



Lately, the elk have been reminding me that I owe them. A year or two ago, driving down 101 within the Cannon Beach city limits, I had a head-on collision with a member of the mid-town herd. Seeing the last of the herd disappearing into the roadside trees, I slowed to 35. But she - that last, nervous straggler - accelerated to 30 in a panicky dash to rejoin her clan across the road. Diving into the street from a roadside bluff, she hit me before my foot could hit the brake. She bounced off the front of my truck and into the muddy roadside ditch, as the truck crumpled and popped, its plastic grill exploding, the frame bending, the passenger door jamming shut. (These are huge animals, dwarfing their closest local relatives, the deer, who can bounce off of grills without leaving much of a mark.) I pulled over and watched her massive, 500-pound form struggle in the mud. Feeling helpless, I fingered a small knife, realizing that the situation required a *coup de grace* that I was not prepared to deliver. Mercifully, the local police arrived immediately and did what needed to be done. Though people kill elk every day, this situation left me feeling morose. It wasn't the adrenaline spike and the awful sights and sounds. It wasn't the truck, which - though the elk wasn't insured - was eventually repaired. It was something else, something hard to describe. Here on the coast, we live in close proximity to the elk; I knew this herd. Somehow, this felt like running over a local.

I think that I have patched things up with the elk in the time since. Still, the elk herds seemed to visit my yard more this year than usual, until our town's late spring touristy clatter chased them back into the woods. Pushed down from the high mountains by inclement wintry weather and the lack of food, big herds grazed in the lush lowlands, and filed through neighborhood streets in nighttime silence. They left deep pothole prints in the lawns where they graze, and mighty piles of dung. They gave the flowerbeds a well-churned, craters-of-the-moon look, pockmarked with split-heart prints, like they had been performing Rockettes routines outside my front window all night long. I don't mind. It is their prerogative, and a suitably elkish thing to do. Each dawn they disappeared, moving on to greener pastures far from the chaotic clanging and banging of a human morning.

Up, back on up into the mountains they go, on trails of their own making. Elk trails zig-zag all over the coastal forest. Through dense brush, over logs, under branches, along muddy and musky scented paths to which they have returned, year after year, and generation after generation. I often choose to hike on these muddy elk trails, rather than on meandering human paths. The soil is churned up there, the downed logs and sticks pulverized by a thousand hoof beats. Brush is battered back, cleared to an elk's width. Connecting the geographical nodes of elkish life - bedding areas and feeding areas, places to drink and to breed and to give birth - in a dense network of linear trails. There are well-worn resting areas on local mountainsides, with spectacular ocean views. And off to the side, there are the places they go to die. (Invariably, my dog finds these places, sneaking away with a robust femur or two; over time, she seems to slowly reassemble elk skeletons, one piece at a time, in my back yard, like a museum's well-chewed paleontology display.) In the spots where elk linger, the grass is grazed short, and the soft tops of other favorite foods - sword ferns, huckleberry bushes, young salal shrubs - are grazed to a uniform low level.

