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Money Game

Impatient hunters seeking guaranteed trophy antlers -- and impatient Asians seeking aphrodisiacs -- have made elk farms a thriving business. We're just starting to assess the damage

by Hal Herring

ON a hot September afternoon the small town of Hamilton, Montana, is a busy place. Expensive Jeep Cherokees are towing rafts and drift boats. Sport utility vehicles cruise by full of camping and fishing and rock-climbing gear. Old pickups loaded with firewood and a .22 rifle or a shotgun in the gun rack wait at stoplights. Conspicuous in the traffic is a brand-new flatbed four-wheel-drive with tinted windows and a special rack in the back, from which hangs a truly monumental bull elk, the smooth mahogany-colored surface of its antlers protected by a wrap of rubber inner tube. The metal of the flatbed shows a long wash of blood, and trickles of blood streak the license plate.

Even in Hamilton, where a dead deer or elk in the back of a pickup is a common sight, this rig slows traffic, as tourists stare and visiting hunters look on in envy. The locals are less impressed. They know that the spectacular animal hanging there is just another "shooter bull," on its way to a nearby meat-packing plant. Behind those tinted windows is a wealthy man who has paid thousands of dollars for the privilege of killing an elk that has been raised and confined within the fences of the Big Velvet Ranch, twenty miles to the south -- one of a growing number of game farms in the United States.

The rise of the elk game-farming industry is a relatively recent development, but the notion has been around since the 1920s, when an eccentric Montana character named Courtland DuRand set up a dude ranch where elk pulled wagons and rowboats, and customers applauded as trained bison dropped from a forty-foot-high platform into an artificial lake.

The modern industry is a more serious business. North American farmed elk produce 100 tons a year of blood-rich immature "velvet" antler, cut from bulls' heads annually in June and sold mostly by the Asian medicine trade, which

markets it as a general tonic and an aphrodisiac -- by some estimates a \$3 billion industry worldwide. Farmed elk also provide shoots for trophy seekers who have neither the time nor the inclination to take their chances in the Rocky Mountain wilderness. The number of people taking part in these staged hunts is growing. Last year the Big Velvet broke its own record, providing trophy heads for more than 140 clients. The price for a bull varies according to how large the antlers are. Hunts at the Big Velvet start at \$5,500 and may cost \$20,000 or more.

Colorado is the current leader in elk ranching, with more than 140 game farms holding more than 10,000 elk captive. In 1994 the game-farming industry in Colorado successfully lobbied the state to transfer the regulation of elk game farms from the Division of Wildlife -- which worried about habitat loss and the spread of disease from captive elk to native wildlife populations -- to the Department of Agriculture, which is less concerned with such matters. Wyoming is the only Rocky Mountain state that has outlawed game farming and captive shooting -- after a campaign that took several years and a great deal of public money. In Montana, despite the efforts of industry lobbyists, state wildlife officials still share jurisdiction with the Department of Livestock. And even here the property-rights movement, whose interests dominate the state legislature, has successfully deflected attempts by wildlife advocates to ban or further regulate the industry. Across the state, as new game farms are established, their fenced-in herds displace native deer, elk, antelope -- and just about every other wild creature except birds, which have probably benefited from the creation of large areas newly freed of natural predators.

Because wildlife is considered a public resource, the land to be fenced for a game farm must first be cleared of all wild game. The "game-proof" fences that went up for the Big Velvet, in 1993, enclosed some particularly valuable deer habitat and elk winter range. Len Wallace, the Big Velvet's owner, hired local teenagers to run through the gullies and coulees of the property, driving mule deer to the proposed fenceline. Helicopters buzzed the scattered herds of deer to keep them moving. The area was then opened to hunters who held unused deer tags from the past season. Finally game wardens moved in and shot forty-nine mule deer that refused to leave the area. The wild elk were still in the high country, so they escaped slaughter. When snow brought them down to their winter range, they encountered an eight-foot-high fence and came face to face with their captive brethren.

Prospective clients of the Big Velvet are sent photographs of available shooter bulls and a promotional video narrated by Wallace, who shows the bulls wandering around the property and reports exactly what each animal will score on the Boone and Crockett scale -- a standard measure of the horns

and antlers of North American big game. In the video's finale happy trophy seekers -- including a bow hunter in full camouflage garb and facepaint -- pose with their elk. "Finally I got one exactly the way I wanted it," one client says. In game-magazine advertisements the Big Velvet boasts of "The Worlds Most Successful Trophy Elk Hunt! 100% Success, No Kill, No Pay" and promises a "video of your hunt" along with transportation and lodging. Other ads show giant bull elk killed by clients of the fenced Yellowstone Game Ranch, near Sidney, Montana, far out on the plains.

