

# What Elk in Our Valley Means to Me

by Allan Wakaluk

**A**s a young lad growing up, the first elk I had ever seen was one my oldest brother had shot and brought home for food. The treat of good meat was something we never had a lot because we had to sell our cattle to buy other essentials. As time went on, and I became a teenager, I realized what a beautiful animal an elk really is.

One abnormal winter, when snow fell to 5 feet and the temperature fell to minus 48, the elk herds moved from the mountains in the forest down to the plains and ranches. There were thousands of them. At one time, my father and I counted 600 head on the hills around our valley home. I set out with my horse and dog and literally drove 350 head back towards the mountains. But as I was putting my horse in the barn, the elk came back to the edge of our field in search of food. They couldn't get our haystacks because the hay was stacked in corrals 10 feet high.

A couple of days later, temperatures rose a little, and I started our little TD9 International crawler and broke a trail for about eight miles on the road toward the prairies. We lived in the foothills, and east of us was prairie land, west was the big mountains and lots of snow.

When the elk moved east, there were thousands. Some of the ranchers said the herd was several miles long. Many haystacks fell to the elk, and entire stacks



photo courtesy of Allan Wakaluk

were eaten in a couple of days. After all the elk flooded through, you could have driven a logging truck down the trail.

The elk migrated for up to 60 miles in search of food and, as a result of that winter, many have never returned to the mountain country. Many elk today live year-round on the prairie

edge, in valleys and draws with stands of fir, spruce and aspen.

I have always thought of elk as a majestic animal, wild and free, and part of my heritage. Today, my grandson and I grab the rifles and set out to find elk. We often seem to follow trails I used to walk 50 years ago. We don't go very far—a clearing, a hill, a river—and I'll stop and tell a story of the herds of elk that used to roam the valleys and ridges, and the success stories of my hunts.

Today I see the elk disappearing. Our elk population has dropped. I wanted to do something, which is why I've been a member of the Elk Foundation since it was founded more than 16 years ago.

My dream is for my grandsons to take their grandsons out in the country, and feel that the elk is part of their heritage.

*Allan Wakaluk lives in Blairmore, within Crowsnest Pass. He was founding chairman of the Elk Foundation Canada's Three Rivers Chapter.*