

Experience Pennsylvania's Elk Country

TRACKS & RACKS

Keystone Elk Country Alliance

Volume 14 - Spring 2025

Photo by Zac Shopene



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to Elk Viewing**

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**KECA Celebrates 15 years
of Conservation**



“Our Mission is to Conserve and Enhance Pennsylvania’s Elk Country for Future Generations.”

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Elk Country Visitor Center Hours: January through March, Saturday and Sundays only from 8am - 4pm. Closed Easter Sunday. April through May, Thursdays through Monday 9am - 5pm. June through October, open 7 days a week 8am-8pm. November through December, open Thursday through Monday 8am-4pm.

For More Information Call: (814-787-5167) or check our website ExperienceElkCountry.Com

Pennsylvania's Elk Country is a place of natural beauty and memorable experiences. The stunning beauty of the mountains, the fall bugle of a mature bull elk, the splendor and serenity of the forests, the springtime cadence of songbirds, the summertime wildflowers, the clean air, clean water, abundant wildlife, the sound of a babbling mountain stream, the smell of the forest after a summer rain, the breathtaking views of the night sky, and the crispness of a clear winter morning. I could go on and on, but my point is Elk Country is an awesome place to visit anytime of the year. Pennsylvania's Elk Country and the Elk Country Visitor Center continue to be a fantastic place to visit. Whether it's viewing elk during the rut, experiencing the solitude and beauty of winter, searching for antler sheds in the spring, or catching a glimpse of a calf or attending one of the many area events during the summer, Elk Country is special.



As a Pennsylvania based non-profit wildlife conservation organization that operates the Elk Country Visitor Center in Benazette, PA, the Keystone Elk Country Alliance (KECA) is dedicated to Pennsylvania's Elk Country and Pennsylvania's Elk herd. Pennsylvania's elk now number over 1,400 animals and live across a ten-county area within North-Central Pennsylvania. The Keystone Elk Country Alliance's mission is to Conserve and Enhance Pennsylvania's Elk Country for future generations. Our over 2,200 members, 740 life members and 300 volunteers are proud to be advocates for this special place and this special animal. Our mission priorities are Conservation Education, Habitat Enhancement, and Permanent Land Protection.

The Elk Country Visitor Center has become the premier tourist destination in the Pennsylvania Wilds, averaging over 300,000 visitors each year. In fact, we've had over 5.5M visitors pass through our doors from all 50 states and 47 countries. Elk watching and nature tourism generates over \$250M in economic activity, and has created jobs, businesses and infrastructure throughout the region.

Conservation Education is KECA's number one mission priority. When we opened in 2010, we had one small classroom in the Visitor Center to conduct conservation education programs. Since that time, we've added two 40 x 80 outdoor classrooms to accommodate the demand for our conservation education programs. We now teach an average of nearly 40,000 students of all ages with our various Con-ed programs each year. We've reached students in all 67 of Pennsylvania's counties, eighteen states and Canada. Our programs have been delivered to over 720,000 students and have helped to create a whole lot of great stewards of the land and wildlife.

Habitat Enhancement is KECA's second mission priority. Our habitat crew enhances an average of over 500 acres of Elk Habitat across four counties in the elk range each year. Over the years we've enhanced over 6,300 acres of habitat on both public and private lands. In 2024 we had the opportunity to partner with Lyme Timber, DCNR, TC Energy, and the Domtar Corporation. to enhance a 21-acre tract in the May Hollow area of Cameron County. The land was a weedy and poorly vegetated reclaimed mine site. Domtar donated and transported 191 triaxle loads of paper mulch co-product from their Johnsonburg paper mill and covered the cost of tillage and re-seeding. The paper mulch co-product is composed mainly of wood fiber and also contains calcium which neutralizes the acidic soil much like common lime does. The fibrous material absorbs and holds moisture near the surface where it is available to plants. TC Energy contributed \$25k to cover KECA's cost for seed, fertilizer and the extensive stone removal that was required. Their generous contribution will also provide for the future maintenance and additional habitat improvements on the property, which is now a high value field of mixed clover, orchard grass, and winter wheat. The total cost of this project was over \$80k!

We truly appreciate all of you that support us by visiting the Elk Country Visitor Center, by attending one or more of our 16 fundraising banquets and events across the commonwealth, by volunteering at the Visitor Center or fundraising events, and through your generous donations. 100% of the money we raise stays right here in Pennsylvania's Elk Country. We won't forget our supporters and our past and will remain true to our mission **"To Conserve and Enhance Pennsylvania's Elk Country for Future Generations"**. See you in Elk Country!

Jeff Gauger
President & CEO
Keystone Elk Country Alliance

BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO PENNSYLVANIA ELK VIEWING

WRITTEN BY MARK NALE

Venturing to northcentral Pennsylvania to see elk can be a daunting and sometimes disappointing task. Elk are wild animals that roam wherever they please. Therefore, there are no guarantees. We do want you to visit Pennsylvania's "Elk Country" and we want you to be successful and have a rewarding time. What follows is a guide to help increase your chances of seeing elk during your visit.

Approximately 1,400 elk live in the Pennsylvania Wilds. The Pennsylvania Game Commission has designated 3,000 square miles as the elk range. In other words, there is about one elk for every two square miles of territory. When you consider that elk usually hang in groups, that leaves a lot of empty territory.

I have taken numerous trips into the elk range and I have had the privilege of viewing and photographing many elk. One fall day, it seemed that I spotted elk everywhere I went. On another day, I saw about 40 in one herd at the visitor center, but I have also struck out on more than one occasion.

TIMING

If possible, put yourself in elk country at first light. This could be in or near Benezette, but there are many other places where elk can be found grazing in roadside fields. Considering the times that I have zeroed, none were during the first two hours of daylight. Like many species of wildlife, elk are more active, and likely to be seen grazing in the open, at dawn and dusk.

The time of year is also important. During the winter months, especially when there is snow cover, elk favor south-facing slopes, and they are more likely to be found at lower elevations.

LOCATION.

LOCATION. LOCATION

You've heard that saying before with respect to business and real estate, but the same principle applies to trout fishing, deer hunting and elk viewing.

The center for elk viewing in Pennsylvania is certainly Benezette, in Elk County. In and near Benezette, you will find the Elk Country Visitor Center and three nearby elk viewing areas – Dents Run, Woodring Farm and Winslow Hill. The visitor center is a must for first-time elk viewers.

Be sure to check out the exhibits and watch the special 4D video presentation. Walk the short trails at the Center for a chance to see elk and other wildlife. The best times to see elk at the Visitor Center or the Winslow Hill viewing area would be from mid-summer through early winter.

You might also spot elk in less-traveled areas, such as around Karthaus, Keewaydin, Driftwood, Grant, Frenchville, Piper (also called Quehanna), Weedville and Medix Run, or anywhere in the Quehanna Wild Area, such as along Ardel Road. Sinnemahoning and Kettle Creek state parks are other good public places to see elk.

Other less-traveled routes -- Rolling Stone Road, north from Kylertown (I-80 Exit 133), is a great place to spot elk, as are roads such as Woolridge Road, Caledonia Pike, or Keewaydin Road, which lead off from Rolling Stone Road. A good source for locating and navigating these back roads is the Moshannon-Quehanna Purple Lizard map or the free state forest maps. Several Facebook groups are devoted to Pennsylvania elk -- checking them out before your visit might help you learn where people have been seeing elk recently.

DRIVING OR WALKING

Most people drive to look for elk or they hang out at one of the popular viewing areas. Drive slowly, with the driver mainly keeping his or her eyes on the road, while others scan for elk. Their tan rump patch is often the first thing spotted. Be respectful of other motorists -- some might not be as interested in viewing elk as you are. Don't park blocking the highway or on private property. If you see another vehicle paused along the road, slow down and take a look. They just might be watching an elk or other wildlife.

Want to get some exercise, with a chance to see elk? Try parking in one of the small lots at the gated entrances to state game lands roads. Good choices would be SGL 100 in northern Centre County, SGL 321 near Pottersdale, or SGL 311 north of Benezette. Be sure to obey signs -- some areas are off limits.

Mark Nale, who lives in the Bald Eagle Valley, is a member of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association. His favorite place on earth is northcentral Pennsylvania. He can be reached at MarkAngler@aol.com

FUNDRAISING EVENTS



WAPITI WADDLE (DUCK RACE) - SATURDAY, MAY 24TH, 2025

Join us for a day of fun on Memorial Day Weekend! "Adopt" your duck by pre-order or on the day of! Ducks will drop into Trout Run promptly at 1pm and swim their way down into the Bennett's Branch. First Duck to cross the finish line will receive a \$1,000 Prize! Lots more prizes to follow!

GOLF OUTING - FRIDAY, MAY 30TH, 2025

This foursome shotgun scramble will be a great day spent outdoors with your registration to include 18 holes of golf, usage of a cart, lunch and dinner! This annual event directly benefits the Keystone Elk Country Alliance Conservation Education Department. Allowing us to educate over 40,000 people each year.



ELK LADIES DAY OUT - SUNDAY, JUNE 29TH, 2025

This annual event welcomes all women ages 12 and up to spend the day together learning, having fun, and enjoying outdoor activities. From classes on Outdoor Wellness, Maple Syrup, creating your own walking sticks, learning Primitive Survival Skills, introduction to Beekeeping and more!

CAR CRUISE INN - SATURDAY, JULY 5TH, 2025

This event is FREE and great for ALL ages! Either enjoy the event as a spectator of this massive car display or bring your antique car, truck, or bike to be entered to receive a dash plaque. With a food truck and music, you are sure to have a great time!



MOTORCYCLE RIDE FOR THE ELK - DATE TBD

Prepare yourself for an exciting ride through the PA wilds where you'll get to experience some great stops that will include games, a meal, and prizes. Stay up to date with the Elk Country Visitor Center Facebook Page to learn more information!

ARCHERY CHALLENGE - AUGUST 15TH - 17TH

Test your skills as an archer and athlete at this year's Elk Country Archery Challenge. During this three-day event held at the Elk Country Visitor Center, you'll face a Challenge Course, Head to Head races, 3-D Target Courses and a Pack Race. You can take part in every event or pick an individual challenge. The event is open to all ages, monarchs and matriarchs welcome.



CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF CONSERVING PENNSYLVANIA'S ELK COUNTRY BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Written by Rawley Cogan, President and CEO Emeritus and Jeff Gauger President and CEO



Spending time in Elk Country is just, time well spent, time to reflect on family, friendships and life in general. Elk Country is a place that you can depend on being there; steep mountains, crisp clean air, tall oaks, mountain streams and wapiti; when you arrive; there is just no place like it. No doubt you know you are there; you can feel it. For the last fifteen years KECA has been working to conserve and enhance Pennsylvania's Elk Country. If you lean into what it means to work for Elk Country, you would discover that KECA's leadership, staff, volunteers, members and supporters are for the most part builders. Sure, in the context of construction, we built the Elk Center, E. M. Jack and Jean Parker Outdoor Classroom, Butch Clemens Outdoor Classroom, and other building

structures but that is not really what we are referring to here.

In 2010 the Founders began to construct this outfit and built it on a foundation that would provide for sustainability as well as growth. To provide the footings for this foundation we determined what our mission was and to this day it has not changed. Every decision KECA has made and every decision going forward must meet our mission. KECA cannot waver or drift off our core mission. Since 2010, the guiding principle of the Keystone Elk Country Alliance has been to Conserve and Enhance Pennsylvania's Elk Country for Future Generations.

Building our Conservation Education Department

Conservation Education is KECA's number one mission priority; by design. When the Elk Country Visitor Center was built between 2009-2010 the Founders knew the Elk Center would be a huge learning tool: a prop if you will. The best educators use hands on methods to teach and make their points. Students learn and retain information when they are involved instead of the more common lecture type classroom. The Elk Center was designed with this in mind: hence the Discovery Room and interactive displays, animal hides, skulls, antlers, skeletons, nature trails etc. The Elk Center is also a Gold rated LEED certified Building which is one of few located in Pennsylvania's Elk Country. The energy saving and water collection and conservation are also excellent teaching tools.

Pennsylvania's Elk Country is by necessity not close to large human population centers. For many schools the Elk Center is just too far to bus students. KECA was aware that this was the case and developed a distance learning program we refer to as distance learning. Using technology, KECA's educators can take Elk Country into any school with an internet connection. Modern technology will become more and more relevant and useful for reaching more students in the future. Since opening in September of 2010, KECA's professional educators have educated over 420,000 students and guests from all over the United States as well as several other countries.



Building Consensus

Approximately 15 years ago the USA turned the corner to where more people now live in an urban environment than a rural one. Today, approximately 80% of the residents of the USA live in an urban area. KECA's conservation message is more important today than ever; we must ensure that our children and grandchildren experience this special place. KECA has built a reputation and has become a leader in conservation education. Elementary, middle and high schools, colleges, civic groups, and outdoor clubs appreciate the significance of the educational programs KECA offers. KECA adamantly believes that through our conservation educational programs, we can build bridges of understanding between urban and rural environments.

Building Acres of Wildlife Habitat

Pennsylvania's elk range is comprised of less than 10% high quality herbaceous openings that are preferred by elk and other wildlife. From 2010 until 2012 KECA was focused on education and operating the Elk Center to the point we did not have the human and or financial resources to develop elk habitat. We did, however, during that time manage and improve the habitat at the Elk Center. Today, KECA enhances habitat across private and public lands including Elk, Clearfield, Cameron, Clinton and Potter Counties. KECA's professional land managers work directly with private landowners to enhance their land for elk and other wildlife; by planting high quality forage such as timothy, various clovers, winter wheat, annual oats, brassicas, brome grass, rye grass and other preferred forage crops. During the last 15 years KECA has acquired equipment such as two 100 HP tractors, disks, harrows, cultipacker, no-till drill, grain drill, hay bine, hay baler, wagons, bat wing mower, lime and fertilizer spreader and a dump truck and trailer to mobilize the equipment. In 2021 KECA constructed a 40'-60' maintenance building to house and maintain this equipment. KECA's staff and volunteers enhance between 400-500 acres each year.



Building KECA's Permanent Land Protection

Over the last 15 years KECA has permanently protected three parcels; Kimmel Run Property, Dents Run/Sinnemahoning property and purchased a section of SGL 311 for the PA Game Commission. All three parcels are located in Elk County Benazette Township. The Kimmel Run Property, named in honor of KECA's Founding Treasurer Randy Kimmel is located adjacent to the Elk Center property. As KECA looks into the next 15 years; permanent land protection will likely become more of a priority not by acquisition but by developing conservation easements as a permanent land protection tool.

Building Partnerships

KECA is in the people business and relationship building is paramount to our success. KECA has long-term partnerships with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to operate, administer and program the Elk Country Visitor Center. A 35-year lease agreement was negotiated and endorsed in 2014. KECA and DCNR's leadership work well together to ensure the partnership continues long into the future. This long standing private/public partnership is a wonderful example of government and the private sector combining resources for long term gain. The KECA/DCNR partnership is best described as a joint venture of private business and government whose goal is to drive innovation, enhance quality of life and improve efficiency.

KECA also partners with the PA game Commission on habitat enhancement projects and educational programs to ensure elk habitat is maintained and the latest research findings and information are available to our visitors.

KECA's long-standing partnerships with the natural gas industry has been extremely beneficial for elk conservation in Pennsylvania. For example, Seneca Resources and KECA partnered to invest significant dollars to generate interest and then use dividends to fund scholarships for high school students going on to college in a related major, providing much needed funding to potential conservation leaders. Range Resources and KECA have also partnered long term. Range has provided much needed funding for pull behind trailers and graphics as well as providing KECA 4x4 trucks for our work. KECA also partnered with TC Energy to enhance habitat on a pipeline corridor on the Sproul State Forest and a DCNR Easement parcel in Cameron County.

We've become a family of friends who care deeply for Elk Country with a commitment to our mission of Conserving and Enhancing Pennsylvania's Elk Country for Future Generations!

EASTERN ELK IN THE PA WILDS

Today and Tomorrow

Written by Ray Hunt



Retrospective – Our Elk Heritage

I have developed a keen sense of wonder when it comes to the magnificent Rocky Mountain elk in Pennsylvania's Elk Country. *Where did they come from? When did they get here? How big is the herd? And where can I find them?!*

Let's set some context so we can begin to think of how they have evolved into the landscape and continue to thrive here in the PA Wilds....

North American elk are made up of four different subspecies: The smallest, Tule elk, are primarily found in the central and northern areas of the California. Then moving east are the Manitoba elk who once roamed from Colorado and the Eastern Rockies north into Canada. Further west, the Roosevelt elk, ranging from the northern California coast through Oregon, Washington and western Canada. And lastly, Rocky Mountain elk, the largest subspecies, who live in the mountain ranges east of the Cascade Range. Today the estimated total number of combined elk in North America is approximately 1.2 million. The total number of Rocky Mountain elk ranges between 800-900 thousand, and the number of Rocky Mountain elk in Central Pennsylvania is estimated between 1,400 – 1,600.

In Pennsylvania, eastern elk have been an established part of the landscape for centuries. The herd was once prominent from northern New York down through central Georgia, with earlier recorded accounts of eastern elk habitat found further north in parts of Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Throughout the area, before and during the 16th century, Indians hunted them for food and used their skins for blankets, teepees, and clothing. Later, in the 17th and 18th centuries European settlers from France, Spain, and England migrated westward to America, to the eastern parts of the country. As they settled and established their encampments and built up communities the elk



continued to roam, foraging near these settlements throughout the year. During winter, they were a generous and tempting target for hunters. As the settler populations grew into the 19th century, elk were pursued by area farmers who regarded them as a major threat to their livelihood. In parallel, eastern forests were being cleared for the emerging logging and mining industries which diminished elk food sources and destroyed their habitat. It's reported that by the late 1870's the last eastern herd were literally wiped out in Pennsylvania, the last elk shot in Centre County.

Ironically, in the early 1900's, a group of conservationist-hunters took the initiative to capitalize on a Federal program designed to thin a massive herd

of over-abundant elk from Northern Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, and transplant them into barren game lands. In 1913, sponsored by the PA Game Commission, and hired by the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, an American frontiersman, Howard Eaton, was charged with rounding up 50 Rocky Mountain elk in Yellowstone for later release in two Pennsylvania counties – Clearfield and Clinton Counties.

Eaton was born in 1861 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and at the age of 17 had moved out west to the Dakota Territory to raise cattle and horses, where he was later joined by two brothers. Howard Eaton sold wild game to the railroad workers and wealthy easterners, and also provided guiding services to hunters and explorers in Wyoming, Yellowstone, and Glacier National Parks, developing quite a reputation among frontiersmen, big game hunters and Presidents. So, in 1913, the first group of fifty Pennsylvania-bound Rocky Mountain elk were successfully rounded up and shipped via train and reintroduced to our eastern landscape. In 1916, Eaton was hired once again to round up an additional herd of one hundred elk from Yellowstone to be transported by rail back to the Pennsylvania counties. Elk regeneration had begun!

The eastern elk we enjoy today are direct descendants of those original Rocky Mountain elk that came from Yellowstone National Park. For nearly a half-century after their arrival, their numbers remained somewhat static – during the Great Depression and up until the 1970's and 80's, they were poached by hunters and killed by farmers. The Pennsylvania Game Commission then began implementing guidelines for hunting elk, and various entities and conservation groups have continued to provide stewardship through programs, land purchases and policies designed to protect these beautiful creatures from ever being diminished, again.

Looking Forward – Respectfully Enjoying Pennsylvania's Eastern Elk

Today, our Rocky Mountain eastern elk herd inhabit our landscape preferring to stay close to the Bennet Branch of the Sinnemahoning Creek. The Creek runs from the confluence of the Driftwood Branch (Driftwood, Cameron County) and southwest along Pennsylvania Route 555. Route 555 passes through Hicks Run, Dents Run, downtown Benezette, Medix Run, Caledonia, Weedville, Force, onward further south and west where it joins Route 255, continuing on to Penfield. I've spotted elk off the highway in the village of Hollywood (Huston Township, Elk County) and at several spots off of Route 555 clear up to Driftwood, which covers about 30 miles one way.

On a recent afternoon trek from DuBois I scoured the landscape on my way north in hopes of spotting these magnificent creatures. On Route 555 up toward Driftwood I traveled north 5 miles to Dents Run and pulled over to walk along the woods just off Sinnemahoning Creek. Fortunately, I didn't need to go far before I spotted four cows resting under trees. And nearby a juvenile elk was napping alone in the shade. Although I've personally observed them in groups of almost one hundred, it's more common to see them scattered into little groups as I saw there. It's also typical that male elk are most commonly seen with other male elk, females with other female elk.

From Dents Run I headed a few miles further up to Hicks Run, to a cool and eerie cemetery right off the Hicks Run Viewing Area (where you'll find members of the Dent and Hicks families buried). And I've been lucky to spot elk at Hicks Run almost every time I've stopped there – at the Viewing Area, down by the cemetery, and across the road along the Sinnemahoning Creek. And I was lucky enough to have spotted a couple of stragglers in the woods just beyond the meadow exposed by the Hicks Run Viewing Area platform. Maybe the arrival of Spring motivated the elk to come up off the Creek and move up and out of the shade. Whatever the case, a victory is a victory!

