

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2017: Stories from the
Albums*

Article 12

2017

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Recommended Citation

Ballard, Lisa Densmore (2017) "Elk in the Smokies: Adventures with a Reintroduced Herd," *Appalachia*:
Vol. 68: No. 2, Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol68/iss2/12>

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Elk in the Smokies

Adventures with a reintroduced herd

Lisa Densmore Ballard



EXPLORING STRETCHES OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL IN MY LATE teens, circa 1979, I would have laughed at the thought of seeing an elk. Elk were iconic western ungulates that roamed the steep clearings and loosely timbered ridges of the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest. If you wanted to see wild elk, you had to travel to places like Yellowstone or Rocky Mountain national parks. But had I been an early pioneer, pushing into the great eastern hardwood forests, I likely would have seen elk, also called wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*).

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to conserving elk habitat and returning elk to its original historic range, estimates about 10 million elk roamed much of the Lower 48, except for extreme desert and immediate coastal areas, in precolonial times. By the end of the Civil War, however, unregulated hunting and loss of habitat to agriculture and human settlement nearly extirpated these large antlered mammals. By 1900, only a few remnant populations remained in the less hospitable terrain of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada.

The formation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, followed by other large-landscape national parks in the western United States and the National Elk Refuge near Jackson, Wyoming (1912), played an important role in conserving the few elk that remained. Elk from these wildlife sanctuaries became the breeding stock that the federal government, state conservation agencies, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation used to build the herds.

Today, about a million elk inhabit the protected timber and prairie regions of the West. In the East, a few small herds have been reintroduced and are gaining traction, most notably in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. The herd in the southeastern part of the Bluegrass State is by far the largest east of the Mississippi, numbering more than 10,500. Michigan is a distant runner-up with about 1,400 elk, and appropriately named Elk County on Pennsylvania's Allegheny Plateau has about 1,000 elk. But Great Smoky Mountains National Park?

Was I surprised when an invitation came from the elk foundation to see elk there! Granted, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is known for its plethora of flora and fauna. It's the most biodiverse unit in the national park system. This 800-square-mile patch of lush temperate forests, steep-sided mountains, and verdant valleys straddling the Tennessee–North Carolina

Typically hidden among the forests of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a member of a reintroduced elk herd shows itself. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

border is home to more than 19,000 documented species of plants and animals. Scientists believe there may be another 100,000 species living there, still undiscovered, but one would think it's hard to miss a 600-pound elk.

"Actually, it's tricky to see them in heavily forested, mountainous terrain," Joe Yarkovich, a wildlife biologist at the park, told me. He said that in the West, where the trees are not so dense, managers count elk from the air. "We're developing counting methods on a regional scale using fecal DNA, but we don't have results yet."

Elk did live in the East. They were extirpated from North Carolina during the 1700s and from Tennessee in 1865. When my husband, Jack, and I planned a June trip to the Smokies, it was mainly to hike to at least one of the famous balds, stand atop Clingmans Dome, and trek through the wild rhododendrons and azaleas on the Appalachian Trail. Elk were not on my radar, until I got the invitation to see the results of the reintroduction.

On June 22, 2015, we flew to Knoxville, Tennessee, then drove to Gatlinburg, entering Great Smoky Mountains National Park by the Sugarland Visitor Center on the north-central side. We had a day before our elk outing, so we decided to check out some of the historical sites in the park and do a little hiking.

Clingmans Dome

Whenever I head into new mountains, my immediate reaction is to get as high as possible to better understand the lay of the land. As a result, our first destination in the park was Clingmans Dome. At 6,643 feet, Clingmans Dome is the highest point along the entire Appalachian Trail. The mountain has an observation tower on its summit with a reputation for a hundred-mile view on a clear day.

Clingmans Dome was originally called Smoky Dome. In 1859, the geologist and geographer Arnold Guyot renamed it for his friend, General Thomas Lanier Clingman. Clingman had spent much of the 1850s exploring the area and believed this mountain to be the highest east of the Mississippi River. It turned out that a mountain then known as Black Dome and renamed Mount Mitchell (after Clingman's teacher Elisha Mitchell) was actually 59 feet higher.

The route to Clingmans Dome extends a mere half-mile on a paved but steep path from a sizable trailhead parking lot. We followed the steady stream of visitors toward the summit. Within a half hour, the tower appeared out of

the clouds like an unidentified flying object. Unlike the fire towers one sees in New England—small metal cabins atop a dizzying matrix of steel scaffolding—this one was a concrete disc atop a massive pillar. Rather than climbing vertical steps, hikers trod an arching bridge to the viewing platform, but, on that day, there was little to see. A bank of mountain smoke (clouds) clung thickly to Clingmans Dome.

