

Nature Discovery Tours observe local elk herd



Nature Discovery Tour guide Barry Wannamaker has been involved with the Elk Restoration Project since its beginning more than 15 years ago. He was part of the team of conservationists and wildlife biologists to bring the species back to its native habitat in the Bancroft area. Kicking off the tour season at the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce on Saturday, April 4, Wannamaker led the season's first group of enthusiastic wildlife seekers through an enlightening presentation about the origins of the Elk Restoration Project and the current state of the herd in the Bancroft area.

The first 50 elk were released in the Hartsmere area by the MNR back in the year 2000. This was not the first re-introduction of elk attempted in Ontario, he explained to the group. The first elk were released in the Burwash area adjacent a prison facility. The herd was doing well until they were deemed responsible for an ailment in farm animals residing in the same region. The slaughter of the elk was ordered, however, this didn't quite go as planned.

?Somehow in the night the fence got cut and about 50 of the elk escaped before they could be killed.?

Since elk are multi-coloured animals their natural camouflage made the animals that escaped even more difficult to locate. When the elk were finally approved to come to Bancroft after a series of costly and extensive studies the challenges didn't stop there. Funds had to be raised with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to help ship the herd safely to its new home in Hartsmere and to build a compound to contain them until they were habituated to their new habitat.

When all of the arrangements were made, Wannamaker along with the other volunteers responsible for the project hit the road.

?We drove the elk here in 48 hours straight,? Wannamaker said.

?We had three drivers per vehicle rotating shifts behind the wheel. It took four V-10 trucks pulling big trailers to get them here. One of us would sleep while one guy drove and the other kept him company.?

The trip was exhausting since they drove straight through for the sake of the animals' welfare in transport. When they arrived at the release site everything was ready to go, except the elk had other plans. The first elk to leave the trailers bolted leaping over the fence the team had set up around the enclosure in a single bound. The MNR was there with their press release already drafted stating the success of the release.

?I was videoing all of this and I was right there where they were jumping out,? he said.

?We had cut holes in the plastic tarps covering the fences so that we could fit our camera lenses through. The elk were coming right at me. Some of the small ones started getting their legs caught on the fence and they were landing on their backs. You could hear the wind get knocked out of them when they landed.?

Not wanting to see any of the elk injured or killed by the fall after such long, hard work in getting them here, Wannamaker started cutting the fences to let them out.

?If they were going to get out they were going to get out healthy,? he said.

?All of the elk were collared and each collar gives out a different signal so we started tracking them with researchers from different universities.?

The collars for the bull elk had to be specially designed with a stretching bicycle tube type extension on their collars to allow for the swelling of their necks during the mating season. Because of this feature some of the elk were able to use their hind leg to pull it off.

Once the animals began to move throughout their new territory, the team of volunteers realized how difficult it was going to be to keep tabs on them.

When the Elk Restoration Project team decided to make a second trip to add more elk to the local population they were better prepared for the both the transport and the release, mounting cameras in the trailer to observe the elk in transport, and building a taller fence around the enclosure. The cameras in the trailers revealed interesting social dynamics of the herd.

?It was unbelievably interesting to watch how the elk shuffled during the trip,? said Wannamaker.

?The ones on the outside were obviously cooler than the ones on the inside, so they took turns shuffling around. It was a pretty boring film watching for eight hours of elk in a trailer, but if you actually sat there and watched it you could see them shuffling around and sharing so each of them could get warm.?

After releasing the second group of animals the team observed other strange observations when some of the animals from the first release began hanging around the outside of the compound communicating with the elk inside.

?We recorded them making all sorts of sounds we'd never heard before communicating with the elk inside. We also saw some of the elk on the outside interacting with the deer which some folks said would never happen because they believed the two species could not live together.?

After the presentation was over Wannamaker took the group to an observation site where they could get up close and personal with these majestic creatures. The next elk tour is not until July 13 however the next nature discovery in the series will be held at the North Hastings community fish hatchery on April 25. For more information or to book a spot on the next tour contact Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce at 613-332-1513, or visit their website at www.bancroftdistrict.com.