

The Elk Decade

The untold story of Kentucky's elk restoration

By Dave Baker

THE SUN WAS just minutes over the mountaintops of Breathitt County when Middlesboro resident Mark Sheckels placed the crosshairs of his .270 rifle behind the shoulder of a 6x6 bull elk and squeezed the trigger. One hundred and twenty-five yards away, the bull staggered. Sheckels held tight as the big animal ran down the bowl of the mountain and out of sight – the bush the hunter used to conceal himself had blocked his view.

On a nearby ridge, Sheckel's father, Bob, and their good friend, Tennessee resident Otis Parker, had an amphitheater view of the kill. "I was jumping up and down when I saw that bull tumble down the hill," Parker said. "He hit that bull just right."

Similar stories unfolded throughout the second week of October as 93 hunters scoured the mountains of eastern Kentucky for the 2007 bull elk hunt. While final scoring must wait until the antlers have fully dried, preliminary scoring indicates the state record for a typical bull could fall this year, a sure sign of a healthy herd.

Ten years ago, former Gov. Paul Patton opened the door of a livestock trailer and released seven elk in eastern Kentucky.

Another 1,542 elk would follow over the next few years.

Since that December day, Kentucky's ambitious elk restoration program has been an overwhelming success in a variety of ways. Today, the herd numbers approximately 6,500 animals – more than all the other herds east of the Mississippi River.

Kentucky's elk restoration story is a compelling tale of ambition, vision and years of hard – and often dangerous – work.

DOVE HUNTERS KICK-START ELK RESTORATION

Tom Baker's eyes blaze when asked how Kentucky's elk program began. Although no longer a member or chairman of the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission, he still refers to the animals as "my elk." He is the restoration effort's pit bull.

In the mid-1990s, Baker served as the head of the Kentucky chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, an organization centered on a species that did not exist in the state. Baker was determined to change that.

Elk had long been absent from the state. In 1810, naturalist John James Audubon noted some elk still existed in Kentucky.



JOHN PERKINS PHOTO



JOHN PERKINS PHOTO

A state police officer (left) protects former Gov. Paul Patton during Kentucky's first elk release in December 1997.

By 1847, Audubon wrote, "we believe that none are to be found within hundreds of miles."

The eastern subspecies of elk is long extinct. To bring elk back to Kentucky would require the introduction of a different subspecies: the Rocky Mountain elk.

Skeptics believed parasites and disease would kill off elk in the eastern United States. Baker wanted to prove them wrong – but he needed money for a study.

Baker displayed a gutsy determination when he convinced a federal judge and federal prosecutor to divert the fines of 27 people caught dove hunting over bait in Simpson County into funding for an elk study. That seed money eventually led to the release of

29 elk into a 700-acre fenced area at Land Between the Lakes in western Kentucky in 1996.

EAST MEETS WEST

Elk at Land Between the Lakes would always be a novelty herd as long as they were contained within a fence. True restoration required free-roaming animals.

Doug Hensley, the Seventh District Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission member from Hazard, decided it was time.

"Doug came in my office one day and said, 'Wouldn't it be great if we restored elk to eastern Kentucky?' That's how the whole thing got started," recalled former Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Tom Bennett. "Tom Baker was working in the other part of the state for Land Between the Lakes, but he wasn't in the picture to begin with in eastern Kentucky."

"It was a perfect storm situation," Bennett said. "You now had two like-minded people working toward the same goal."

Baker and Hensley would become strong allies in the elk restoration cause.

Hensley would become the keystone for elk restoration on the Kentucky Fish and

Wildlife Commission. A strong advocate for eastern Kentucky interests, he foresaw the potential that having an elk herd would have for the economy of the area. Without Hensley's backing, elk restoration may have only remained a dream.

COULD ELK SURVIVE IN KENTUCKY?

