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THE WANDERING WAPITI

by

Elk

3 pictures from Drury.

Irene Finley

It was mid September and all the high hills and deep valleys in Yellowstone Park, washed clean by the first fall rain, glowed glossy-green and shimmering. A portentous hush was in the soft autumn air. Nothing seemed to be stirring. The birds flitted stealthily between the limbs of the high pine trees. A striped chipmunk sprawled on a log in the sunshine, his nose on his paws, his legs stretched out behind him, as if taking advantage of the last siesta of the year. Yet there was a tension in the air as if something was going on behind all this secretive silence. And there was - a taut bow string of love and mating of wild animals.

We ambled slowly along across Fishing Bridge that cuts in two a long wet willow marsh, and saw two elk, a young bull and cow, large members of the Cervidae family, come thrashing up the steep bank and cross the road into the lodge pole timber. Once the bull looked back at the meadow, ears pricked up, eyes scared. We turned off hastily, grabbed our camera packs and were after them. Bill took one path and I another. After a little while, our paths converged. Neither of us had seen anything of the elk.

Following the trail around a hillside, we had about given up finding our game. I happened to glance off in the trees, and there not fifty feet away were the two shadowy ghosts. Their long heads and the bull's horns were lost in the branches, and their dark legs lined up with the tree trunks. It was perfect obscurity. They knew it.

This young bull had brazenly grabbed off one mate from the harem of some surly old champion who was caught napping. Instead of standing up and fighting for his prize, he was running away. Now he stood petrified, not knowing which way to bolt, the cow behind him. They didn't even give us a glance as we passed in front of them. Human beings were not their worry.

We left them and stalked noiselessly along the needle strewn trail,

looking for that old bull elk ourselves. In the spring or summer it wouldn't even have been an adventure to meet an old bull on a woods trail, but now two helpless pedestrians on foot would make him see red. I didn't relish the thought of being spiked on those great pointed horns.

Our trail was slanting up toward the highway where there might be some passing cars, a little bit of a comfort. Just before we reached the highway, not forty yards ahead of us a magnificent bull with head raised high plunged along through the trees, followed by eleven cows. They went straight across the road and were instantly lost in the thick timber. The thrashing of their long strides through the underbrush came back to us. We decided to make tracks back into civilization. There were too many pugnacious animals on the move around us.

A few days later we got up early and were ambling slowly in the car around a grade in the deep woods. Four o'clock in the morning is the witching hour when the dew is on the grass and every blade and leaf glistens. It is also the hour when the wild folk are afoot. We looked down over the rim of the narrow road into a deep green canyon where the gurgling of a stream could be heard. Just the time and place for an old bull moose to be browsing. But not a sound. All the world was still. Glancing up the steep hill above us, Bill put on the brakes so suddenly that we almost went through the wind-shield. Not twenty feet above us, two bull elk were braced with their antlers pushing and tugging at each other. Their heavy bodies and stout legs strained forward in a death struggle. A dry clattering sound reached us every time their pointed spikes clashed. They were deaf and dumb to our presence. There was only one thing in their minds - to kill each other.

These savage encounters were going on all over the Park. Not infrequently a pair of competing bulls are found with their antlers locked intricably together, dying a slow death. Or sometimes merely the antlers themselves are discovered, silent witnesses of a tragedy of former years, a tragedy that may have ended in starvation or a feast for wolves or coyotes.

Most polygamous of all our land animals, *Cervus canadensis* starts

out each fall to acquire as many wives as he can steal, and this often proves to be a household of from twenty to sixty members, and no small matter hanging onto them.

After the rutting season, the elk collect in large herds and wander around for a time until they finally drop down to the lower valleys for their winter feeding. These are usually open hills where the ground is kept more or less free of deep snow by the wind. However, in most winters they are compelled to dig deep for a meager living, and many of them starve. By spring the communal life is abandoned and the bulls, feeling the shadow of inferiority coming upon them, foregather in hidden places and live to themselves. All of a sudden they have no more majestic, spreading antlers. Their flattened heads show only little knobs sprouting above their timid eyes. For several months they are in this degrading stage. They are shorn lambs until their new antlers have grown to the size of masculine dignity.

Jogging along a road one late afternoon, a peculiar sound came to our ears. We knew from close acquaintance the roaring of the silver-tip grizzlies, the hoarse bellowing of the buffalo, the wavering mellow notes of the sandhill crane. But it was none of these. Rounding a curve, we stopped short. On low, opposite green hills, two bull elk stood facing each other with heads raised in lofty pose. Standing stiffly and with wide eyes about the little arena were a number of cow elk, waiting for something. One bull lifted his nose to the sky and from his throat came a low, rumbling tone which gradually ascended the scale until it held on a clear, fine spun note which wavered and vibrated on the air. At intervals he threw back his head and the white steam of his breath poured into the frosty air. It was a shock and a thrill, too, this un-animal like challenge of one bull elk to another. We did not see the end of the performance, which is described as a return challenge of the other bull and a head-on battle, perhaps to the death of one.