I decided to head back towards Benezette as the afternoon was winding down and I wanted to stop and check out Ruffo Flat for elk on the south side of 555 coming into Benezette, and the downtown area to see if the weather hadn't lifted other elk out of the shadows and into view. I spotted more elk passing through Dents Run – the same spot I saw them earlier in the day, but now a few more elk were present.



Continued...

And I noticed the traffic on the roads that afternoon was pretty sparse and I was the only spectator on my stops - truly grateful for the sightings of elk and the beautiful day and surroundings.

Passing the Flat and continuing through downtown Benezette I passed the "Benezett Store Campground" on the left side of Route 555. As I approached the "Rut N Bugle" outlet (killer moonshine here!) I swiveled my head around and saw elk by the Campground across the road. With my car pulled into the lot at the Rut N Bugle I crossed the road and spotted eight elk – three bulls and five cows that were grazing in the grassy meadow. I watched them for a few minutes and they occasionally looked up at me but kept up their grazing. How can such massive creatures appear so docile and approachable? While maintaining a safe distance and snapping a few pictures in the fading sunlight I decided to call it a day, already thinking about, and looking forward to, my next trip to the PA Wilds Elk Country.

Eastern elk can be viewed on virtually any outing to Elk Country. If you're planning on coming out to explore, stop by the Elk Country Visitor Center (950 Winslow Hill Road, Benezette, PA 15821, 814-787-5167, www.ExperienceElkCountry.com). The Center has elk viewing tips, various displays, educational resources and maps, and trained, helpful staff to answer any and all questions to make your elk experience exceptional.

You can also get information through the Keystone Elk Country Alliance (KECA – info@experienceelkcountry.com). KECA is a wildlife conservation organization that operates and manages the Elk Country Visitor Center. KECA provides access to a number of educational resources, workshops, programs, events, and distance learning for individuals and groups of all ages. Check them out to learn more about these resources and opportunities to get involved.

So, when you come remember to check out the above resources and **bring Binoculars, a camera, snacks or a lunch, drinking water, and an umbrella or rain jacket.**

And most of all, enjoy a memorable trip to the beautiful countryside and enjoy our magnificent eastern elk!

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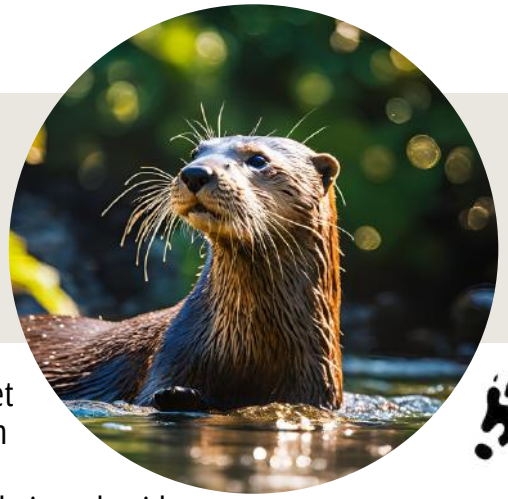
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SPOTLIGHT ANIMAL:

North American River Otter



River Otters are found in all major river systems in PA. Otters are about 2 to 3 feet in length and have a 12 to 15 inch tail. Male otters are known as boars and weigh more than the females known as sows. An average weight for a river otter is 10 to 25 pounds. A river otters colors are dark brown with a lighter brown on their undersides. Their throat and chin are a grayish color and their noses are black and bare. Often times found in rivers laying or floating on their back. They are often spotted like this while they are eating. River otters eat fish, frogs, turtles, snails, mussels, crayfish and much more. Otters den under tree root systems, abandoned beaver dens, or rocks. The mating season is from January to May. The main purpose of dens is for this special time of year. Otters will have their young ones known as pups in these dens. Every time otters eat, they clean up after themselves as well as clean themselves after every meal. The river otter is one of PA's versatile aquatic mammals.



Fun Fact:

Otters are one of the few mammals that use "tools". They will use rocks to act as a hammer to open foods.

Population

River otters were nearly wiped out in Pennsylvania in the early 1900s, but restoration efforts have led to a comeback. The Pennsylvania River Otter Reintroduction project ran from 1982 to 2004 and reintroduced 153 river otters into state waterways.

Habitat

Otters prefer clean water with fish and other aquatic life. They live in large home ranges that include streams, ponds, lakes, and wetlands.

Behavior

Otters are curious and playful, and they can navigate underwater for up to a quarter-mile without coming up for air. They are carnivores that eat fish, frogs, crayfish, snakes, turtles, birds, small mammals, and mussels.





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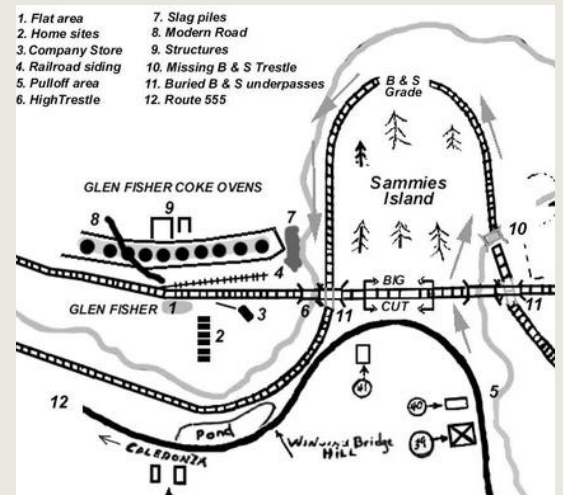
EXPLORING THE HISTORIC BENNETT'S VALLEY COKE OVENS

Have you ever been on a back road in the Bennetts Valley area and ran into some abandoned openings and thought what are they? What were they used for? And Why were there so many? The Bennetts Valley area hosts three main sites where these Coke Ovens, also known as "Beehive Ovens" can be found. These Ovens could be found in Byrnedale, Glen Fisher and the largest set found in Tyler with roughly 380 ovens. A Coke Oven is a chamber of brick or other heat-resistant material in which coal is heated to create coke. As coal has been converted into Coke since the early 1700's, Coke was originally made through an Iron Furnace.

The technique of using an Iron Furnace yielded many difficulties. Within this process, making coke took roughly 5-7 days and only converted roughly fifty percent of the coal into coke. Thus, creating the demand for something quicker and more productive. The first production of coke in a Coke Oven occurred during the 1830s. The Coke Oven could convert 35 tons of coal into roughly 25 tons of coke in as quickly as 18 hours. As time went on, Southwestern Pennsylvania became the Nation's leading coke manufacturing region in all of the world. As these "Beehive Ovens" grew more in demand, companies such as Shawmut Coal Mines and Winslow Brother Coal Mines opened in Northcentral Pennsylvania.

Working the coke ovens was hot, dirty, and labor-intensive work. The masonry domes were constructed in long rows to facilitate the loading and unloading process. Workers from nearby coal mines dumped coal through the openings in the tops of the ovens and then sealed the ovens shut. The coal was then ignited and smoldered. Since the ovens were sealed, the coke ovens became essentially oxygen free so that when the coal was heated to about 1250 degrees Celsius, the coal would not actually burn. Thus, separating the coal gas, coal water, and tar.

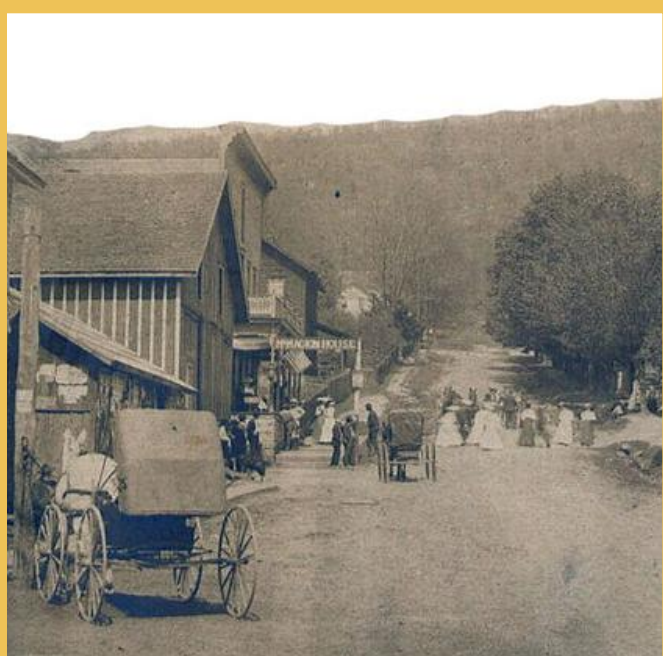
The coal gas and coal water fuse together with carbon and the remaining ash, forming a hard residue commonly referred to as "coke". After heating up the coal into coke, the coke is then unloaded from the oven by a pusher machine. The pusher machine has a pusher arm that puts the coke into a car that takes the coke to a coke quenching tower. Here, the coke is quenched with water. The coke is then taken to a coke wharf, where the remaining water evaporates. A reclaimer then feeds the coke from the wharf to a conveyor belt, which transfers the coke to the crushing and screening station. The tough economical era of the 1930s also known as, The Great Depression, devastated many of the "smaller" operations. Larger coke oven sites took precedence as the United States entered World War II. In 1910, beehive ovens made up more than 80 percent of the nation's coke. Two decades later their share was less than 6 percent. Today, the materials for steelmaking are mined and then transformed into steel using two different processes: the blast furnace and the electric arc furnace.



BASED IN BENEZETTE

ELK COUNTY MURDER

By James T. Baumgratz



(Photo of Winslow Hill Road leading up to Devils Elbow)

The significant snowfall had obliterated any signs of Pascuzzi's tracks into Devil's Elbow and this made the search most difficult and unsuccessful. Pascuzzi's body was eventually found by another hunter two days after he went missing. Pascuzzi's rifle barrel was glistening in the sunlight, and this caused the man to further inspect a hump he saw in the snow. Found frozen and face down, the authorities speculated that Pascuzzi had succumbed to a heart attack and the cause of death was natural. When turning over the body, they quickly realized that this was no natural death and that Pascuzzi had indeed suffered a fatal shot through the back of his head which exited through his face. This was now a homicide investigation.