Wildlife Division Director Roy Grimes had his reservations. "My initial reaction was that it wouldn't work," said Grimes, who no longer works for Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. "I thought that brainworm would kill too many animals."

John Phillips, whose innovations as the head of Kentucky's deer program helped build the trophy-class herd of today, had his own concerns. "I was skeptical, because a lot of the research I'd seen in school and read in the textbooks was that brainworm would negate elk in the east," said Phillips, who retired in 1999.

Brainworms, known to scientists as meningeal worms, can leave their victims blind, lame, disoriented or dead. These thread-like worms grow to adulthood in the space between the animal's brain and skull. After laying their eggs, the larval offspring pass through the animal's digestive tract. The larvae then latch onto snails and slugs. When animals graze, they inadvertently eat the slugs and snails clinging to the plants. That starts their life cycle again.

Brainworms are only found in the east, because coniferous forests to the north and the dry plains and deserts to the west act as natural roadblocks to the slugs and snails that carry the larvae.

The brainworm can infect both deer and elk. However, white-tailed deer in Kentucky evolved with brainworms, and they serve as hosts rather than victims. Researchers believe that the extinct eastern subspecies of elk evolved with brainworm immunity, too. Bringing a different subspecies of elk into the state that didn't have any kind of resistance to the brainworm, however, could be disastrous.

Undeterred, Grimes and Phillips started doing their own research. "We got on the phone and started calling other states that had started elk herds," Grimes said. "We found out that Pennsylvania and Michigan had elk herds for around 90 years, and that their loss from brainworm was 2-3 percent. So it wasn't the problem that we originally thought it was."

They also discovered that restorations in some states did not work because the elk destroyed too many farm crops. Alabama exterminated its fledgling herd a century ago because of crop damage, Grimes said. The researchers decided that Kentuckians would not accept elk in their region if the animals destroyed too many crops.

The biologists decided that a free-ranging elk herd could survive in Kentucky. Now they had to figure out where to put them.

Phillips studied satellite maps, then flew around the state in a small plane to look for suitable elk habitat. "There were some dandy places in western Kentucky where elk would work," Phillips recalled. "But there was too much farmland that elk could damage, and the residents would never accept them. The only area that looked suitable was southeastern Kentucky."

Southeastern Kentucky encompassed



PHOTO COURTESY BILL AUXIER

Bill Auxier took this bull on the opening day of the 2007 season. Preliminary measurements show it may be larger than Kentucky's current state record for a typical rack.

2.3 million acres with 1 percent cropland, 6 percent grasslands and 93 percent forest. Reclaimed strip mines had opened up the forest to grasslands; the percentage of grasslands was marginal, but still enough.

A BOLD PROPOSAL FOR ELK RESTORATION

Phillips and Grimes settled upon a full-blown elk restoration. By stocking 200 elk a year for nine years, the herd would reach 7,200 animals – about one elk for every square mile – in 17 years. “That shocked Tom (Bennett),” Grimes said. “I think people were expecting us to create a novelty herd of a couple of hundred.”

Hensley supported the concept because he did not want a novelty herd. He wanted a huntable population of elk. “We learned from the deer restoration programs that we had since the 1950s that putting just a few animals in an area didn’t work as well as a mass stocking,” he said. “That’s why we wanted to bring in a lot of elk.”

Grimes and Phillips presented their recommendations to the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission on March 7, 1997. However, Bennett said, “We didn’t have the money or the financial resources to pay for a long-term restoration program.”

Baker stepped up. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, he told commission members, would consider funding the project. With that prospect, department employees spent the next three months pitching the program during public meetings held at gyms and courthouses around the state.

The department received 3,200 written comments – with 90 percent in favor. Most importantly, 1,300 comments came from southeastern Kentucky. An overwhelming 99 percent supported it.

Meanwhile, department officials reached an agreement with Kentucky Farm Bureau members to keep elk out of heavily farmed regions. “We made a commitment that we could keep elk in southeastern Kentucky,” Bennett said. “We made a huge effort to build consensus. In my opinion, that’s the greatest success story of the whole program.”