Andrews Bald

We retreated from the fog-shrouded mountaintop back to the parking lot, then followed the Forney Ridge Trail from the same lot to Andrews Bald (5,920 feet), the highest bald in the park. Balds are high-elevation grassy meadows, but they are not alpine zones. They're too far south. In fact, without periodic maintenance by the National Park Service, the balds would be reclaimed by the surrounding forest.

It's not completely clear how these mountaintop meadows were formed, but very hot fires that burned to the soil and clearing trees for farms probably contributed to the unique landscape. During precolonial times, grazing elk played a role in keeping them clear of trees. During the 1800s, domestic cattle played the same role. In fact, Andrews Bald is named for a local cattle herder, Andres Thompson, who summered his cows there during the 1840s.

After the establishment of Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934, which effectively ended domestic agricultural practices within the park, the balds began to shrink. By the 1980s, at the urging of visitors, the park service started to actively maintain Andrews Bald and Gregory Bald. Andrews Bald is the more accessible of the two, a 3.6-mile round-trip hike versus 8.8 miles round-trip to Gregory Bald. We opted to visit Andrews Bald because we were short on time and because the trail departed from the parking lot where we stood.

The route to Andrews Bald descends Forney Ridge, a high shoulder of Clingmans Dome, then climbs about 900 feet. The first part of the trail passes through a spruce-fir forest, typical of the higher elevations in the southern Appalachians. Requiring a cool, moist climate, dense spruce-fir habitats used to be widespread along the Appalachians during the last Ice Age, but as the climate warmed, only isolated islands survived at higher elevations. Unfortunately, many of the Fraser firs along the trail to Andrews Bald are dead or dying because of an infestation of the balsam woolly adelgid, an invasive species from Europe. This tiny, wingless insect releases a toxin in its

saliva as it feeds in cracks in the tree's bark. Ninety percent of the Fraser firs in the park have succumbed to this deadly bug.

We found Andrews Bald to be more verdant and inspiring. From various vantage points around the several acres of grass, layers of blue-hued ridgelines spread to the horizon like choppy waves across a restless sea. We had timed our visit perfectly to see the annual blooms. The meadow was ablaze with stunning orange azaleas. In less than a day, I had already checked off three items on my wish list for the trip: seeing Clingmans Dome, a bald, and the rhododendron-azalea show.

Cades Cove

We finished our introduction to the Smokies by touring the 11-mile, one-way loop road to Cades Cove, an isolated valley in the western part of the park. In addition to an extensive array of preserved structures from the 1800s, the loop is known for its wildlife, especially black bears, wild turkeys, and whitetail deer—but not elk. Prior to the arrival of the first European settlers in the early 1800s, Cherokee Indians hunted elk in Cades Cove, but as the population of pioneers swelled, both the Indians and the elk abandoned the valley.

The various cabins, antique farming equipment, and barns along the loop road transported us back to a time when self-reliance and grit were among the keys to survival in the remote, rugged Smokies. At one point, I stumbled upon the grave of one of those early inhabitants, Russell Gregory (1795–1864), for whom Gregory Bald is named, behind a small white church. Like Anders Thompson, Gregory lived atop what's now Gregory Bald during the summer, tending his cattle, but his main residence was with his family in Cades Cove. During the Civil War, Gregory, like most of Cades Cove, sided with the Union. Gregory Bald was named in his honor after he was killed by “Confederate rebels.”

The highlight of Cades Cove came at the far end of the loop, when I wandered down to the creek that turned the old gristmill wheel. Pale rosebay rhododendrons hung thickly over the shallow stream. After taking a few photos, I sat down on a log to savor the scene and a few tourist-free moments. As I turned to go, a coyote sauntered by, glancing casually my way. Then, as I walked back to our car, three whitetail bucks, their branching antlers in full velvet, appeared in the tall grass by the road.

The Cataloochee Valley

Predawn the next day, we met Kim DeLozier, who manages the eastern program of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and who drove us back into Great Smoky Mountains National Park, through the Cataloochee Valley gate in the eastern part of the park. Like Cades Cove, the Cataloochee Valley was originally a Cherokee hunting ground that became a farming community when European settlers arrived. In 2001, 25 elk from Land Between the Lakes, Kentucky, were released into this isolated valley surrounded by densely forested hillsides. A year later, another 27 elk, this time from Elk Island National Park in Alberta, Canada, were released.