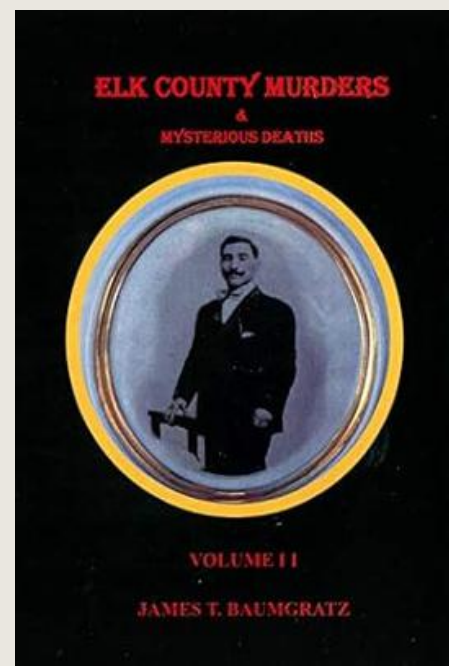
Through a thorough and competent investigation, the authorities eventually settled on James Hribal of Mount Pleasant as the prime suspect. Hribal, one of the hunting companions of Pascuzzi, eventually admitted to the slaying which he stated was accidental. Many questions surrounding the death of Pascuzzi were never answered, but the death of Pascuzzi certainly added to the mystique of Devil's Elbow. The full story of the death of Pascuzzi is contained in Volume III of Elk County Murders & Mysterious Deaths which is available at the Elk Viewing Center Gift Shop.

Geographic locales with the word "Devil" in the name have often been associated with evil throughout history. One such location, not far from the Elk Viewing Center, is "Devil's Elbow." When you drive that road you could certainly understand why that "elbow" is named after the devil, especially when you do not follow the speed limit.

In whitetail buck season of 1955, "Devil's Elbow" did live up to its name, however, for quite a different nefarious reason. Nick Pascuzzi, of North Braddock, regularly hunted this area and had been quite successful in years past in harvesting the then elusive white tail. Pascuzzi had been hunting the Benezette area since the 1930's and was so enamored with beauty of the wilds, that he had purchased an old farm in the hamlet of Grant and traveled often to the Benezette wilds whenever he had free time. On the first day of the 1955 buck season, Pascuzzi, accompanied by several of his friends, drove to the Devil's Elbow and the men proceeded into the woods in anticipation of encountering a buck. As the men entered the woods in the early morning darkness, Pascuzzi did not know that he was participating in what would be his last hunt. Pascuzzi would never be seen alive again.

Pascuzzi's hunting companions returned to their vehicle as darkness was beginning to fall but found no sign of their companion. Using a key that was left under a rear tire, the men started Pascuzzi's vehicle to warm themselves and after waiting in the auto for over an hour, the men walked into the woods, calling out their companions name. Silence is all that returned, and when they fired their rifles, they heard no repeat. Hoping against all odds that their companion had found another way to the farm and was somehow waiting for them there, the men drove the auto down to the camp. At least one of their hearts was broken when they saw the lights out in the farmhouse.

Traveling to a nearby tavern, they alerted the authorities to the "missing" hunter and within an hour, Devil's Elbow was swarming with searchers, despite the massive snowstorm that had developed.



Pioneer Day

Written by Ben Porkolab
Conservation Education Coordinator

@ THE ELK COUNTRY VISITOR CENTER

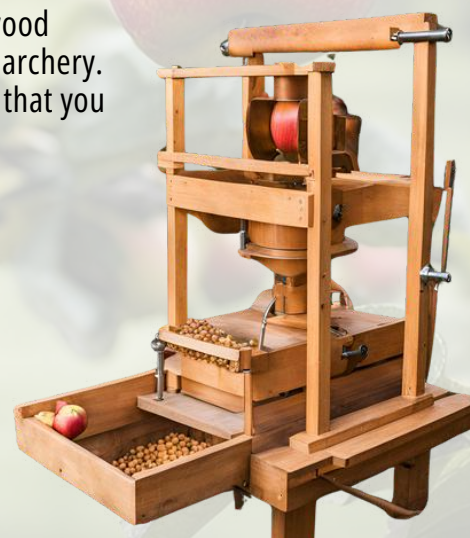
While working at the Elk Country Visitor Center, for the Keystone Elk Country Alliance, a person hears many new ideas from its wide array of visitors. Some of these ideas are excellent while others may not work out. About five years ago, someone mentioned to me that we should do something with all the apples that are grown in the orchard at the Homestead on the property at the Elk Country Visitor Center. Several of these trees are quite possibly over 100 years old, and numerous trees have been planted in the past 15 years by some of our wonderful volunteers. There are also a variety of apple types ranging from McIntosh, Yellow Delicious and Stayman Winesap to name a few. I agreed that this abundance of apples could create a fun educational opportunity for our visitors. A family friend of mine had an apple-cidering party each fall that my family often participated in when I was growing up. Not only did we utilize a resource to produce a delicious drink, but we learned a lot about an often-forgotten craft.

And just like that, our annual Pioneer Day was born. I asked my family friend if we could borrow his antique muscle driven cider press, and graciously he agreed, as well as volunteering himself and his family for the event. We decided to hold this event on the Sunday of Columbus Day weekend. The participation was overwhelming! We ran out of our 450 dixie cups quite quickly and smiles and laughter filled the area as families participated in our apple squeezing event! It was apparent that the success of this event would be annual!

A few months later, Alex Luckenbill from Troop 199 in St. Marys reached out to me looking for an Eagle Scout Project. I love it when the stars align! Alex was excited about the unique opportunity to build a cider press for the Keystone Elk Country Alliance to be use at this annual educational event. Alex raised the funding to buy a high-quality hard maple wood kit that he sanded, constructed and finished with four coats of polyurethane. Alex, his family and other members of Troop 199 volunteered to help out at the second Pioneer Day. Alex and his family also contributed a large amount of apples that they had picked. They continue to help out with Pioneer Day each year!

The following spring, we held an apple-tree pruning program for members of the St. Marys Ecology club. As the eager students learned this new skill, we enhanced the health of the orchard. The following fall they returned to help us pick the apples! This has become a great tradition each spring and fall for the St. Marys Ecology Club!

This coming fall on October 12th we will host our 5th annual Pioneer Day on the grounds of the Elk Country Visitor Center! Each year we have added more to this event, from live music to additional old-time crafts and long-lost demonstrations. Some of these have included Bluegrass Music, wood carving, trapping, leatherworks, candle-making, bee-keeping, wild edibles and traditional archery. Once again, without our wonderful volunteers, this event would not be possible! We hope that you bring your family and friends for this great event this fall!



KECA WORKS WITH PGC ON TURKEY BANDING

Written by Gage Meyer and Jason Wagner
Pennsylvania State Game Commission

At 8:34am on the morning of January 3, 2025, the usually quiet and peaceful grounds of the Elk Country Visitor Center were awakened by an explosion. Immediately following the blast of three simultaneously launched rockets, eleven people bailed out of their vehicles and dashed through the snow to a field full of feathers with black powder smoke still lingering in the air. This event was no surprise, no accident, and no act of terrorism. This was a planned wild turkey trapping event conducted by the Pennsylvania Game Commission with the aid of staff members from the Keystone Elk Country Alliance.

Before going any further, let's step back in time nearly two decades. From 2006 until 2009 the Pennsylvania Game Commission utilized leg banding to undertake its first major effort to collect statewide data on annual harvest and survival rates for male turkeys. This winter banding of male turkeys began again in 2020 and will continue annually for the foreseeable future. The objective of the winter wild turkey leg banding program is to estimate spring gobbler harvest rates and annual survival rates by age and Wildlife Management Unit (WMU) from leg banded male turkeys to calculate turkey populations by WMU. This best available science will allow the PA Game Commission to more precisely set

turkey season regulations. To achieve the objectives of the study, the PGC traps, leg-bands and releases at the trap sites, male turkeys from January through March each year. Each trapping season the goal is to leg-band 10-15 juvenile males per WMU and 10-15 adult males per WMU with a statewide total banding effort of 460+ male turkeys each year. Turkey hunters, or anyone who finds a banded turkey, are asked to call or email the PGC using the information on the band and report the band number, date, and general area it was found. The number of turkeys reported in each WMU is then used to measure the percent of turkeys harvested during the spring season, annual survival rates, and population size.

Now let's jump back to the future stopping at December 31, 2024. Staff from the Elk Country Visitor Center are no strangers to seeing turkeys on the grounds of the Center. In recent weeks, one or more flocks of adult male turkeys (also known as gobblers or longbeards) had been observed using the field in "The Vista." Around noon on December 31st, Don Schnars with KECA and Jason Wagner with the PGC identified a suitable trapping location in the field and placed scratch grains with a cellular camera to monitor turkey activity. Ideally, we want turkeys to find the bait two days in a row and then trap the third day. If bait is left for a longer period turkeys get used to the consistent source of feed and become more unpredictable about when and if they will visit the bait site. That can mean a lot of wasted time watching an empty field waiting for turkeys to show up. Kicking off the new year, a flock of gobblers were on bait the morning of January 1st. In anticipation of the birds being on bait again on the 2nd we made plans to get the trapping site prepared mid-day on the 2nd after the turkeys had a chance to feed at the bait site in the morning. Unfortunately, the turkeys never showed up the morning of the 2nd. Confident that the birds would come back on the morning of the 3rd we still proceeded to set up the trapping equipment around noon on the 2nd. With the help of Todd Taylor and Don Schnars from KECA, PGC Wardens Peyton Edwards, Kolton Mueller and Jason Wagner set up the net. The net is rectangular, approximately 60' long and 30' wide, weighted in the rear with steel plates and attached in the front to three rockets propelled by an explosive charge. The net, weights, and rockets (minus the black powder charge) were set up and fresh bait placed in front of the net.



Not long after leaving the trapping site a notification came through on my cell phone – the gobblers were already on the bait. The turkeys remained at the bait site until late afternoon so we hoped they would roost nearby and be ready to visit the bait site again first thing in the morning.

At 6:30am on January 3rd a crew of 4 KECA Staff, 3 PGC Wardens and 4 PGC Habitat Crew members, all donning headlamps, made the final preparations for the morning trapping effort in the dark. Fresh bait was placed, the black powder charges installed in the rockets, and detonator wire ran to our primary observation point about 80 yards behind and uphill from the net. A little before 8:30am gobblers appeared at the edge of the bait site. Within moments, most of the flock was feeding on the bait. A few stragglers seemed uninterested in joining the rest of the flock, but we had a good group of birds feeding and made the decision to fire the net. We wait until all the birds have their heads down feeding. With their heads down we minimize the risk of injury to the turkeys when the rockets are launched and we also catch the birds off guard so that they have less chance to react and escape before the net lands on the ground, capturing them beneath. At 8:34am, KABOOM!