A HOME FOR ELK

In 1997, John Tate served as land manager for the extensive Cyprus-Amax coalfields. He counted Hensley among his friends.

Hensley called Tate one day with a request: would he give a tour around the



mine site to some visitors? Hensley didn’t say much more; Tate was glad to do the favor. Those visitors included Baker and Ron Marcoux from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation headquarters in Montana.

Baker had never been on a reclaimed mine site. But as they drove around in Tate’s Ford Bronco, Baker looked across the mountains and saw miles of elk habitat. Marcoux finally revealed the purpose of their visit. “John,” he said, “we’re looking for a place to have a free-roaming elk herd in eastern Kentucky. We wondered if we could do a release on this property.”

Tate was stunned. “You want to do *what?*” he exclaimed.

The company’s support was important: the 17,000-acre Cyprus-Amax property shared a 14-mile border with the smaller 14,800-acre Robinson Forest, owned by the University of Kentucky. The mine site also had much more critical grassland acreage than the university’s property.

Marcoux convinced Tate that everyone could work together. “I could see that it was a good thing for our region and for our industry,” Tate explained later. “The coal industry played a significant role in the restoration of this critter. I think that doing these kinds of things on mine sites proves that good things can happen.”

PIVOTAL DAY FOR ELK RESTORATION

State Fish and Wildlife Commission members picked up the issue again at their next meeting on June 13, 1997. It was a pivotal moment for the elk program.

Baker sat silently while others discussed the issue. “The commission members liked the idea, but they just couldn’t pay for it,” Baker recalled. “So I stood up and said that the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation would pledge \$1 million. Their jaws just hit the table. No one had ever offered \$1 million for a project before.”

Baker brought with him some earnest money – a \$150,000 check. Hensley, who worked closely with Baker and knew about the check beforehand, made a motion to commence with elk restoration in Kentucky. It passed unanimously.

“When Tom Baker stood up and answered the cash question,” Grimes said, “that was the last barrier.”

FIRST ELK

Bennett wanted the first elk released within six months. It would be the department’s Christmas present to the state.

State fish and wildlife officials in Utah offered to provide elk that winter. Everything was in place for a December stocking – until Grimes received some bad news. A horse in



JOHN PERKINS PHOTO

Approximately 4,000 people watched the first elk release in 1997. The reluctant bull in this trailer stayed inside for an hour before bolting for freedom.

Utah had what resembled hoof-and-mouth disease. Kentucky could not move any elk for at least 45 days.

“We weren’t going to be able to get the elk out of Utah until January 1998,” Grimes said. “Tom Bennett said we couldn’t wait ... he said people are expecting elk on the ground by Christmas – you have to do it.”

Grimes, who once served as regional supervisor for parks and public lands in central Kansas, remembered there was a captive elk herd in Maxwell, Kansas. He recalled the herd was carefully tested and certified disease-free. When Grimes called to inquire about the elk, Kansas officials replied, “Come on out and get them.”

That December, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife employees Doug Wehr, Greg “Big Un” Ison, Willie Amburgey, John Phillips, Joe Lacefield and Jason Plaxico headed west in two department trucks. Each truck pulled a fifth-wheel livestock trailer otherwise used to haul deer and waterfowl.

Capturing elk is not as simple as lassoing each animal from horseback, as one might expect to see in the movies. In

Kansas, officials decided to dart each animal with a tranquilizer gun.

Tranquilizer guns have only limited range. The elk had to be close enough to hit. The problem seemed easy enough to solve. Because fences blocked the elk from moving to a wintering range, state wildlife officials fed the animals daily with alfalfa pellets spewed from the back of a truck.

“They knew the elk would come in and could be darted from the back of another truck,” Plaxico said. “That worked about two times before the elk realized something was going on. It was much harder after that.”

