Seeking Elk

Into the Clouded Valley

I couldn't see them.

The Tetons, perhaps the most recognizable mountains in all of North America with their distinct summits marching up and down south to north against the sky, the way they rise seemingly without foothills. And when I dropped into Jackson Hole, they weren't there.

I had traveled south from Yellowstone through some spitting snow, stopping at Old Faithful amid fog and steam and schoolchildren along with an unperturbed bison or two. Following that obligatory tourist experience, I headed through what one local called, the "tunnel of trees" south of Yellowstone Lake on the way out of the park.

Then I hit Moran, the village at the entrance to Grand Teton National Park. I moved over to the scenic pullout at the famous oxbow in the Snake River. The yellow-orange aspens cloaked the shore, but clouds curtained the rest of the scene and penetrated my clothes. My nose dripped. I saw a gray-sky ceiling, green pines covering a small rise a half mile away, brown grasses and willows spreading from the riverbanks, and water so slate-dull no reflections bounced back. I knew mountains walled off the valley to the west. But they were nowhere to be found.

I wasn't the first person to miss these mountains at the moment of arrival.

Just as summer began in 1927, Olaus Murie met in the nation's capital with his bosses in the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, the forerunner to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A biologist who had just completed six years of field work in Alaska, Murie learned of his new assignment: develop a complete life history of the elk of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The herd, numbering 20,000 animals, was in trouble, starving in great numbers every winter even after the National Elk Refuge was created in 1912. Murie relocated to Wyoming to learn about elk to help them survive. "This was just the kind of free yet demanding assignment I loved," he wrote.

Murie traveled through Yellowstone by bus and came to a stop at Moran, just as I had. He looked west, across Jackson Lake. But he had arrived as dusk turned to darkness, and he "first 'saw' the valley by not seeing it."

Murie and I both arrived excited and turned to confront uncertainty. He would stay for decades, completing his magisterial *The Elk of North of America* (1951). I would stay for days, completing nothing.

Out of My Head

When you work in a university, like I did for two decades, you become accustomed to justifying the merit of your work, the significance of your ideas, the contribution of your theories, your arguments, your writing. So when I headed to Jackson Hole that autumn I explained my quest in practical, academic terms. I was researching how public land administrators managed elk and how the public shaped those actions over time. Seeing elk habitat in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, on my way to visit multiple archives, made sense for my research agenda.

Push me further—and you'd have to shove given my customary reticence—and I might have carried on about how my study attempted to explain the history of federal bureaucracies through the eyes of elk, a more-than-human being that reflected human institutions. It approached the cutting edge, a way to reframe our previous understandings, a way to de-center the state and its institutions while not ignoring their roles.

Bear with me. I know this is abstract and maybe a little boring. But my idea had potential. A normal history—like many I've written—tells stories about the past in a straightforward way. And the history of the National Park Service triumphantly, or critically—depending on the decade you are writing, your temperament, or your political commitments—marches forward through eras and policies. But telling a story of an institution through a species, I thought, might reveal something unique. That's why I traveled to Jackson Hole, I might have claimed.

But if I really trusted you, I would have told the simpler truth: I wanted to hear elk bugle.

These confessions should suggest at least two things already. One, I was a man, closer to retirement than college graduation, who had never heard elk bugle in the fall when bulls gathered their harems to perpetuate their species as they had done in the mountains for thousands of years. That meant I didn't grow up where elk were common, and it meant that I didn't travel to hunt them. I was a novice, a neophyte, a tyro, a tenderfoot.

Two, I end up in the mountains because of something that starts in my head. *I think, therefore I am. A life of the mind. Head in the clouds.* These were unofficial mantras for, or accurate enough descriptors of, me. I say this with some sorrow and a little shame. I had yet to learn to *experience* with as much care as I *thought*.

On the Ground

Matt promised to help me hear elk. I had met him just three months before at a writers' workshop in the glorious mountains of northeastern Oregon. Recognizing kindred sensibilities and some shared life experiences, we stayed in touch after the workshop. I arranged to stop and stay in Jackson on a weeks-long research adventure through the Rocky Mountain West. Matt, a poet who had grown up in this valley, left for college and various early adult adventures before returning to home ground once he recognized how much he loved and missed it. Such migratory habits, I've learned, define Jackson Hole's human and more-than-human inhabitants.