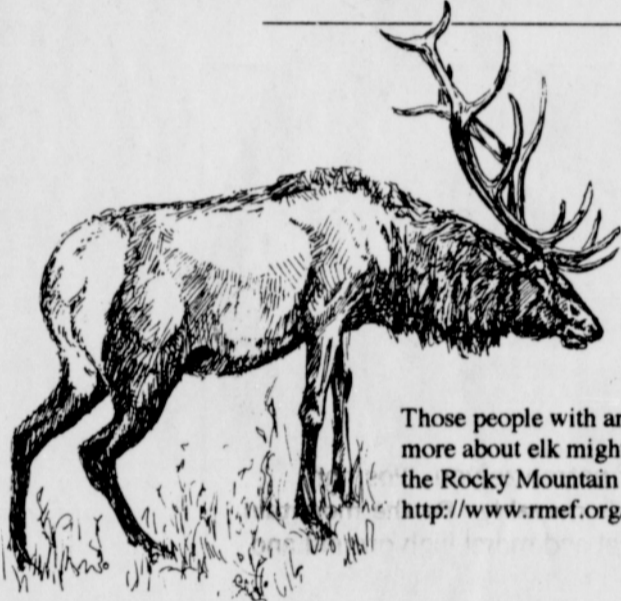
In places such as our local state parks, this network of elk trails overlies a separate network of human constructed trails. The two co-exist, facilitating the coming and going of the two species through the forest along distinct routes. And though separate, they are not equal. While a human trail may twist here and turn there - to avoid steep slopes, for example, or to detour to a particularly impressive view - an elk's path tends to be more focussed, more direct. Unlike park visitors, elk are not on vacation. From Point A to Point B they go, in direct lines between places of elkish interest, regardless of terrain. Straight up cliff-like slopes, straight down the other side. They are robust creatures, adept at plowing through obstacles and stomping the trail clear of debris. If they could be convinced to work for these local Parks, they would be formidable members of the trail maintenance crew. As it is, their trails criss-cross human trails, going to different places, manifesting their different agendas.

Formerly, elk were found throughout almost all of North America. The increase in human population and the dramatic transformation of the American landscape over the last three centuries has pushed them to the unsettled fringes, in the mountainous forests of the west, or the taiga forests of the far north. Sometimes, when hiking in these forested places, you might stumble upon an elk. Some run, but there have been times when, walking silently through the woods, I have seen them hold their ground, grazing, watching me with apparent disinterest from close proximity. During their autumn breeding season, agitated males, their antlers accounting for up to 40 pounds of their 1/3 ton weight, may escort you through their territory, paralleling your movements from just behind the brush, making menacing grunts. No doubt, it is best to avoid confrontations with a grunting bull elk.

Though they are huge, elk do have to concern themselves with predators - formerly, the young, the sick, and lame had to be wary of bear, wolves, and mountain lions. Before Europeans arrived, local Native American hunters used spears or bows to hunt elk, often aided by hunting dogs who would chase the herd this way or that. On occasion, portions of a herd would be run off cliffs, buffalo-like. Today, the healthy adult males are the primary targets of human hunters with guns. I do not hunt elk, though I have eating a goodly amount of elk meat as the beneficiary of those who do. But I avoid eating the locals. Our association with elk seems too intimate here, our proximity too close. There are distinct herds that live in the mountains around us, recognizable by their number, and the look and behavior of each herd's individual members. Each, like human communities, has their own distinctive cast of characters, their own agendas. There are herds consisting largely of cows and their young. There are herds consisting largely of bachelor males. There is a herd that lives in one place, a herd that dwells in another, each just beyond the outskirts of town. Hunkered down, in our own winter-reduced numbers, they seem like neighboring tribes. They walk parallel trails, live in parallel communities. They

have power struggles, amorous liaisons, a good knowledge of local terrain. Shooting one of these local elk would seem unneighborly somehow. As would running them down with a truck.

