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## **Elk on the Meadow**

Early in the summer of my first year as caretaker on the Rouse brother's ranch in Whitney Valley, the owners came up to see if I had figured out everything I needed to know to get the work done. The wild meadow grasses grew lush and green; I had soaked most of the ranch once, and I had repaired enough fence to please John and Mike.

John asked me, "Are the elk coming down onto the meadow?"

I said, "Sometimes, a while before dark, they come down out of the timber. We counted 90 along the edge of the timber Tuesday evening."

He shook his head. "If they keep coming down, they're going to eat a lot of hay before we get it cut."

I asked him, "What do we do about it? Should I try to keep them off the hay ground?"

"Sure. Keep them out of there if you can."

John and Mike didn't know how I could keep them off the meadow. They said if I could find a way, I should do it. They drove back down the river toward their home ranch.

Gene had been ranching up Hale Valley for more than 40 years. I asked him if he knew how to keep the elk off the hay ground. He said, "Ride a horse out there and take your dog with you. Keep him right by you and go slow and easy. They won't spook off as quick from a horse. Get as close as you can, and when they start to run, go after them for all you're worth. Put the dog after them, and chase them as far into the timber as you can go. Do that two or three times, and they won't come back. Deer will; you can't run them out and keep them out, but the elk won't. Oh, sometimes a cow and calf will, or two or three, but the herd won't come back."

I told John what Gene had said and asked him, "Can you bring me up a horse for a while?"

He said, "Well, we don't have a horse to spare right now."

Dawg was off his feet, healing slowly after tangling with a passing car. So it was up to me and the motorcycle. Late in the afternoon, about fifty elk came down out of the timber onto the

far edge of the meadow. I started the motorcycle and rode around the barn and down onto the meadow, a half-mile from the elk. They saw me coming and headed up the hill into the timber. I cranked that motorcycle wide open, bounced across ditches and ground-squirrel holes, and roared into the timber, right up their trail.

Half a mile up the ridge, dead trees had fallen across the trail. A motorcycle can't jump like an elk; so I headed back down. I rode to the next trail up the meadow and rode up that as far as I could go, about a mile. I shut off the motor and listened. I didn't hear any elk. I figured they were miles away and still on the run. But elk, I soon would learn, wouldn't make any effort to fit my ideas about them.

"Wapiti" is the name given them by some Native Americans, Shawnee and Algonquin among them. Since that day of the chase, I've learned that wapiti aren't afraid of the things humans have handled. I've left tools in the timber and returned the next day to find gas container, hard hat, and tools for repairing fence scattered about. I covered tools with a tarp and weighted the tarp down with chunks of wood. Sometimes the elk worked the tarp off and scattered my tools. I don't know if they were playing or trying to tell me something.

The second summer we lived on the Rouse brothers' ranch, we brought a load of manure for the garden down from Gene's place. I looked back at my wife, Laura, and our daughters, riding on the wagon. Laura pointed, and I let the tractor roll to a stop. A wapiti calf tried to get from our side of the fence to the other side, where his mother waited. She was very nervous about being so close to us, but she wouldn't leave her baby. He ran up and down the fence, thrusting his head through, until he found wires with some slack. He squeezed through, and he and his mother galloped away.

Their graceful carriage is obvious at a distance. Up close, it's stunning. Those high-powered legs seem to go on forever.

Elk can't jump a four-wire fence. They'll clear three wires and break the top strand on their way over. We made an agreement. I left the top wire down at their crossings, and they left the rest of my fence alone. But if the herd panics, agreements don't mean anything. Elk running for their lives don't jump. They gallop through and break all four strands of barbed wire. During hunting season, I lost a lot of fence.

Deer often are killed on the highway, but I've rarely heard

of a wapiti killed by a car. I watched a mother elk watching the highway from 200 feet away, down in the willows. When a pause came in the traffic, she took her calf at her heel, and they trotted up and crossed. They had climbed a hundred yards above the highway before the next truck roared around the curve. In a deer's mind, it is unfortunate coincidence that cars suddenly appear out of the woods and whiz by them or hit them and take their lives. But when I watched the mother wapiti watching the road, I knew she understood how it works; vehicles travel on the highway, and sometimes, safe intervals appear between them.

The day I chased the elk off the meadow, I started the motorcycle and rode back down the ridge, confident the elk wouldn't come back for a while.

The trail runs a ways just inside the timber, parallel to the meadow. It was dark enough by then, I thought at first my vision fooled me, with my imagination running wild in dim light, but then I realized the elk really had returned to the meadow ahead of me. I rode onto the meadow where one of the ditches spreads water, and I couldn't gain speed because the wheel spun on the slick, wet ground when I gave the motorcycle more throttle.

The elk trotted across in front of me, and up the trail, into the trees, except for two of the cows, who stood at the edge of the timber and watched until I was within fifty feet of them; then they followed the herd up the hill.

When I got back to the house and shut off the machine, I heard the elk whistling. It was too dark by then to see them, but I knew they played and ate in the heavy clover on the bench ground.

I stopped trying to run them off the meadow. Cattle eat the largest part of the available graze in the national forest, where the wapiti would feed if we could keep them off the meadow. Wapiti leave four-fifths or more of the meadow growth; so there's hay to feed the cattle through the winter. Allowing the elk access to the meadow seemed to me to be the only fair arrangement.

Some people who came around assumed that we ate elk meat all year. We probably could have, if I had worked at it. But I didn't hunt them. They feed our minds, our need to see something beautiful that is independent of man. That meant more to me than the meat I could get by killing them.

The day's light is leaving. I'm going to walk down toward the river and watch the wapiti come down out of the timber and begin their evening on the meadow.

If I'm quiet and if I don't walk down into the willows, they'll accept my presence, and I can watch them until it's too dark to see them. When I come home, I still can hear the yearlings whistling in their play and the mothers whistling to their young until I sleep.