multitude of species. Safe from roads and civilization, the animals could go in

ELK BUGLING is one of the distinct calls of the wild, akin to the howl of a wolf or the call of a loon, and its sound can **SEND SHIVERS** down your spine or **BRING TEARS** to your eyes.

and out of the protected timber into these herbaceous openings to access the food there.

Bill knows elk and the Quehanna Wild Area like the back of his hand, and he has used this expertise to join with another friend of mine, Pat Maier, owner and guide of Wellsboro's Mountain Trail Horse Center, to develop a horseback-riding trip into the Quehanna elk range. Besides caring for 80 horses at his center, Pat has raised elk for an agricultural business (the velvety antlers are used in the making of nutritional supplements) and has led and guided elk hunts in Colorado for 30 years. He is also part-owner of Nature Quest, a geo-tourism company offering horse-trekking trips in northern Pennsylvania. I have ventured into the wilds of Cameron County to sample one of these guided trips.

The Search for Elk

The Quehanna Wild Area is a 48,000-acre, almost circular path of second-growth, mixed-hardwood forest located 28 miles west of Renovo near Sinnemahoning, where Cameron, Clearfield, Elk and Clinton counties meet. Except for elk, it is the most unpopulated area of the entire state. For our trip, we will be staying on top of the Quehanna Plateau and will not drop down into any of the drainages, or draws, as they are called in this part of the country.

The fall leaves are spectacular in the woods this Indian summer weekend, and the earth seems to glow with warm color. I haven't been on a horse in years, but it doesn't seem to matter, for Pat's horses are well-behaved and trail smart. We will be able to cover more country on horse than on foot, and horses are less intrusive and threatening to the elk than we two-legged animals.

Twelve hours earlier, Bill had scouted the area for signs of elk—droppings, tracks and sounds of bugling—to ensure that I would see plenty on my trip. These brownish-gray animals, which can weigh up to 1,000 pounds, are identifiable by their four-inch-long tails, light-colored rump and the massive branchlike antlers on the males.

Mature bulls use bugling, a series of vocalizations, to compete for the cows' attention and to challenge opponent bulls. The call begins with a medium clear note, rises to a high pitch with a shrill scream, and ends with a series of grunts. It is one of the distinct calls of the wild, akin to the howl of a wolf or the call of a loon, and the sound can send shivers down your

spine or bring tears to your eyes.

Females are attracted to the most dominant bulls. A male demonstrates his dominance by gathering and keeping his cow group together and fending off other bulls that constantly challenge his place as herd bull. It is an exhausting undertaking and, here in the open meadows and food plots, can become quite a show, for which we are hoping to be the privileged guests.

I listen for bugling, and Bill teaches me how to scan the land.

"Look for parts of animals," he says. "Watch for a rump section, a silhouette of a head and ears, or a dark rack mixed with tree branches. It is like looking for hidden objects in a picture book."

As we travel, Bill and Pat are constantly scanning the forest for game and movement, pausing from time to time to raise their binoculars and focus on an area. I am simply enjoying swaying to the rhythm of my horse's trot and taking in the smells and sights of autumn in the woods.



(left) Bill May searches for signs of elk—droppings and tracks.

(above) Scouting efforts are later rewarded with a view of a large bull that responds to Pat's bugling.

The Showdown

Suddenly, a bugle call pierces the late afternoon air. We make an immediate U-turn and spy a large elk standing in the cover of some hemlocks. After tying up our horses, we sneak closer for a better look. I raise my binoculars to my eyes and am startled to be eyeball-to-eyeball with a majestic bull. Neither of us moves a muscle.

Pat raises his elk call, which resembles small sections of a vacuum hose, to his lips and belts out a strong, believable call. The bull answers, and draws closer to investigate. But soon he grows weary of the game and lumbers off, leaving us to mount our horses and continue our ride.

We head toward a 12-foot-wide wet depression in the field. My guides take deep sniffs and alert me to the musty smell of elk that hangs in the air. During the rut, bulls will dig holes in the muddy ground into which they urinate and roll their body. The urine soaks into their hair to give them a distinct odor that attracts the cows.