FIRST RELEASE

Kentucky’s first release of elk into the wild occurred Dec. 17, 1997. Four thousand people lined Potato Knob in Perry County to watch the historic event. One spectator counted 61 school buses parked nearby.

Gov. Patton climbed atop a flatbed trailer to speak to the crowd, urging them to guard the elk against poachers. “The world is going to be watching eastern Kentucky,” he said. “We have to take ownership of these elk.”

The governor walked to the trailers to inspect the animals that he would help release. “Governor,” Tate warned, “you need to be careful around that trailer.”

The trailer boomed as Bull No. 4, a mature, 900-pound animal, kicked the side. “Whew,” the startled governor responded. “I see what you’re talking about, John.”

The big moment arrived at noon. “There were 4,000 people watching, and you could hear a pin drop when they opened the door of the trailer,” Tom Baker remembered. “The elk turned around and looked at the crowd, then ran off. You could hear 4,000 people cheering.”

Bull No. 4 was not so willing to venture into its new Kentucky home. It stayed inside its trailer for an hour before finally exiting. The bull started moving north, eventually reaching Mason County near the Ohio River. “He was headed in the direction of I-75, and we couldn’t let him get that far,” Grimes said.

Employees cut antlers off bulls before shipping them to prevent the animals from hurting each other.

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife employees darted the bull three times before it died of heat exhaustion. Because of all the problems with Bull No. 4, Phillips decided the department would no longer move mature bulls.

WORKING OUT THE BUGS

In 1998, the department released 161 elk from Utah, far short of its goal. The following year, the number of elk dropped even further, to 143. Mild winters made it difficult to lure elk into baited corral traps.

“In 2000, we started going to multiple states to hedge our bets,” Grimes said. “We were too much at the mercy of the weather if we just depended on one state. That also gave our program a chance for greater genetic diversity.”

Elk shipments increased significantly. In 2000, Kentucky received 409 elk from Utah, North Dakota, Arizona and Oregon, more than twice the yearly goal. In 2001, Kansas and Utah supplied 326 elk. In 2002, Kentucky released 503 elk from Utah and New Mexico.

Approximately two-thirds of the elk brought to Kentucky came from Utah. Those elk originally came from Yellowstone National Park, the source of Utah’s own elk restoration program from 1910-1925.

Some of Kentucky’s early elk relocation trips did not go smoothly. Capturing then moving elk cross-country was a new experience for department employees. It took several trips to work out the bugs and improve techniques for handling animals.

In January 1998, employees shipped the first load of elk from Utah to Kentucky. However, the driver hired to haul the animals didn’t arrive on the designated day. Grimes later learned that the driver had stopped midway through the 32-hour trip to sleep in Kansas City.

After that incident, the department hired extra drivers to make the trip non-stop.



BETH McDONALD PHOTO

A truck carrying Kentucky conservation officers also would escort each load.

The second load of approximately 50 elk from Utah nearly became the stuff of legend when an Indiana state trooper pulled over the truck on Interstate 64. “She thought the elk looked thirsty,” Grimes said. “So she insisted that we open the truck and let the animals drink from the ditch along the road.”

The Kentucky conservation officers escorting the truck called Grimes to intercede. They managed to convince the trooper that letting elk loose alongside the interstate would not be a good idea.

“That would have been disastrous,” Grimes said. “There’s no way that we could have gotten those elk back in the trailer. Had we let them loose, Indiana would have had the fourth-largest elk herd east of the Mississippi River. There would have been road-killed elk all over Interstate 64.”

Weather affected shipments, too. In 1998, a blizzard in Nebraska left a truckload of 51 Utah elk stranded for two days alongside Interstate 80. Within four weeks of their release in Kentucky, 26 of the elk had died due to stress from their capture and transport.