To get reacquainted and to orient me to this place, Matt led me on a short hike a few miles out of town among the eastern foothills where the National Elk Refuge and the Bridger-Teton National Forest meet. In no time, we left the trail and crashed through sagebrush and dormant grasses until we hit some golden aspens in a small drainage, where we stopped, and I gazed. Above and behind us, the forest thickened. Below and in front of us, a plain stretched out for miles until it hit the Tetons, a few buttes rising in miniature before the hulking mountains behind them. While improved from the night before, the weather still blocked the mountains from view; I could not see Grand Teton or Teewinot or any of the other summits in the famous horizon, just low peaks and mountainsides brushed with snow. From the small rise our walk had taken us to, I saw the valley for the first time, the straight angles of the road we took, the meandering cottonwoods that marked the streams, the constantly shifting light as clouds moved through, darkening and lightening the day almost by the minute.

I might have stayed there for hours, gazing across the landscape and asking questions about plants, mountains, animals, but time quickened. Matt had a deadline back in town, the hand off of his son, a routine I recalled without nostalgia. His divorce was still unfolding; mine a decade past. Matt and I discussed our experiences the way middle-aged men do when they seek to make sense out of circumstances they had not planned. I knew sadness and regret as reluctant acquaintances, my daughter's tense teen years behind me but vaguely present in the ongoing effort to repair ruptures. Matt's report: so-far-so-good. (I think his fingers were crossed.)

As we both knew intellectually and in our bones, times change. And when they move in irreversible directions, we make do, patching workable solutions to fragmentations.

C-R-A-C-K

When we heard rifle shots far away, up in the Bridger-Teton, Matt thought it best to move to our next stop. Leading us back through a narrow, wooded drainage, he said, "This place is just a boneyard in spring, perfect habitat for mountain lions." As if on cue,

we saw a complete vertebral column, picked clean, just off the trail next to a deer's foreleg still covered in its hide.

This boneyard was a small artery to and from winter feeding grounds on the National Elk Refuge, itself a patchwork solution to disrupted habitat. For millennia, elk circulated freely here following seasonal beats and biological rhythms, but cows, sheep, horses, and their minders found the Tetons and nearby valleys attractive. Subsequently, blockages clogged many of these pathways. Elk could not move far enough to find food, so they settled here, helping themselves to ranchers' haystacks. Soon, such charity taxed ranchers' goodwill and required government supplements. For more than a century, Wyoming and the federal government and local landowners intervened with a patchwork of policies and practices, the equivalent of bypass surgeries, stents, pacemakers, and regular doses of aspirin to keep elk in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem viable. This was the history I wanted to research and tell if I could manage it right.

On the Path

We drove back through town and wound our way to the other side of the valley, my head swiveling to catch all the signs—archways of antlers at the town square, long driveways of the dude ranches, swanky storefronts and ski resorts. Matt stopped at the Laurance S. Rockefeller Preserve, a small nature center next to the Snake River where he told me he sometimes sees elk. I noticed that Matt grabbed bear spray before we walked off a short way and observed two moose near the trees that bordered the river. I had already seen moose at my campground, and I wasn't on a quest for them. But we stopped and watched from a distance, hoping they'd amble off so we could find elk near the river. They didn't. "Let's move on. Moose are the one animal I try to avoid."

We navigated the famous Moose-Wilson Road, a 9-mile gravel route full of potholes and twists. There we saw a young bear next to the road, gathering hawthorn berries by climbing the flimsy branches and hanging on without grace or a care in the world directed toward us, the other vehicles, or the park volunteers grumpily telling us, "Move along." ("They are friendly at the beginning of the season," Matt said—of the volunteers, not the bears.)

We continued a couple miles further north when Matt pulled off the road to park in a dirt lot big enough for maybe four cars, a convenient spot but not quite a well-worn path. He grabbed the bear spray again, and we set off with hope. I imagined being minutes away from a meadow full of elk, harems gathered with a cacophony of competitive bugling while the business of natural selection proceeded timelessly.