As we ride, we pass several fresh elk rubs on the trunks of saplings, pines and spruce. Some of the bark is shredded to pieces.

The bulls use the trees to scrape off the dried velvet that had served to protect and nourish their antlers while they were growing all summer. This rubbing also helps to mark the bulls' territory. Bill points out two particular trees that are spaced rack distance apart, and we can easily imagine how a bull used the trunks to rub both antlers at the same time.

In the span of an hour, we sight half a dozen different bulls en route to a specific food plot where Bill had recently found a large herd. Then, we hear it. The forest rings out with the calls of multiple bugling elk.

My guides are nearly breathless in anticipation and delight as they crawl through the waist-deep ferns and over the spongy emerald moss and ground cover for a closer look. They motion for me to follow.

There, in the clearing, is one of the largest bulls that Pat claims ever to have seen. It easily weighs more than 1,100 pounds and has an impressive rack that measures well over five feet wide and six feet long and probably weighs about 60 pounds.

"He is well into the world-record size," Pat whispers.

Moving around the bull is a harem of 15 cows, which he is gallantly defending. He noses the ladies to herd them into a tight group and bullies the one with enough moxie to try to stray. From all directions, the forest reverberates with the sound of bugling bulls. Soon, four different bulls emerge from the trees. Two challengers are nearly as large as the harem stud and could be next in line if he becomes too exhausted or proves incapable of breeding



Riding horses, sleeping in tents and enjoying an evening camp fire amid a forest alive with bugling elk during the rut, Nature Quest offers an experience of seeing elk in a wild environment with a few comforts of home.



all his cows. These competitors strut their stuff, attempting to bugle as loudly and frequently as the herd master.

The other two newcomers are raghorns—two-year-olds with impressive enough racks—that skirt the edge of the clearing. They know this fight is out of their league for now, but they still want to be part of the showdown.

For the next few hours, we watch the drama and listen to the constant, heart-quickenning sound of elk bugling. It is such a moving experience to be a privileged spectator in this grand wild show.

WHEN NIGHT BEGINS TO FALL, we leave our outdoor stage and head back to the horses. In all today, we've covered 10 miles on horseback and crisscrossed a three-mile radius of old logging roads, skid trails and pipelines to check out approximately 20 different food plots. We've seen nearly two dozen elk this evening and almost an equal number of white-tailed deer.

As we return to camp in the dark, there comes a point when I stop focusing only on the horse in front of me and surrender myself to the forest at night. I lean back and gaze up at the sky, spotting the Milky Way and Cassiopeia. A few leftover summer cicadas echo in the forest. The horse's shoes clomp on the stones, and every now and then, a spark shoots out as metals scrape.

I have come to this wilderness to experience nature at its best, and I have not been disappointed. I know that my encounters with the elk and the sounds and sights of these majestic creatures in their natural habitat will remain with me long after I leave the wilds of Pennsylvania behind me. ♣

—Cindy Ross of New Ringgold is a regular contributor.



When You Go

Autumn, when elk are in rut, is an excellent time to view these massive creatures. (September is the peak for hearing elk bugling.) The best times for seeing elk is the hour or two after dawn or before dusk.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have developed several public sites for safely viewing elk in the northern tier of Pennsylvania. For more information about elk and these sites, visit www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc and click on "Wildlife" on the left-hand side of the page. Then, click on "Elk" under Game Species.

Nature Quest, headquartered in Wellsboro, Tioga County, offers a variety of trips and guided tours aimed at connecting people with nature. Trips range from elk-viewing tours on horseback in Cameron County to bike treks into the Pine Creek Gorge in Tioga and Lycoming counties. Tours vary from daily treks to multiday all-inclusive packages.

For more information about elk-viewing trips or any other outdoors adventures in the northern tier of Pennsylvania, contact Nature Quest at 866-376-5068 or www.naturequestadventures.com. ■