All of this talk of life and death, of majestic neighbors who we eat, indicates a certain tension in the relationship that we humans have with elk. Traditional Native American views seem instructive: local herds were believed to be human in nature, just like us, yet elk were also a staple source of food. This is a paradox to the Western mind, which separates all creatures into those that are eaten (e.g., pigs, cows, or chickens) and those that are not eaten (e.g., dogs, humans, and recently, whales) - all beings, divided rather neatly into those creatures that are viewed empathetically as intelligent social beings, and those creatures that are not. To the indigenous peoples of this coast, all creatures - elk, salmon, whales, and others - were traditionally viewed more as separate 'tribes' than as inert organisms that existed in sharp contradistinction to human societies. They all had 'souls.' In mythtime, most of these creatures could speak, and there was little reason to think that they did not continue to do so when humans were not present. And yet they were eaten. The consumption of these creatures as food, the placement of sentient beings at multiple levels of the food chain, created some real cosmological tensions. By consuming a creature that was viewed as intelligent and self-aware, humans generated obligations, ceremonial and mundane, that had to be repaid in a manner similar to human debts. Elk could not be killed casually or excessively, and elk had to be repaid for their losses, being honored in multiple ways, through symbolic offerings or the elkish equivalent of a 'first salmon ceremony'. The European mind works somewhat differently, and must first dehumanize beings to justify killing them. This point warrants far more consideration than I have room for here, but it is a recurring theme: many historical cases come to mind, in both our relationships with other creatures, and in our relationships amongst ourselves. Suffice it to say that I am not sure that the West's way is the best way. I have eaten elk, and I have run elk down with my truck. This is no great tragedy - certainly, in time, all elk must die, and there are worse ways for an elk to end its life. But this does not mean that I am comfortable killing them casually. I know them far too well for that. May we all look at elk just a little differently, for they are not as different from us as some might think or hope. And, elk willing, may these words, this symbolic offering, be partial repayment for my personal debt to the mid-town herd.



Those people with an interest in learning more about elk might consider contacting the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation at <http://www.rmfef.org/>.

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"The only things that evolve by themselves in an organization are disorder, friction and malperformance." Peter Drucker



June could not be enticed from her garden, but will return next month.



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### Guerilla Tourist Hiking

by Bill Wickland

Crap is scrap without the 's'; and the 's' is essential.

Oh, boy! - I have been too sedentary this winter. I took a real hike today, and my calves and forelegs are screaming from it, but it was beautiful. Between here and Winchester Bay are very high hills, and I'd heard that some good views could be had by parking at a locked gate halfway to WB, and walking in.

So I did that. This one is a former logging road through a clear-cut which was replanted in '96. The gravel road now leads to a communication tower under construction. Steep mother.

I probably hiked only a mile and a half to the tower, but early on the way I was wheezing, and I had to force myself to stop to breathe from time to time, even though I had stopped smoking cigarettes on purpose six months before.

It was really warm up there, feeling like 65. I have doors and windows open at home now, getting rid of the beach mold, but the official temperature is only 57.

The views up there are amazing. Had I hiked another mile or two down the other side, I might have been able to see Winchester Bay, but I did see big parts of the Umpqua between here and there, and much of the coastline, and one angle back here to downtown Reedsport and a bit of Scholfield Creek. Breathtaking views, and those rabid, unrelenting environmentalists can dang me, but I'd like to put a cabin up there. Gee darn I would like to do that. Just sit there and look out.

There was a bit of litter on the road, but not a whole lot, and except for one very old Henry Weinhard's brown beer bottle (Batch 137), it was new crap discarded by tower engineers or contractors in 30-wheel-drives. Year 2G Humans who had more room inside their rigs than third-world denizens have in their homes, but felt like there wasn't enough room for that piece of scrap to stay in the rig until they could get to a proper recycling place; so instead of scrapping it in the right place, they crapped it out the window.

Oh, hell. Is there a proper recycling place? Do we have a chance?

The first piece of crap really bugged me, a Fed Ex envelope. I hadn't brought a litter bag and I didn't want to carry that damned thing up a hill, so I hung it on a broken branch on the side of the road. That got me started. I hung up six pieces of litter where they would be visible. At the site was a wooden gear box, the lid of which I could lift a little. I picked up about six more pieces of crap and put that crap into the gear box.

When the contractors come back they can't miss seeing that Fed Ex envelope which stands out like a billboard, and has their name on it. If they want to get rid of it, they'll have to stop the rig and get out; and if they wonder why the hell someone hung it on a branch, maybe they'll wonder why the hell someone threw it out of a truck window.

The brown Henry's beer bottle, with a sprig of some pretty blooming red flora, came all the way home with me; I'll get a nickel for it after the pretty red leaves drop off.

Bill Wickland, a life-long wordie and frequent journalist, moved to Reedsport last winter on purpose.