John Phillips remembers the weather hazards well. “One night we got stuck in a snowstorm as we were leaving Hardware Ranch in Utah, headed toward the valley,” he said. “We lost sight of the road and got into the ditch. We spent hours there, thinking that we were going to freeze to death. Luckily, a snowplow came along and got us out.”

ELK WRANGLERS

Officially, Charlie Logsdon and Dan Crank are wildlife biologists. Unofficially, they became the department’s elk wranglers – a difficult, dangerous and sometimes monotonous job, often performed under the most brutal of weather conditions.

Logsdon, who once served as an intern for Phillips, was running the West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area when he received a new assignment. “We needed someone who could take the bull by the horns and run the elk trapping operation,” Phillips recalled. “We knew Charlie was a superb biologist.”

Crank started working with the elk program while employed as a research technician at the University of Kentucky. The department hired Crank in 2000 to help Logsdon in the final three years of the



elk trapping program.

Crank and Logsdon worked months at a time trapping elk in the harshest of conditions. “In Utah, it was so cold that you could throw a glass of water in the air and it would freeze before it hit the ground,” Crank recalled. “The wind chill sometimes got to 35 degrees below zero.”

A typical day of elk trapping in Utah started with a 4 a.m. wake-up. Trap lines were set 125 miles away from the nearest lodging at Hardware Ranch. Depending on the weather, it took three to four hours to drive to the trapping site.

The trap consisted of a corral baited with a two-mile long strip of hay leading inside. A tripwire closed the gate once the animals were inside. Metal fence posts set 18 inches apart kept the large, mature bulls outside the trap. If a big bull got inside, it could easily kill several smaller elk.

Trapping was most successful in the most brutal weather. “We did our best when there was two to three feet of snow on the ground and the temperature was 10 degrees or less,” Logsdon said.

Captured elk were loaded into trailers for the return trip to a Hardware Ranch

holding pen. Once 60 elk were in the holding pen – enough for a semi-tractor trailer load – each animal received an ear tag and had blood drawn for disease testing. Elk were checked a second time for tuberculosis.

In Utah, the workdays typically stretched 12-14 hours, seven days a week, for three months in winter. “Some days there were only two elk in the trap, or none, but you still had to drive out there, check the trap, bait it and reset it,” Logsdon said. “It got so monotonous that in the end, Dan and I would go days without talking to each other.”

Wild elk were easier to manage because they feared people. “Elk that are habituated to people are the most dangerous,” Logsdon said. “Tame elk off feed rows are completely different than wild elk. They have no fear of people and will just stand there and stare at you. They’re dangerous.”

Crank adopted a dangerous tactic to deal with these problem elk: He stood on the other side of the head gate and let the animals charge at him through the chute. If someone did not clamp the head gate at precisely the right time, the elk could trample him. “Elk get mad and start popping their teeth at you,” Crank said. “It sounds like two pieces



KDFWR PHOTO



KDFWR PHOTO

Left: Charlie Logsdon holds an elk while Dan Crank prepares to fit a tracking collar, part of the research on elk movement. Above: In a moment of playfulness, Charlie Logsdon (left) shows an elk being held by Bill Lynch where it is going and where it needs to stay.

of wet rubber band being rubbed together.”

Officials also used nets shot from helicopters to capture elk in Utah, Arizona and New Mexico. After capturing the elk, wranglers hobbled the animal by tying its feet together then airlifting it back to a collection site.

“Net gunning” meant an exhausting day for employees. “After taking the hobbles off 50 elk a day,” Logsdon recalled, “I had to take four Advil a day just to get my arms moving again.”

Kentucky’s nine-year elk relocation program lasted fewer than six years due to concerns over the spread of chronic wasting disease. “We had reached the critical mass to sustain the herd by that time,” Bennett said.

ELK HUNTING RETURNS

Kentucky’s long-dormant elk hunting heritage returned on Oct. 6, 2001. Shortly after dawn that day, Lexington resident Tracy Cerise took a bull elk in Perry County with a 20-yard shot from his muzzleloader. His bull, still wearing the No. 147 ear tag placed on it in a Utah corral four years

earlier, received immense media coverage.