We crossed over a wooden bridge that spanned Cottonwood Creek, and we meandered to a small clearing with a handful of buildings—cabins of large and small

variety and a barn: the Geraldine Lucas homestead, now a historic district. Lucas made her way to Jackson Hole in 1911, became the second woman to summit Grand Teton—visible from her homestead on clear days—and acquired 580 acres. With the creek running nearby, the mountains looming above, and pastures opening the forests, it seemed an ideal location. I lingered. I read the interpretive signs and took photos, a gathering of historical details I'd need to imagine and recreate life here. But Matt pressed us on, off the trail and into the trees.

Whispers and then hand signals told me that I needed to be quiet if I wanted to see or hear elk.

We walked, stopped, and listened.

We moved on. Stopped again. Always listening.

The atmosphere changed as dusk began to settle. No more conversations about kids or writing or Jackson Hole. Just concentrated observation and anticipation.

We waited just inside the trees where branches might hide us from elk. I strained to hear anything above the wind and started wondering, philosophically and practically, if wind made noise itself or only when it meets something else—a tree, grasses, me.

I heard birds.

The two-day stubble on my neck scraped against my coat, zipped up all the way for warmth, and I was alarmed at its startling volume.

We remained beyond the edge of trees as minutes piled up. Finally, we gave up and crashed through the limbs, no longer worried about noise. We walked into a meadow, maybe 15 acres, and saw a small tree nearly destroyed, bent over and scraped up. A bull elk was responsible, Matt told me. He needed to point it out, because I wouldn't have recognized the significance of the shredded bark and broken branches. At this point, my knowledge of elk came only from books and only a few of those.

Then, a plaque attached to a large boulder—black and gray and white with green lichen climbing up its side—commemorated Lucas's life. This sign I understood. She lived from 1865 to 1938, the Civil War to the Great Depression, both eras replete with tragedy and opportunity, times to pay attention.

The scraggly pine and a nameplate on a boulder left behind by the glaciers made for oddly juxtaposed memorials to the majestic wildlife and the quirky pioneers who found homes in this valley.

In the spacious pause, I noticed how much could be noticed, the sounds and feel of the wind, the innumerable shades of green in the trees, the slight numbness in my nose ruining any chance that I might whiff the forest's fragrance.

My disappointment that we heard no elk dissipated, because I recognized that the moment still mattered. I sought bugling. Matt aimed to supply it. The elk had other plans. Grasping for nature to do the thing we want it to struck me as a common failing of the on-demand culture we lived in and something best to avoid.

My day had been (nearly) perfect.

Interlude

Like the elk around the equinox, I had to move on. While they scoured hillsides for food, I foraged in archives to locate traces of the past. For the next couple weeks, I liberated file folder after file folder, each one bursting with old documents, out of countless boxes at the American Heritage Center in Laramie and from the Conservation Collection at the Denver Public Library. I unearthed correspondence, reports, newspapers, from decades before my grandparents were born to those when I could barely drive legally. The folders exhaled decades-old dust, while I searched for elk prints in the past.

As a practicing historian, I find archival research deeply monotonous, periodically surprising, and comfortably familiar. Most of all, it's work, and work contains all these qualities in an unpredictable routine and mixture. After spending days outside in mountain air looking and listening for elk, the archives felt antiseptic—more so than normal. Yet all my training and experience meant that I felt more assured there than walking through places that required bear spray.

Ten researchers probably spend their time in archives in twelve different ways. I gather as many materials as I can. Almost immediately, I understand the basics of the evidence I find. At least the gist. Later, when I have the luxury of time, I sort the mass of artifacts and figure out what they mean while ordering them, an iterative process that might never end if you aren't careful. So my time in Laramie and Denver was a bit like accumulating food before hibernation—a busy time whose work was preparation for the purposes of other days.

I worked through the files of scientists, politicians, writers, and conservation organizations with my eye on elk. The story of elk in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem rose off the carbon copied and mimeographed pages in broad strokes. Concerns about poaching and overhunting yielded quickly to the story of starving elk and the need to preserve land for the animals and then the necessity of feeding them. Sir Isaac Newton posited that every action had an equal and opposite reaction in his third law of motion. It was as though the biological world worked the same: the recovery of elk led to an overabundance that produced the resultant fear that elk were eating themselves out of forage. Controversies over how to manage the excessive elk herd animated conservation

politics with wide-ranging opinions and political disagreements. What I saw in the archives suggested that managing elk eluded the people who lived here in every decade in every corner of society and government. They were searching for elk, too, seeking balance and health. Day after day in the quiet research rooms, what I would need to understand to tell the history of elk became clearer.