With the net launched, it is all-hands-on-deck during a brief period of chaos. We need to get to the trapped birds quickly. Several people are carrying blankets which get laid over the turkeys to help calm them down. Once all turkeys are covered the group can take a deep breath and start preparing for data collection. Each turkey is carefully removed from the net and held by a member of the trapping team for processing. Both legs are secured in one hand while the wings are held tightly to the turkey's body, wrapped under the arm of the person holding the bird. Each turkey gets a single silver, aluminum leg band placed on one of its legs and secured with a pop-rivet. We alternate between reward and non-reward bands, so at least half of all male turkeys captured will have a reward band worth \$100. A measurement is then taken of the spur length on each leg and the beard length on the chest. With the band in place and data collected the turkey is carried off to the side of the trap site and placed on the ground for release. The whole process of banding and data collection only takes a few minutes in comparison to the hours spent baiting, setting up trapping equipment, and waiting for turkeys to show up on trapping day. During this particular trapping event, we captured 9 adult male turkeys, one shy of the minimum goal of 10 for Wildlife Management Unit 2G.

If you are interested in helping the PGC with its annual leg banding program you can report winter flock sightings via this link

<https://pgcdatacollection.pa.gov/TurkeyBroodSurvey>.

Remember, all turkeys are trapped and released on site. No turkeys are being relocated.

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AN INTERNSHIP THROUGH THE KEYSTONE ELK COUNTRY ALLIANCE

Written by Penn State Dubois Intern, Austin Dubay

I recall a shift towards the end of my internship, it was getting dark with still remnant hints of orange lingering in the sky, almost time for closing the trails. I grabbed my jacket off the swiveling office chair and slowly headed out of the large glass doors of the center. The treeline was a dark silhouette on a slate grey casted sky, a moving silhouette as the branches danced softly. I stood and admired this painting of nature in front of me. In a second glance I saw now the sky became a mean bull. The distant rolling hills would flash with muffled lights, something was coming, a severe thunderstorm was gathering over the hills in the southwest. I continued to the trails, my boots crunched with every step against the gravel paths. The trees now violently jerked their branches and the fading fall leaves flew through the sky. As the loud cracks of thunder approached, great hands of lightning filled the sky, its fingers outstretched. The elk screamed their bugling call, the thunder matched their wail. The elk and the storm seemingly fighting over the sound of the sky. It was a spectacle of nature, the kind that makes you struck with awe. You could sit there and admire the torrential night away. However the job needed done.



Greetings! My name is Austin Dubay. I am a self-taught illustrator with the goal of getting people engaged and fascinated about nature. I was one of the three Penn State Dubois interns at the Elk County Visitor Center in Benezette this past fall. This internship is a collaboration between Penn State DuBois campus and the visitor center. I chose to be an intern at the center while studying Wildlife Technology with aspirations to become an environmental educator. During this internship you get to converse and inform the public about a variety of subjects. Often it was answering local questions, such as "where can I take a hike" or "When are the elk expected to come out".

When meeting hundreds of people you can expect to become very good at communicating to others in an effective fast manner. Other duties include helping with the wagon rides and tending to the draft horses during breaks. You can also expect to get your steps in, as you walk the trails, and feed the exhibit reptiles. My favorite part about this internship was seeing lots of elk and decently up close, I studied them and sketched them when I could. The scenery on Winslow Hill is fantasy-like, rolling hills as far as the topography will let you see. You get to experience a sunset like no other while closing the trails at the center. During an internship here you get to do your own educational program during the weekend. Mine was a mock game show in which the contestants, 6 or so eager kids, got to try their luck for candy by identifying trees after



a quick crash course. Towards the end of the internship you have to look forward to the halloween festivities that are held at the center. Smores in the chimney, face painting, crafts and the antler toss. It was a sight to see as kids in costume bounced off the walls with excitement to sling rings at an elk skull and antlers on a wooden base.

Overall my time at the center was short lived throughout the fall, but the skills I gained and people I influenced will hopefully last through my life.

If you like the illustrations shown in this article I have a page on instagram where I share all of my illustrations, sketches, and studies I make. @Dubay.illustrations



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WINTER TIME BULLS

Written by Zac Shopene

When the calendar flips from August to September, elk watchers travel near and far to the Benezette area hoping to catch a glimpse of branch-antlered bulls - some in the 400-inch range - roaming fields with their harems, flexing their muscle to any would-be challengers. Ghostly bugles in the twilight, the clashing of antlers between two titans of the forest, and the chopping of leaves by heavy footsteps right behind you are just a few sounds that elicit excitement to those young and old. With an influx of tourism throughout the elk range, finding these animals behaving naturally is becoming quite the challenge. You have to burn a little boot leather and get away from the crowds to find these Beasts of the East moseying around naturally in their element. The mixture of bugling bulls and constantly changing deciduous foliage is a recipe for the memory of a lifetime. Nothing beats the fall. But what do you do if you want to see herds of elk acting naturally without the big crowds?

Throw on your coat and gloves, grab your binoculars or camera, and check out Pennsylvania's elk in the winter! Keep in mind, the Elk Country Visitor Center's hours change starting in November. Check out their website before you decide to brave the snow and cold if you want to stop in.

Aside from the reduced crowd sizes, there are other positives to winter elk watching. Bulls are grouped back together in their pre-rut posse. Herds can number well into the forty-plus range, making them easier to identify from a distance. Crisp temperatures make for great photographic opportunities as the morning frost burns off, casting each breath into smoke slowing rising overhead. After a few December days out in elk country, I can say, without a doubt, this is my new favorite time to photograph Pennsylvania's elk. Here's a story about one of my more memorable days out photographing elk during the heart of winter:

Last year on the morning of New Year's Eve, I was driving around Winslow Hill with the hopes of spotting some elk, preferably a bull, to photograph. I drove my normal route up Winslow Hill, back down to Route 555, and back up the hill once more. Off in the distance, I spotted some movement. I pulled into the parking lot and took out my binoculars. Through my optics, I caught a glimpse of four bulls in a field. I wavered back and forth on whether I should try to walk out to get a closer - but still safe - look. After some internal deliberation, I made my decision. I drove down to one of the gated service roads, grabbed my camera gear, and started to hike out to the elk.

I found myself completely immersed in the deafening quiet. I could hear every birds' chirps and trills, my frozen boot steps crunching the icy ground beneath, and the wind whistling through bare branches, all combining to give my hike its own natural soundtrack.

After navigating some switchbacks and gaining elevation, I laid eyes on two of the initial four bulls. Each of the bulls, sporting branched 6-point antlers on each side (also known as a 6x6 bull), milled around, searching for the last green grassy patches to munch upon. Initially, the smaller of the two bulls picked my silhouette walking across the landscape - picking its head up to make out just exactly what I was. After the seconds-long standoff, the larger bull realized there was someone else on his turf. Slowly, I raised my camera and fired off a few shutter clicks, capturing the bulls together and then isolating each of them into vertical snapshots. I continued to move and position myself where the background and foreground would tell a better story of the encounter. I dropped down, putting myself at eye-level with the bulls and captured the image I had in my mind's eye.



The two 6x6 bulls I had the opportunity to photograph on 12/31/23. Notice the blurred, grassy foreground, giving the perspective of being at eye-level - if not a little below the bulls.

The two 6x6 bulls I had the opportunity to photograph on 12/31/23. Notice the blurred, grassy foreground, giving the perspective of being at eye-level - if not a little below the bulls.

While these two bulls weren't the giants Benezette is known for, they were exactly what I was hoping to find that morning. I photographed the larger of the two bulls for a while longer. I was inspired to capture some environmental shots of the bull, showing just how small this large bull appeared in the rolling hills he called home. I decided then it was time to head back to the car, head up to the visitor center to walk around, and leave to go back home. I took two steps and heard a distinct sound.

The wind knocking branches and limbs together convinced me I was just hearing things, but when the wind died down for just a few seconds, the sound was still there. I decided to follow the sound as far as I could,

knowing there was a chance I'd never find it. With each step, the sound grew louder and louder. I slowed down my stride, trying to sync my eyes and ears together, trying to pick out the smallest movements in the timber.

As I descended a worn, gravel two-track, my senses sounded an alarm with the turn of a head - finally finding the sound. I looked to my right and spotted the bulls: two 5x5 bulls deep in the woods, sparring with this year's antlers. They had no clue I was in their world. I crouched down and snapped some pictures. It was incredible to see just how well these large animals blend into their surroundings. Their shades of browns camouflage their bodies amongst the weather-beaten trees, fallen after years of battling the wind, rain, and snow. Their antlers branching off into the unnatural, yet natural patterns nature shows us each and every day.

After reviewing some of my images, something caught my attention amongst the frost-bitten goldenrod. I picked out the tips of antlers - another bull - walking in my direction. With all of the commotion of antler clashing, a smaller 6x7 bull rushed in to check out what all of the commotion was. I hid myself behind some thicker brush while the bull crested the hill. The bull posed behind a wintry backdrop of leafless trees and frosted limbs - showing off the grays and browns from fall's exit.

My favorite image from the day! Here, the smaller, 6x7 bull is looking around for the sound of the other bulls sparring. He didn't want to be left out of the fun.

The smaller bull couldn't pick out where the other bulls were fighting through the forest, especially from his location. Frustrated and a bit perplexed (I assumed), he turned around and walked away slowly, disappearing back over the hill and into the woods, completely out of sight within seconds.

That was my cue to finally head back to my car. On my hike back, one of the bulls that was sparring turned, finally acknowledged my existence, and gave me a good, final pose. I fired off a few clicks and continued my walk. I had walked nearly three miles from where I parked, but had photographed bulls behaving naturally - finally.

There were no bugles.
There were no vibrant fall colors.
There were no crowds.

It was just me with some Pennsylvania bulls. There aren't any words to describe being completely accepted into one's world. There's a book title, written by Conor Knighton, called Leave Only Footprints. That day, I only left my footprints, but took home with me a morning full of memories.

I returned to my car and started driving towards the visitor center. There were a handful of vehicles parked in the lot with people staring through binoculars searching for elk. The two bulls I had photographed earlier had moved along, hiding amongst the trees. Little did everyone know, there were bulls just off the beaten path.



My favorite image from the day! Here, the smaller, 6x7 bull is looking around for the sound of the other bulls sparring. He didn't want to be left out of the fun.



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A photograph of an elk bull with antlers, looking towards the camera. The bull is standing in a grassy field with trees in the background.

Where are the Elk?

Written by Emma Walters

No matter the time of year this is the most asked question here at the Elk Country Visitor Center. People from all over the world travel to Benezette to view these gorgeous creatures. Elk are constantly moving, so predicting their locations can be very difficult. There are a few rules of thumb to follow when looking for elk to increase your odds.

