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Jackson's Hole Elk

J. Howell

It is very unusual for a National Forest to receive an appropriation without asking for it. But this year, while Col. W. B. Greeley was on his western tour, he stopped at Jackson, Wyoming, the headquarters of the Teton National Forest and Government Feeding Station for elk, to inquire about the much agitated Park Extension and other business. Before September 15, when the hunting season opened, Supervisor McCain received notice that he had sufficient funds for the establishment of twenty men on game patrol work for the length of the hunting season.

The men were to watch for illegal hunting, such as the using of dogs for tracking, using traps or deadfalls, the using of 22 highpower rifles and poaching. Poaching for elk teeth, meat or the lust to kill has been the greatest problem to solve. It is usually very hard to obtain witnesses and the evidence against a poacher, unless a game warden or officer was present at the act. In 1923 a certain person was tried before a court for the killing and selling of seventeen elk, and wanton killing of three mountain sheep, which were left to rot with the heads. This case was thrown out of court through a technicality. Conclusive evidence is the main object of the patrol and game warden against the poacher.

The elk used to range the lodgepole pine forests in herds of two hundred or more and was an easy animal to hunt, but now, through the hard brought education of the white man, the small herds of twenty or more break up into twos and threes. The bulls range wide and travel very swiftly from place to place. He has learned not to bugle, as that gives his position away.

When the hunting season closes the elk begin to drift out of the hills and into Jackson to the winter feeding grounds. The elk used to use the high wind swept ridges for the winter feeding grounds, but since the hills are grazed by cattle in the summer and the meadow lands are taken up as hay ranches the elk has but only to starve. They endeavor to get at the hay that the rancher has put up, but are repulsed by high pole fences. The situation became so serious that many of them died and it was feared that they would become extinct, and big-game hunting was the stock-in-trade for the dude ranches.

The Forest Service and the Biological Survey made a study of the situation and through combined efforts a feed-

ing station was established on a marsh, a little east of Jackson. The station consists of a hay ranch capable of producing about eight hundred tons of wild hay, but this is not enough to feed some 20,000 elk that come down in the winter. The object is to save the weaker members. These are separated from the herd and placed in a corral and carefully fed. In doing this, many bull calves are saved, for it seems that the mortality among the bulls is greater than the heifers. The old bulls will fight any of the others when they have a morsel of hay; in fact, the calves usually are not able to get much hay unless it is well scattered.

Elk are very crafty and can go thru the forest without making very much noise, but if frightened and running it sounds as if a herd of cattle is passing. If it were not for the white patch on the elk's trousers, it would be very difficult to see them in the forest. In the winter the bulls are as tame as kittens. They can be fed by hand and even petted, but in the spring, when the snow is melting on the hills, and hand feeding is tried, all that is seen of the formerly tame elk is a white streak darting away. The natives of the Hole will say that an elk can not be tamed or trained, as they have tried it.