On paper.

I still hadn't heard the elk bugle. My search continued.

With the Muries

After my last day in the Denver library, I picked up Kelley, my spouse, from the airport. She joined me for the return trip where we stayed just ahead of the freezing temperatures. Campgrounds had shut off their water and some closed down. After a quick overnight at Dinosaur National Monument—a place I wanted to visit because of its historic role in the emerging post-World War II wilderness movement (and one Olaus Murie and his spouse visited)—we headed to Jackson Hole. I looked forward to sharing with Kelley this beautiful place and what I had already learned. Also, we still had a date with elk.

Early in our first full day in Jackson, we visited the Murie Ranch, where Olaus and his wife Margaret, or "Mardy," lived. The Murie Ranch, now one site operated by the Teton Science Schools that is dedicated to place-based education, is a collection of several buildings scattered around an opening in the trees adjacent to a visitor center for Grand Teton National Park. The mountains fill the western sky above the trees and greeted the Muries every day, weather permitting. The Muries, together, worked hard on behalf of wilderness preservation. Among many other things, they helped to mobilize the American public in favor of protecting Dinosaur from being inundated by a proposed dam at Echo Park, not far from where Kelley and I had camped. Years before I knew her, Kelley read Mardy's classic account of Alaska, *Two in the Far North*, and she owned and admired the *Peterson Field Guide to Animal Tracks* full of Olaus's sketches.

I had toured the Murie Ranch during my previous visit and knew Kelley would appreciate their log cabin. I arranged to get inside, even though the season had ended. Awed and humbled by the historic power of the Muries' biological and conservation work, we drank in the books and the drawings and the setting. Original art and photos graced the cabin; local numbers were still attached to the wall by a defunct phone line. In Olaus's studio—where he drew and wrote—we saw copies of his books and hers, including *The Elk of North America* and *Two in the Far North*—and an old wooden sign carved with "The Wilderness Society: Headquarters," showing great wear after more than six decades. Olaus had presided over the organization, agreeing only when he was

allowed to do so from Moose, Wyoming, the ironic address of the ranch where the elk specialist lived. The history of the place, the evidence of Olaus and Mardy's mutual affection for their entwined outdoor lives, settled over Kelley and me with a familiar comfort, like the colorful quilt on the bed where Mardy died when she was 101.

As we were leaving, I mentioned to the Teton Science Schools field educator and naturalist who generously showed us around that we hoped to hear elk bugle that evening. She warned me to temper my expectations. "It's getting late. We say that mid-October is pretty much the end." Adding with fluffed up optimism for my sake, "But I hope you hear them."

Along the Road

That evening, before we set off with Matt for another round of searching for elk bugling, we met for dinner at Dornan's. This restaurant-and-bar was part of a longtime private inholding in the national park with a wall of windows overlooking the wall of mountains that had called to the French fur traders' longing. They were having a hootenanny, the thousandth-some consecutive weekly musical gathering with local musicians having and creating a good time. Dusk had not quite knocked on our door, but it was on the walkway to the porch. We rushed to finish our meal and headed further into the park with the aim of returning to the place where Matt and I struck out two weeks earlier.

Before we reached the rendezvous spot, Matt pulled his truck over in one of the ubiquitous turnouts that allow for viewing the mountains and wildlife. We followed to the stop in our van. A few other vehicles a hundred yards further along had simply parked on the road's shoulder, a safari sign that wildlife was about.

Off in the distance to the east, opposite the Tetons, were dozens of elk browsing among the sagebrush. The fading light, the pale sagebrush and dried grasses, and the color of elk blended on the plain, practically indistinguishable. But against the forest that bounded the open space to the north and with the movement of the cows, elk shapes filled my distant field of vision. When I held up my binoculars, I counted 65. Among them, a handful of most impressive bulls. One sat down amid the brush so tall that all that was visible were his enormous antlers, rising up as though the sage sprouted them.