The most common times of day to see elk are early morning and evening. 2 hours after first light and 2 hours before sunset are prime times to see elk all year round. At that time of day, they are most active. Viewing areas like the Elk Country Visitor Center, Winslow Hill, Hicks Run, and many more are great for this type of viewing. These areas provide an easy and accessible viewing experience for elk, which is also the most popular.

Another method is hiking. With the vast network of local trails there is certainly a trail for you. These trails go back into their prime habitat, where commonly the elk bed down or stay under cover during the day. Some of these trails can even get you back into food plots on PA game lands or some of our state forests, offering a more private and unique viewing experience of the elk.

The last recommendation I have is to drive back roads. Using a 4-wheel drive vehicle that can handle dirt roads and a map is important to this option. Since elk are constantly moving, there is a chance you can see one just driving down the road. Exploring some of these less traversed roads can increase your chances of spotting elk. Keeping your eyes peeled and driving down a dirt road is a more accessible way to enjoy the beauty of our Pennsylvania wilds and see our elk.

The options above are great ways to explore elk country and I recommend doing a combination of the three. Some other good tips to increase your odds are, keeping voices and movement to a minimum when viewing elk, since elk are a prey species, which means they have a strong sense of hearing, sight and smell. When they can hear, see, or smell people they become cautious and agitated, causing the elk to leave the area or become defensive, depending on the time of year. We hope these recommendations and tips help those coming to elk country this year. Remember to always be Elk Smart when viewing elk and enjoy the beauty of the Pennsylvania Wilds.



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GIVE ELK SPACE

Keep a distance - of at least 100 yards - between you and the elk. Never approach them. Elk are wild animals that are unpredictable and sometimes aggressive, especially during the fall breeding season. Cows are also known to defend their young when they feel threatened.

DON'T FEED ELK

Not only is it illegal to feed elk in Pennsylvania, but it teaches them to associate people, cars and/or homes with food. This could cause them to approach people looking for more. Feeding also promotes the spread of infectious diseases by having them unnaturally congregate into small areas.

DON'T NAME ELK

Characterizing elk, or any wildlife, by naming them degrades their wild essence. The very reason people are drawn to the elk is their unaltered independence from humans. Personifying elk as humans takes away from their truly wild nature.

DO YOUR PART

The welfare of the elk herd is a shared responsibility. If you see someone being disruptive or careless, whether intentional or not, kindly ask them to stop or report it. We all have a duty to ensure the safety of people and the long-term welfare of the elk.

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Habitat Corner

Written by Bob Schmid – Pheasants Forever

SO YOU WANT TO BUILD A FOOD PLOT?

You bought some land for recreation and hunting and now you would like to build a food plot to attract some wildlife. It should be as easy as digging up the soil and planting some seed, correct? Not if you want a successful planting that attracts the wildlife you desire. There are several things to consider and preparation that needs to be done before you dig in the soil and plant your seed.

Location:

A good location is the foundation of a successful food plot. Pick a poor location and you will be doing nothing but trying to fix things from the onset. Without adequate sunlight your food plot will struggle if it germinates at all. Add a few deer to the mix, browsing the weak vegetation and your new food plot will never flourish.

Other things to consider is how you will access your new food plot with equipment. If it is going to be larger than ½ acre you

are probably not going to want to use small implements like garden tillers and backpack sprayers to work the plot. Getting larger equipment in and out should be a consideration when choosing a location. You may need stumps removed. Getting the equipment in to create the plot needs to be planned for early spring.

Where the food plot will be located, in terms of property lines and roads, should also be considered. Poaching from the road or trespassing neighbors can lead to frustration later. Better to pick a good location at the beginning.

Soil Amendments:

Once you have a proper location chosen, the next thing to do is get a soil test done. Penn State is a good source for getting a soil test. Directions are online and easy to follow. Last month I sent in a soil sample for a new area I am thinking of developing into a food plot. The numbers were staggering. The pH was 5.0, way below the optimum range of 6.5 to 7.0. The recommendation for lime was 8,000 lbs./acre to achieve a pH of 6.5; THAT is 4 TONS of lime! Experts say that anything greater than 2.5 tons/acre/year is wasted unless you are going to work the lime into the soil by disking.

Similarly, the numbers for phosphorus, potassium and magnesium were also well below optimum. I would need to address these nutrient requirements as well. The magnesium shortage would be addressed by applying lime that contains magnesium. The phosphorus and potassium would be addressed later with the proper fertilizer. My recommendation is to take your soil sample results to a local seed dealer and have them develop a plan for your soil amendment strategy. A lot of money can be wasted by applying the improper fertilizer.

Weed Control:

Depending on your choice of locations, and what is there now, will determine what weed control needs to be done. If there is existing vegetation you will need to treat it with a general herbicide like glyphosate before you till the soil. As soon as you disturb

the soil with tilling, a new flush of weeds will germinate. I often treat the plot with herbicide, usually twice, then till the plot. I wait for that first flush of new weeds and spray again. If I am planting seed that does not need to be planted very deep, like clover or wheat, I sow the seed and then cultipack.

What to Plant:

What you select to plant will also impact your fertilizer requirements. Things like clover and soybeans do not require much nitrogen, but brassicas and corn require much more nitrogen. Some plant varieties do better in a lower pH. Buckwheat for instance is a good choice for a new food plot. The pH requirement is lower and it helps condition the soil for future plantings.

The Plan:

Several years ago, I wanted to create a new food plot about ½ acre in size. I was having a timber sale done at the time and I had all the marketable timber removed from my chosen location. After the loggers were done, I went in and removed the tree-tops, and the remaining smaller diameter trees. I then had the stumps removed and the plot leveled out with a dozer.

In 2018 the first soil sample came back showing a pH of 5.7. I applied ½ ton of pelletized lime to the ½ acre. Last year I applied another ½ ton of pelletized lime and planted buckwheat in the spring. The crop was weak and spindly. Later in the summer I planted some winter forage oats and clover. Both were browsed off quickly by the deer although some clover remains.

A soil sample this spring showed a pH still below optimum. My plan is to double the amount of pelletized lime this spring. I will plant buckwheat again and then follow up with a fall planting of cereal rye. Eventually I would like to plant some of the plot in brassica and some in clover. Until I get the soil amended properly, I am nursing things along with crops can grow in a lower pH.

Conclusion:

Creating a new food plot from a location that has been neglected, overgrown or forested is a longer-term project and takes some planning. Choosing a good location, amending the soil, planning for weed control and selecting seed are all things that need to be considered. Creating a plan and then working that plan will ensure success. Some luck with the weather helps too.

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The Leaders of Tomorrow

"My fourth-grade classes at Mill Hall Elementary have been able to participate in the virtual lessons through the Elk Country Visitor Center for a number of years now. Each and every year, my students enjoy tremendously the presentation that Ben and his colleagues provide. The hands-on experience really enhances the already well-versed information the center is able to educate our students on about all things elk!! We can't thank them enough!"

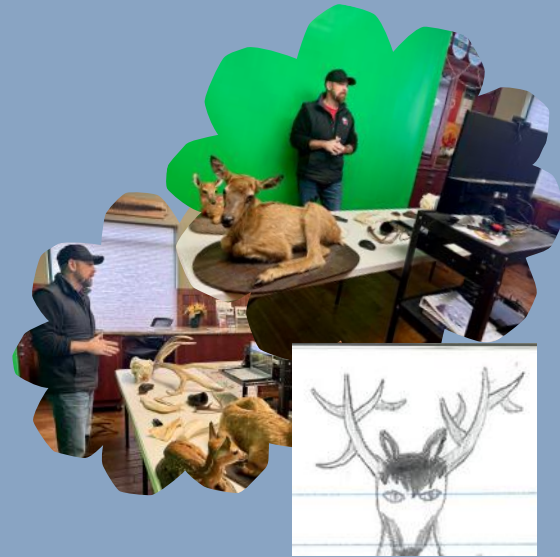
1-13-25
Dear Ben,
Thank you for teaching us about elk.
It was interesting to learn about how an
airplane flies around and counts all the
elk at night. It is also interesting to see
how big a baby elk is compared to a baby
deer. Again thank you so much for
sharing the presentation. It was really cool.
I hope I can come to Elk country to
visit the exhibit and learn more about
elks.
Sincerely, Caylee

Jenny Kaluzny
Mill Hall Elementary

Dear Mr. Ben,

Thank you for taking your time out of
your day to do the awesome presentation.
My two favorite parts were when you
showed how big Irish ELK were, and
how you counted how many ELK
were in Clinton County. Thank you
again for providing facts that we
didn't know. It makes it so much
easier to experience by sending us
materials to see and touch.

Sincerely,
Shylar
Mill Hall Elementary.



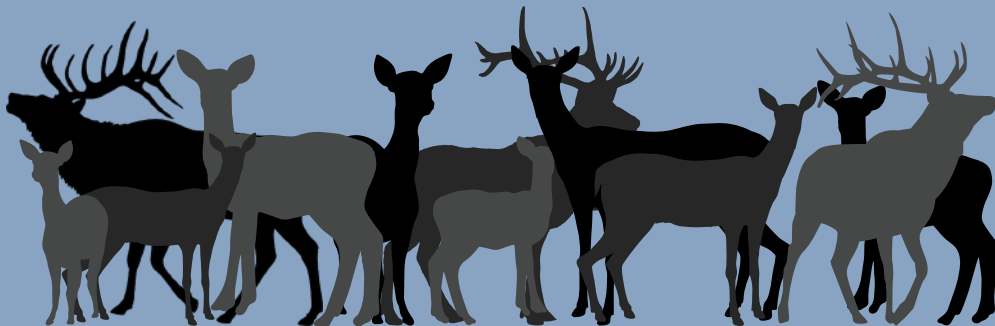
Dear Mr. Ben,
Thank you so much for the awesome presentation
you did for about an hour! That was very generous
of you to take time out of your day for fourth grade!
I can not describe how excited I was to
do that Zoom call with you! I learned so much like
the Irish Elk was the biggest Elk! How much the
the ELK antlers weigh (they weigh 200 pounds), and much
more! Those materials were cool!
Sincerely,
Helen
Mill Hall Elementary!