“I really enjoyed my time in the spotlight,” Cerise wrote recently. “Every time I see a good hunt on ‘Kentucky Afield’ television, it really makes me wish I could go on another hunt like that.”

Word about Kentucky elk is spreading. This year, more than 31,000 hunters from 48 states applied for an elk hunt.

Kentucky already has a dozen registered elk guides ready to help those hunters. Bobby Inguagiato, a college student who guides elk hunters when he’s not selling mobile homes, said guides may charge anywhere from \$150 to \$350 a day, or \$2,000 to \$3,500 a hunt. “Elk,” he said, “have meant a lot of income to this community.”

This year, Inguagiato guided Mississippi resident Ken Peters to a big 7x7 bull taken on opening morning. “I never even heard one bugle until this morning,” Peters said. “This was pretty good

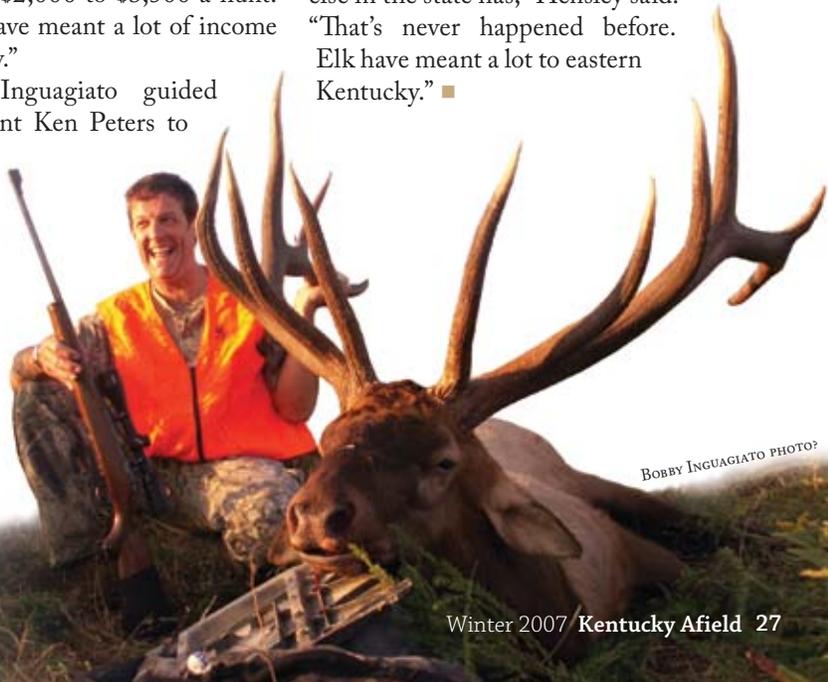
beginner’s luck – I think I’ll quit now.”

Although elk cannot receive a final score until the antlers fully dry, a typical bull taken on opening day by Johnson County resident Bill Auxier received a preliminary score of 367 4/8, slightly higher than the current state record of 361 4/8.

Auxier, who was hunting in Knott County, said he saw the bull at 150 yards on opening morning, but couldn’t keep his .300 Weatherbysteady. That afternoon, he saw the bull again. This time he was 50 yards away. “I didn’t have time to get the shakes,” he said. “I just pulled the gun to my shoulder and shot. I never felt the gun when I shot that elk.”

Elk restoration took an immense amount of effort to get where it is today. “We’ve got something in eastern Kentucky that no one else in the state has,” Hensley said. “That’s never happened before. Elk have meant a lot to eastern Kentucky.” ■

Ken Peters ventured from Mississippi to take this bull on opening day of the 2007 season. A photograph of this bull in the wild appeared in the 2007 Kentucky Afield calendar.



BOBBY INGUAGIATO PHOTO