Then a noise. I barely registered it, such a new sound, and I remained uncertain in this landscape. Besides that, we were standing beside a thoroughfare with traffic moving by at 45 miles per hour.

"That was it," Matt mouthed. I strained to hear, trying to close out the noise of tires and engines. Nothing.

I looked west and noticed the mountains, backlit from the setting sun, appearing to begin their slumber. I snapped a photo. Matt joked, "Meanwhile…," gesturing to the majestic mountains that all of us had been ignoring while gazing at the elk and trying to hear them again. Then, a white suburban, driven by a woman about thirty, pulled around to pass another car, destroying any sense of peace, any notion that in this park wildlife or mountains deserved awed respect, even silence.

"If there is a herd like this here in the open, I bet there will be more away from the road," Matt said. So we moved on toward the intended destination.

Out of the Woods

We got out of our vehicles and immediately heard bugling, then what seemed like a call-and-response from the east side to the west side of the two-laned highway. By now, I understood the sound I was waiting for. Three tones. Short low. High long. Shorter low again. Every so often, a bugle rose up and hung in the air like a low cloud. The sound and the promise of getting closer energized us as we hustled away from the road.

The evening turned cool but not cold, above freezing but not much. We wore sweatshirts, flannel shirts, and hats to keep comfortable. My nose and cheeks reddened with the chill. Matt, the veteran, used thick leather gloves, and he led us off the trail and through the trees toward the sound of a bull. We reached Cottonwood Creek and followed simple powerlines until we found a bridge to cross. We walked as quietly as we could, but in mid-October, grasses were dried and fragile and crinkly. Downed trees meant branches cracked when our weight crushed them. Every so often, elk bugling pierced our natural noises.

Matt whispered, "It's such a sound of longing, of pleading . . . considering what it is they're doing especially. 'I'm over here.'"

Every time the bugling hit our ears, it seemed closer, and we looked at each other and grinned. Matt grinned with pleasure, his eyes widening, showing off this magical place and seasonal but timeless activity, knowing it is why I was here. Kelley grinned with delight, because the way the world works always delights her and because she knows how important this was for me. I grinned in a sort of dumbfoundedness, since I was overjoyed and in awe. Yet if I'm honest, I also felt uncertain, unsure of how to process what was happening. After coming here for this very experience, I now felt mute, my mind buzzed too fast to be coherent. In archives, indexed finding aids tell researchers what to expect and help them navigate the collections; I had no aids here, no intermediaries.

We had circuitously returned to the old Lucas ranch, which provided some cover. By one of the outbuildings, we sat and squatted and watched the bull 150 yards off, beyond a handful of evergreens. And he—unmoving, unflappable—stared in our direction. Waiting

and ready but not ruffled or frightened, the bull stood and stared. He had not built an impressive harem—just one cow was visible in the meadow with him. The distance meant it was not familiar; the size meant it was not overwhelming. In the fading light, I only saw the two animals until several minutes later they walked away and a second cow appeared. The trio ambled off and merged into the woods. “I love how they just appear and disappear into the forest,” Matt said.

And it was over. The script in my mind had been different. A larger harem. A wilder meadow. Louder bugling. But long ago I learned that you don’t always get what you want but often get what you need. I was delighted, tongue-tied, and grateful. I witnessed, in intimate miniature, something that felt primordial. Beyond my previous experiences, hearing elk bugle presented me something new and connected me to something beyond the human. This was, after all, what my work sought: to tell history from an elk’s eyes, beyond human conceits.

But not far beyond, for in this age, the tracks of humans fill the earth and sky.

As we walked back, mission accomplished, all smiles, emotionally satisfied, a jet plane approached the Jackson airport, the only commercial airport at home in a national park. I’m still trying to decide if the jet’s sound broke or punctuated the elk-inspired reverie. I’m inclined to think that such a mechanical intrusion was insufficient to break the spell of something so elemental.

I had what I sought. Field work to match archival research. Experience to pair with thought. Memory to complement hope. The next morning, Kelley and I drove north out of Jackson Hole, skies as clear as I’ve ever seen, mountains looming to the west.