MILL HALL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MRS. KALUZNY'S 4TH GRADE CLASS



Here at the Elk Country Visitor Center, we understand that not all schools and groups are able to physically come to the center. That is where the Keystone Elk Country Alliance's innovative and interactive Distance Learning Program comes in! Using Zoom's live action software our education staff is able to connect with classrooms all over the United States to deliver our programs online at NO CHARGE! What's even better? In addition to our education sessions, each group receives an "Elk Trunk" full of props students can see and touch while learning about elk from us here at the center. No other distance learning program offers this tactile interactive experience, which ignites enthusiasm and a sense of wonder for students of all ages. No student is too young or too old, our trunk has educated those from kindergarten to college as well as other civic

groups. Cub Scouts, Senior Citizen Centers, Rotary clubs have all taken part in this unique experience. This program is developed to meet Pennsylvania State Education Standards so it can blend seamlessly into classroom curriculums.



TOM MIX, “KING OF THE COWBOYS”

Written by Brandi Hanes
Keystone Elk Country Alliance



“King of the Cowboys” was born in Elk Country

I’m certain we have all heard the name Tom Mix at one time or another. However, did you know that he was born in a town 18 miles east of Benezette called Mix Run? This village was founded by Tom’s great-great grandfather which was steeped in logging history. In January of 1880 a legend was born. Tom’s father Edwin was a stable master and expert horseman. The family made the decision to move to DuBois, PA in 1888, where Edwin worked as stable master for a wealthy lumber merchant, and taught Tom to ride and love horses. Tom spent time working on a local farm owned by John DuBois, a lumber businessman.

During this time, a popular traveling act, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West would make its way to DuBois. This show was a major source of entertainment in the 1800’s. Edwin and Elizabeth would take their son, Tom, to the show which lead to his excitement of show business.

As life always does, the path to our dreams never quite goes the way we think. In April 1898, Mix enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he became an artillery sergeant, but eventually went AWOL. By 1903, he had drifted to the Oklahoma Territory, working as a hired hand. It was not until 1910 when he would begin his career in acting. He appeared in 291 films, all but nine of which were silent films. He was one of Hollywood’s first Western stars and helped define the genre as it emerged in the early days of the cinema. During Mix’s twenty-six- year career as an actor, it is said he made six million dollars. That translates to 133 million today.

Though the Tom Mix Birthplace Park and Museum is no longer operational, the history of his birthplace is one worth telling. The Mix Run property where the actor and rodeo star was born and spent his early childhood, has been sold and is currently a campground. However, back when the Flaugh’s purchased this historic site, the only thing that remained of Tom’s home was a pile of rocks that was once the foundation of his home. Flaugh’s, who owned the property for over two decades, assembled a collection of classic photos and artifacts to stock their museum. Money was raised by selling ,10 lifetime memberships, which entitled the bearer to a symbolic one-inch-square plot of the homestead. Ronald Reagan was one of many who purchased a membership. President Reagan grew up watching Tom Mix and was said to idolize him. With the money, the Flaugh’s rebuilt the Mix house, an outhouse and a barn.

Before closing the museum, a “Tom Mix Roundup,” with mock shootouts and hangings, western dress-up contests, country music and Mix look-alike competition was held yearly and attracted many tourists. Over the years the decline in attendance lead to closing the museum in 2002. The Flaugh’s made the tough decision to sell. There was also a national Tom Mix Festival that was held in DuBois, PA for multiple years, from 1980 to 1989 and again from the late 1990s to 2004. Unfortunately, neither event exists today.

As I was researching to write this article, I couldn’t help but think how this story reflects on the impacts of conservation efforts. The Buffalo Bills traveling show’s purpose was to help build the support and education of the buffalo from becoming extinct. This young boy, Tom, was so moved by what he saw that it changed his destiny of a boy born in a small village to become a King of the Cowboys. Conservation can touch us all in different ways but no matter our path, our talent, we can all be part of it. To think this story began in Elk Country is one I think should never fade away!

2024 KECA ELK TAG WINNER

JERRY AMALONG

Written by Trophy Rack Lodge

Jerry Amalong of Latrobe PA, received a surprise phone message from the Keystone Elk Country Alliance CEO/President Jeff Gauger on the last Sunday of July that informed him that he was the 2024 KECA Elk Tag Winner. Jerry had purchased his tickets at a sport show back in February. He filled them out and never thought he would become the winner. Then he got the call, he actually won the KECA hunt! Out of all the chances entered in for the coveted KECA Bull Elk Tag package, his was the one drawn!

Larry Guenot, owner of Trophy Rack Lodge, who donated the guide service for the hunt, contacted Jerry and they excitedly talked about preparations for the hunt that was only a mere 5 weeks away.

On September 2nd, Jerry and his friend Rick arrived at Trophy Rack Lodge (TRL). The guides had been

scouting for a trophy bull and the rut was kicking in. They began their quest in the Quehanna Wild Area. Larry and TRL guide Mike Conaway positioned themselves on a beautiful spot overlooking food plots on a power line. Jerry set up his tripod and got ready for a shot if the right bull came along. They watched 5 bulls sparring. The bulls put on a show for the group, but a shooter bull was not in the mix.

In the next couple of days, the group covered numerous counties and elk hunt zones looking for a trophy bull on both public and private ground.

The rut was in full swing, and the sound of bugling filled the air. Guide Matt Lutz would use the call, and Larry would stay with Jerry and set up, waiting to identify a shooter bull. That opportunity can present itself in an instant and the guides wanted Jerry to have the best opportunity for a shot. The fog was a big factor in the morning hunts. They saw bulls move through the mist for an instant and then disappear as quickly as they came into view.

The next afternoon on private ground they saw a good bull and passed on it since it was early in the hunt. Jerry was incredulous that the bull spotted was not quite "The One". PA elk hunters are very fortunate to have multiple trophy bulls that in other states a hunter would be overjoyed to harvest.



In the next few days, the hunters pursued different leads, seeing elk and hearing bugles but the action slowed. The forecast called for very warm temperatures and it was decided that Jerry would go home and return when the weather cooled down and the bulls became more active.

Jerry returned with Helen, his companion, and friend Rick. With renewed optimism, they headed off to another State Game Land where a herd of cows were seen, and where cows are in the rut, the bulls follow. Again, Larry helped Jerry get ready for a shot at the edge of a field. A group of 5 cows came out of the woods line. They heard a bull bugle farther in the woods. Matt called and the bull and 5 cows came into view towards them. Unfortunately, it was a young bull and Jerry decided to pass on this one.

The next day guides Steve Stiner, Jason Rankin, Matt and Larry decided to give it a shot at a big bull they scouted earlier in the week. Matt went ahead to call and heard the bull bugle and went back to alert Jerry and Larry. The group would have to pursue the bull deep into the big timber. Jerry said he was up to it. They got within 40 yards and heard the bull thrashing the autumn olive bushes and caught a quick glimpse of him, it was a definite shooter scoring 400 inches or better! It was extremely thick where they heard the brush cracking as the bull continued to thrash bushes and small saplings. Another disappointment followed as the bull slipped away as darkness fell. The elk archery season was upon them and Jerry agreed to come back as soon as Trophy Rack Lodge was finished with their archery hunters.

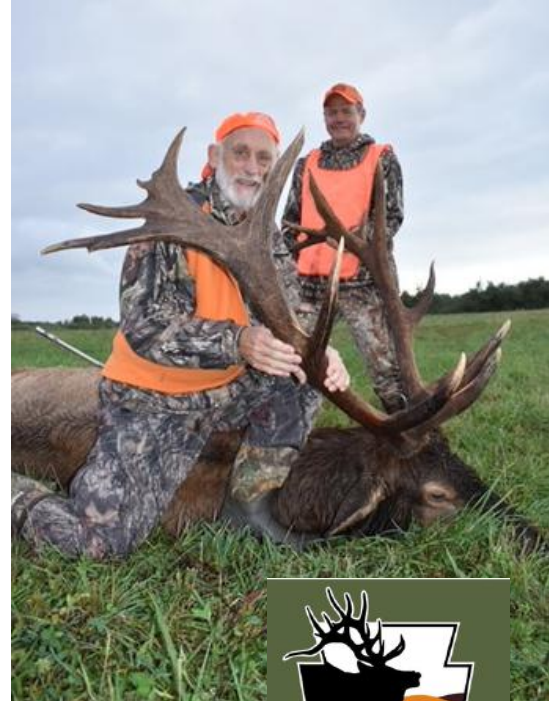


Rick and Helen returned with Jerry for the third time in the last week of September. Helen remained at the lodge patiently waiting for word of a bull down. The hunt resumed on a property leased by Trophy Rack Lodge. First bull out that evening was a bull with a broken main beam. Larry and guide Jason remained positive as Jason called and multiple bulls answered. Finally, a shooter bull came into view and bugled.

Larry put the binoculars on it and told Jerry to get ready. They waited until the bull presented a broadside shot. Jerry shot 2 shots, and both hit their mark, and the bull went down!

Larry congratulated Jerry and told him the bull had heavy mass and was webbed at the top on both sides, it was a very good bull. His friend Rick who was there for every moment of the hunt, congratulated him and shook his hand, thanking him for letting him share the experience.

When they walked up to the bull, they counted the points, and it was an impressive 8 X 8. Jerry thanked Jason for calling in the bull. He thanked all the guides that helped with his hunt and was grateful for KECA and for making it possible to have his hunt of a lifetime for a PA bull elk!



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SCAN ME



2024 Keystone Elk Country Alliance/Seneca Resources Scholarship Recipients

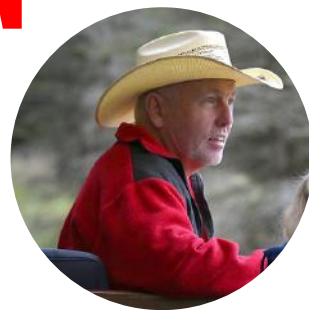
Thanks to a generous anonymous donor we were able to grant nine \$1,000 Scholarships this year to well-deserving Pennsylvania high school seniors! These students are enrolled in majors within the education, wildlife and fisheries, sciences, conservation, forestry and related fields of study. For more information on how to apply visit ExperienceElkCountry.com and click the Education Tab - News and Updates.

From left to right:

Jaidyn Goodman, Reese Fedder, Gracee Breindel, Seneca Resources Representative- Trey Miller, Keystone Elk Country Alliance Conservation Education Coordinator- Ben Porkolab Sr, Will Coughenour, Keystone Elk Country Alliance CEO & President- Jeff Gauger, Ben Porkolab Jr, Seneca Resources Representative- Lauren Adair, Alex Luckenbill, Keystone Elk Country Alliance Board Member- Bob Bolt – Scholarship recipients missing from the photo Gianna Surra, Maria Catalano, Megan Emmert

WAGON RIDES IN ELK COUNTRY

WRITTEN BY ERIN KABLER



Fall is a very special time in Elk Country. Hundreds of thousands of people make the trip every September to see Pennsylvania's majestic bull elk carry on their mating ritual. When the masses of people arrive, they stop at all the attractions. Places like the Cross on Gray Hill, Winslow Hill viewing area, the Benezette Hotel, and of course the Elk Country Visitor Center. But by far, the most coveted attraction in Elk County is the horse drawn wagon rides through the fields at the visitor center to get an up and close look at Pennsylvania's wild elk herd.