Our van rounded bend after bend on the narrow road, as we listened to DeLozier recount the elk project. “At first, the park service considered the reintroduction of elk into the Cataloochee Valley to be experimental,” he said. “But the elk survived and have nearly tripled in number, earning a permanent spot among wildlife here.”

The first tendrils of the morning fingered their way into the sky. A mowed clearing the size of a football field appeared on our left. DeLozier suddenly braked. “There!” he exclaimed, pointing to a shadowy patch by the trees on the other side of the meadow.

I saw the movement before the animal. The elk emerged from the darkness as if the shadows had shed a piece of themselves. The large bull nibbled some grass, jerked its head up, then bowed again to the ground. We quickly took



An elk crosses a meadow in the Cataloochee Valley. LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

some photos, keeping our distance. Although the twelve points of the bull's rack were thick with velvet, they could inflict serious harm if the bull became annoyed or defensive.

The bull snapped its head up again and looked our way. Then it casually ambled farther and farther across the meadow in the direction from which we had just come. It crossed the road, then disappeared into the forest. A wild elk in the East!

We got back in the van, continuing a short way to a campground where we had arranged to meet some photographer friends who were also interested in elk. As we stood in a small circle making morning small talk, DeLozier motioned to us to follow him. We walked past several recreational vehicles, dark with slumbering campers, then paused at his signal. Another bull elk stood 20 yards beyond the edge of the campground, nibbling forbs on the forest floor. A second bull walked regally past the first, then began foraging for food. It was thrilling to see them and surprising for them to be so close to humans.

My elk encounter in Great Smoky Mountains National Park made me wonder again, could a hiker on the Appalachian Trail see elk? The question niggled at me, so I asked Yarkovich, the Smokies wildlife biologist.

"You won't see elk on the Appalachian Trail in the park, but you might around Max Patch," he said, referring to a bald mountain on the North Carolina–Tennessee border to the northeast of the park. "It's a different herd, though."

"Could elk eventually overrun the Appalachians?" I asked. "After all, adult elk don't have any predators here."

Yarkovich believed not. Some people think that because a national park is a protected environment, the elk population could get out of control, leading to overgrazing and damage to the forests and nearby croplands. "We've been proactive since day one, following vegetation monitoring protocols in both the grasslands and the woodlands," he said. "We've got an adaptive management plan, and we can catch changes early. Our models show a small but sustainable population over the next 25 years, which will slowly spread into new adjacent areas."

To give elk a place to expand outside of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation recently acquired seven parcels of land totaling 2,407 acres in the Maggie Valley area adjacent to the

Cataloochee Valley, a natural path for elk leaving the park. The tract will soon become a North Carolina state wildlife management area. Elk are already using the area for calving and because they are attracted to its open grasslands for food.

“Why reintroduce elk to Great Smoky Mountains National Park?” I asked.

“Why not?” replied Yarkovich. “We knew they were here originally. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation offered funding, so the park did a suitability study and disease risk assessment. It was an opportunity to bring back a native species to the ecosystem, which is part of the park service’s mission statement. And it’s good for the economy of the region. They’re a charismatic megafauna. People come to look at them.”

I had to agree with him. Next time I visit the Smokies, seeing more elk will certainly be at the top of my wish list.

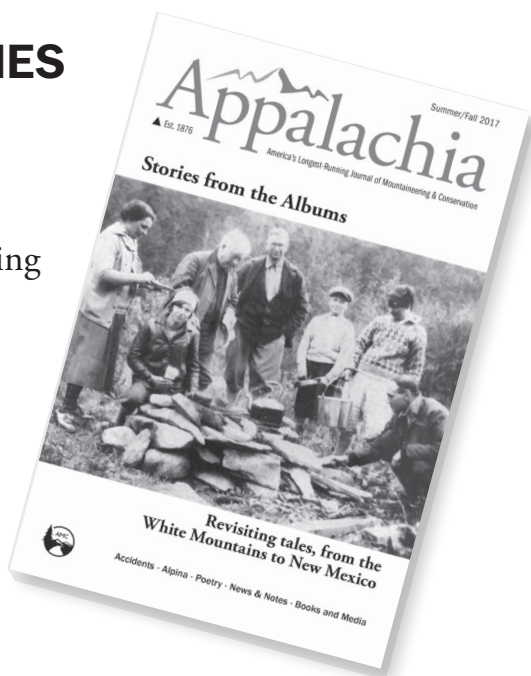
A longtime member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, LISA DENSMORE BALLARD is an award-winning writer, photographer, and filmmaker. She splits her time between Red Lodge, Montana, and Chateaugay Lake, New York, when she’s not exploring a wild part of the world. Visit her at lisadensmore.com.

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