

SEARCHING FOR ELK

By Gary Thornbloom

The possibility of encountering large mammals is part of the appeal of hiking out West, in Maine, in Canada, and in Alaska. If the possibility of encountering a creature weighing up to 1000 pounds, standing five feet at the shoulder, eight feet from nose to tail, with antlers up to five feet long and up to six tines on each side appeals to you, then you need hike no further than Pennsylvania and some of the trails in the Moshannon State Forest.

Wapiti, elk, were native to Pennsylvania, but were extirpated by the 1870's. The Pennsylvania Game Commission reintroduced elk in 1913 and today the Pennsylvania herd numbers around 700. Roadside viewing in the Benezette area has become such a nuisance that private and public groups have joined together to purchase land for viewing the elk. While viewing elk in a zoo like atmosphere can be fun, it does not exhaust the possibilities.

Numerous hiking trails wind through the Pennsylvania elk range. A hike through elk country holds out the promise of encountering one of these magnificent creatures and while such an encounter can be an experience of a lifetime, the fact that such animals roam free in the woodlands, whether seen or not seen, can add magic to every hike. A hiker can also tap into some of that magic by being alert for any of the various signs of elk that are present throughout elk country.

The bugling of a bull elk in early autumn, a low bass moan that builds in pitch to a shriek and ends with a hiccupping chirp, is a sound every bit as wild as wolves howling or loons calling across a northern lake. Even if you do not see the elk, the room left for your imagination can be exciting. On the other end of the elk sign spectrum are their droppings which, depending upon their diet, can range from elk pies of five to six inches in diameter to pellets about three quarters of an inch in diameter.

Wallows can be found in wet areas where the elk roll in the mud tearing up the ground, leaving their hair throughout the mud. Being covered with mud helps to cool them off, as well as offering some protection from biting insects. Game paths are another common sign where elk are moving into and out of frequently visited areas such as fields and water sources. Elk paths will look like a very well used footpath. Muddy areas are excellent spots to see elk tracks (around four inches and round) which are distinguished from the much smaller whitetail tracks (usually less than three inches, narrow and less round).

Elk rubs are one of the more dramatic signs of elk activity. A bull elk will rub his antlers on thin to sizeable saplings, tearing and shredding the bark, to get the feel of that up to five foot high set of antlers on his head. The size and intensity of the rub, along with the individual animals scent, lets other elk know just who is in the neighborhood. A whitetail rub is considerably smaller in scale. Elk rubs will involve saplings several inches in diameter broke off up to six feet above the ground. Thicker trees will be well polished. With several trees in direct proximity, polished and busted up, a hiker cannot help but be impressed with the violence and strength that is indicated.

Trees that elk, with their teeth, have stripped the bark from are another obvious sign of elk activity. Elk seem to prefer maple saplings, so when walking through thickets

of young maple look for saplings that have had bark stripped from them. The smooth bark of young maples will have obvious tooth marks from about a foot above the ground to five feet or more up the tree. The finger wide gashes can be anywhere from an inch to well over one foot in length. One tree will often have marks in several locations. Old scars from prior years are also visible.

Many of the trails throughout the Quehanna Wild Area in the Moshannon State Forest wind through elk country. One good hike to encounter elk and to see elk sign begins where Sanders Trail crosses Hoover Road. Following blue blazes go east on Sanders Trail and after about a quarter mile you will come to a trail junction where you will take Gore Trail to the left. The trail signs are not always labeled exactly as the map reads so it is essential to pay careful attention to the map. The end of the field that is to the right as you began this hike is an old airfield that was constructed during the Great Depression. In recent years it has been planted as an elk food plot, so this is a good area to begin looking for elk sign.

The second trail junction you come to offers a chance to hike about a mile to Gore Vista for a nice view out over Wykoff Run. You will then have to retrace and continue on Gore Trail toward Foley Trail. At the junction of Foley and Sevinsky trails take Foley trail—to the left—and continue on to Hoover Road where you go right for a quarter mile to Quehanna Trail. The two utility right-of-ways that the Foley trail crossed include sections that have been planted for elk food. Many of the saplings lining these areas also offer great opportunities to look for elk sign.

At the junction with the Quehanna Trail—orange blazes—go left. In about a mile Little Fork Vista offers a beautiful view looking north out over Little Fork Draft. Just after the view you will come to Arch Spring. A concrete arch was built over the spring and nearby you can find two stone ruins that may have been a cabin and a barn. Earlier in this hike several other stone ruins, as well as one log ruin were passed. Information on the history of this area is available in **Great Buffalo Swamp** by Ralph Seeley. An old field now claimed by a stand of white birch is the next diversion along this section of trail. A little over a mile past Arch Spring you will leave Quehanna Trail's orange blazes to again follow the blue blazes of Sanders Trail.

Sanders Trail crosses the utility right-of-ways that you crossed earlier in the hike and again offers great opportunities to encounter elk or elk sign. At the junction of Red Run and Sanders Trail stay to the left on Sanders Trail and continue on to Hoover Road where you parked your car.

This is approximately an eight mile hike and would be close to ten miles if you include the trek out to Gore Vista. The terrain is gentle. The woodlands are varied. There are structures of historical interest. Opportunities for encountering wildlife are good. The prospect for encountering wapiti, or elk, on their own terms is present, and the signs are everywhere.

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IF YOU GO

Just north of Karthaus, at the junction of Route 879 and the Quehanna Highway (SR 1011), drive 11.4 miles north on the Quehanna Highway to Lincoln Road—a gravel forestry road that you will have to look carefully for. (It is another 4.1 miles on the Quehanna Highway to the Forestry

Headquarters parking lot where you can find free maps including all the trails in this hike.) After you make a right turn onto Lincoln Road continue 1.8 miles to Hoover Road. Turn left and drive .4 of a mile, if you think the road is passable, to where Sanders Trail crosses Hoover Road. Note that there is no trail sign at this crossing.

RESOURCES

Great Buffalo Swamp—A Trail Guide and Regional History by Ralph Seeley offers an excellent guide to trails in the Moshannon State Forest and gives many insights into the history of the area. It is invaluable in gaining an understanding of many of the things, such as the stone ruins mentioned, that you will encounter while hiking these trails.

Wildlife of Pennsylvania by Charles Fergus has a chapter on elk.

The DCNR Public Use Map for Moshannon State Forest gives an overview of the entire area, while the DCNR Quehanna Trail map covers the area of this hike in more detail.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have websites with information on Elk: www.rmef.org and www.pgc.state.pa.us/

Information on the Quehanna Trail and on purchasing Ralph Seeley's book can be found at www.kta-hike.org/Quehanna_Trail.htm