The Keystone Elk Country Alliance has two horses that remain on site all year long. They are Donny (lead) and Jake. Donny and Jake are matched set of Belgian Draft horses. In the fall, two additional horses are rented from a nearby farm to help us out on a second wagon. The horses are the stars of the show. Draft horses are happiest when pulling something and Donny and Jake are no exception.

If you are a ticket holder, arrive at least twenty-five minutes early and check in with the volunteers at the wagon loading area. Dress according to the weather. Bring a fully charged camera or cell phone. Binoculars are helpful in looking into the deep timber to potentially see bedded deer and elk. When the wagon arrives, we cool down the horse and offer them water before we head out.

Now it's go time! Load up and get ready for an awesome ride. Your wagon master is going to provide you with safety rules. There is no bad seat. Your driver and wagon master will work hard to get you as many opportunities as possible to see and photograph the elk, whitetail deer, turkeys, several bird species, and the occasional coyote. Each ride is approximately forty-five minutes long.

The first question we wagon masters are always asked, "When are we going to see the elk." There are several factors that influence the elk movement including temperature and time of year. It mostly comes down to when the cows want to get up from their afternoon beds and feed. While the elk are not afraid of the horses or wagons, they really don't like human voices. The quieter you and the other passengers remain, the greater chance of seeing wildlife.

Along the way, your wagon master is going to point out things such as ongoing wildlife habitat development, food sources, and wildlife sign. During your ride, you will stop at different spots for the horses to rest, places like the Wallow, Number 9 field, the stone field, and the always impressive Overlook. At these spots the wagon master will explain and answer any questions. Don't be afraid to ask that question that has been rattling in your head! When the rut begins, the big bulls are attempting to attract potential breeding cows, this is when the action really heats up. It's not uncommon to see up to twenty some bulls yelling and screaming in the woods and fields around the visitor center. As your ride comes to an end, don't miss the phenomenal sunsets we have in Benezette.

Wagons Ho! See you this fall!



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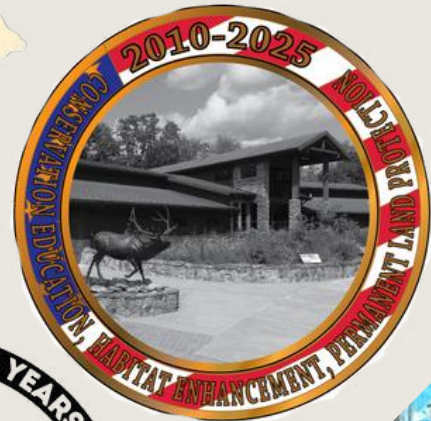
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SEASONAL POSITION THROUGH THE EYES OF A PA GAME COMMISSION REPRESENTATIVE

Written by PGC, Seasonal Conservation Education Specialist, Tom Allison

One night, as I was searching the Commonwealth job pages, I noticed a position listed at The Keystone Elk Country Alliance with the Pennsylvania Game Commission. I applied and was eventually hired. I learned I would be working as a seasonal Conservation Education Specialist during the summer and throughout the peak of the elk mating season, known as The Rut.

In a sense, I had my feet in two worlds. On one side, I am the public face of the Pennsylvania Game Commission, reminding the public that we're not just about law enforcement. It is our mission to manage and protect wildlife and their habitats through the use of sound scientific methods while promoting hunting and trapping for current and future generations. On the other hand, the mission of the Keystone Elk County Alliance is, "To conserve and enhance Pennsylvania's elk country for future generations." I was looking for a job; what I found was a home but more importantly, a family! I say this because every single person I met who worked for The Keystone Elk Country Alliance not only became a friend but filled the role of teacher to me as well. For the next six months, my life was a world of learning and fun! Every day, I would arrive before sunup and greet Hehaka (elk), usually bedded down near the parking lot. I would get out of my car as quietly as I could and go open the buildings. I built a routine and under the ever-watchful eyes of the Elk, I performed my daily duties. Near the elk viewing wall, we refer to as Boy scout, there is an old tree stump, I would sit facing east, waiting for the sun to rise and burn through the fog, the morning mist cool, the fog thick.

From July to November Keystone Elk Country Alliance is hopping! From the Elk Expo which occurs the last week of July, through The Rut, late in November the sleepy town of Benezette, boasting a population of about 230 residents, hosts as many as 300,000 annual visitors. My job during this time of the year varies from day to day and really depends on the number of guests we receive. I once had a visitor from Nebraska ask me how I enjoyed "managing the elk." I explained politely that my job was more about managing people. This was not meant as a sarcastic reply. Our Pennsylvania elk have become somewhat habituated to the guests that we see annually but it is important to remember they're still wild animals. Mostly my job is about education. The Elk Country Visitor Center offers free educational programs for the public, one on Saturday and one on Sunday. This is part of the primary mission of KECA. All of the programs offered are nature or conservation based and tied to the new Commonwealth STELS standards and the National Science Standards. Remember, science is behind every decision we make, and we want the public to know that.

Toward the end of July, my job picked up quite a bit as we headed into the Elk Expo. The first day of the Expo, I drove into the parking lot, out of the morning mist I could just make out two gigantic cranes holding a huge American Flag over the entryway. Prior to the Expo is where I also learned that inside the Elk Country Visitor Center Gift Shop, all products are USA MADE. KECA prides itself on selling only American-made products and most of them are unique to the Commonwealth. More and more I started to love my job, not only was I educating the public about conservation efforts, but I was also helping to promote local community girth and entrepreneurship! I spent the morning walking around interacting with our guests and helping direct our volunteers, but mostly I spent the day helping vendors find their specified area and made sure they had everything they needed such as power, display tables and other tools of the trade.

As the summer wore on and the Expo came and went, there always seemed to be something new. Weeks always started out slow, but by the weekend, we would host hundreds of people, many of whom ended up in our educational programs. Before I knew it, it was October, and we were starting horse-drawn wagon rides into the elk habitat so guests could get up close to the action and learn all about the Commonwealth's Elk and our education and conservation efforts. For me, Wagon rides became my all-time favorite activity! This was where all my years of scientific knowledge and plant science, woods lore, Commonwealth and US history all came together and meshed with the world of my mother's culture.

As my seasonal position came to an end, I realized I had met hundreds of new people and had some of the best conversations I've ever had. I found an incredible family of like-minded, caring individuals who have made it their life's mission to educate the world about our great area and the resources we are trying to conserve for future generations. I have an incredible job as the face of the Pennsylvania Game Commission and hopefully, I've educated people in the fact that hunters contribute about 25 million dollars a year toward our state conservation efforts. Most importantly, I feel, in my heart, I have been true to my cultural roots.



TRAILS AT THE ELK COUNTRY VISITOR CENTER

The Elk Country Visitor Center features three observation trails with viewing areas and interpretive wayside displays. All trails are wheelchair accessible and lead to viewing areas where you can see the elk in a natural setting. Visitors can also experience and learn about other native plants and animals, the area's history, and the surrounding ecosystem. All of the trails here at the Elk Country Visitor Center are gravel with informational panels, benches, and viewing walls dotted throughout. All trails are open to visitors unless marked, please stay on designated trails to respect the plants and animals that exist off the path. All trails close 15 minutes before closing or 15 minutes before dark, whichever comes first. All trails equally offer opportunity to view Elk and PA wildlife.



Vista Trail

Vista is a short trail of 120yds; 2-minute walk. This flat trail leads to a pavilion with benches, informational boards, and a viewing wall overlooking an herbaceous opening. This often-quiet trail, that starts at the front door of the center, is a wonderful way to view PA Elk.

Meadow Trail

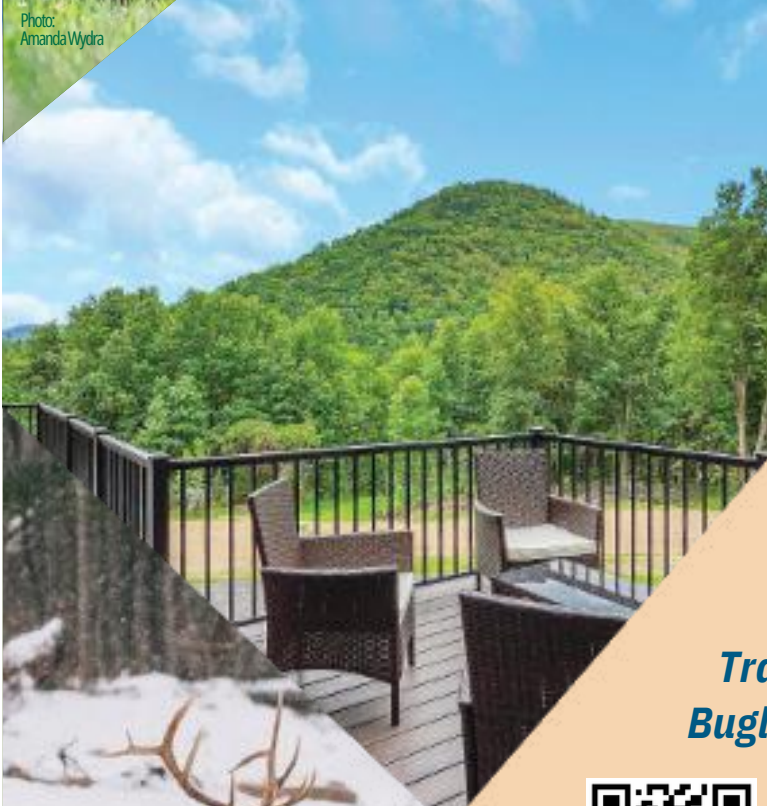
Meadow is a bit longer of a trail. This main trail path is roughly about 300yds from the back of the Visitor Center. Walking to the elevated viewing blind can be made shorter by accessing through the parking lot, about 150yds distance. This elevated viewing blind has a handicap accessible ramp and lower cut viewing windows at chair height. Between the viewing walls/blind, benches, and informational boards, meadow trail is a great choice to view PA Elk.

Buckeneezer Hollow Trail

Buckeneezer is our longest trail, with the distance from the center back door down the main walkway being 360yds. This trail has many splits that offer a range of paths out and back to the center. With benches, informational boards, and 3 viewing walls there is plenty to explore on this trail. Often our most popular trail due to the fields it overlooks, providing great opportunity to view PA Elk.



Photo:
Amanda Wydra



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