Fenced trophy shoots are in themselves nothing new. In Texas, which has very little public land and almost no opportunities for public hunting, they have been around for decades. A client in Texas can choose from an array of exotic game on dozens of fenced ranches and make guaranteed kills of everything from greater kudu to gemsbok to addax to giant white-tailed deer fed on supplements and selectively bred for fantastic antler production. What is new is the growth of captive shooting in the Rocky Mountain states, where wild herds still roam public lands and the tradition of "fair chase" hunting has attained an almost religious status.

THE modern version of farming elk for breeding stock and velvet came to Montana in the mid-1970s, when a Corwin Springs outfitter and restaurant owner named Welch Brogan started the Cinnabar Game Farm, in Paradise Valley, north of Yellowstone National Park. Brogan, with help from a Korean entrepreneur, was the first to exploit the Asian market for velvet antler. Beginning in 1974, he also air-freighted over 300 head of elk to buyers in Korea. In the late 1980s state game officials began to suspect that Brogan and others were supplementing their herds with elk captured from the wild. Brogan was found guilty in 1991 of capturing eighty wild elk, and lost his license to operate. One outspoken critic of the growing game-farming industry is Jim Posewitz. Posewitz spent thirty-two years as a fish-and-wildlife biologist in Montana before retiring to start Orion The Hunter's Institute, a kind of think tank dedicated to conservation and the preservation of ethical hunting traditions. He is the author of *Beyond Fair Chase* (1994), an eloquent discourse on the ethics of hunting which is often used as a text in state-sponsored hunting-education programs, and *Inherit the Hunt, A Journey Into the Heart of American Hunting* (1999). Posewitz is appalled by the growth of captive shooting. "It is killing," he says, "and nothing more. The worst crime is that it prostitutes and trivializes both hunting and wild game animals."

Game farmers have little concern for such pieties. Mark Taylor, a lawyer in Helena and a representative of the Montana Alternative Livestock Producers, views captive shooting pragmatically. "You have a product," Taylor says, "and as a business owner you have a responsibility to explore the markets that will yield the best profits. If a harvest situation is

your best market, then you go with that." Len Wallace said in a 1997 interview that state wildlife officials had persecuted the Big Velvet because they were in direct competition with him to provide big game for hunters. "People who hunt on my property don't have to buy a hunting license," he said. "Besides, I produce a better product, and [the wardens] know that."

Many hunters prefer not to discuss the origins of the trophy head that hangs on the living-room wall or above the office desk. One Big Velvet client willing to talk is Mike Ferrari, an international hunter and the owner of a successful southern-California greenhouse business. The experience changed the way Ferrari thinks about hunting. "I wouldn't want my name out there as a pro-game-ranch hunter," he says. "At the same time, I don't want to take anything away from the Big Velvet. Len Wallace is a hell of a nice guy, and so are his guides. But I'm sitting here right now looking at that animal on my wall, and it just doesn't mean very much to me. And if somebody asks, I have to tell them how I really got it." Ferrari says that he has also hunted at game ranches in Texas, and that the trophy animals there are even easier to kill than elk at the Big Velvet. "In Texas they have what they call a Texas Grand Slam," he says, "where you shoot all the species of sheep, and some of these animals, you have to honk the horn on the truck to make them get out of the way." Ferrari has given up shooting game-farm trophies.

FROM the beginning, many biologists warned that if game farms were permitted in areas that had served as traditional range for wild game, there was a severe risk that captive animals would pass on troublesome and exotic diseases to their free-ranging brethren. Since captive herds are usually made up of animals from many different farms in various parts of the country, there is always the possibility that diseases to which native wildlife have little or no natural resistance will be transmitted. Game farmers dismissed the fear as baseless, but it wasn't. In 1988 shipments of elk from the United States were thought to be responsible for introducing bovine tuberculosis to game farms across Alberta, including the Elgersma Game Farm, one of the country's first and largest. The Canadian industry was then producing more than \$1.5 million worth of velvet antler a year, and operations were being established or expanded across the country, resulting in the trade and transport of large numbers of animals. In an effort to control the rapid spread of the disease, livestock officials "depopulated" fifty game farms, slaughtering 2,500 infected and exposed elk. Forty-one people received preventive treatment for tuberculosis.

In a very controversial decision Alberta game farmers were paid \$13 million in compensation for the eradicated herds, even though they had been permitted to establish a portion of their breeding stock free, through the capture of wild elk.

Six game farms in Montana were placed under quarantine, and one, the Elk Valley Farm, on the prairie near Hardin, was found to have infected some of the wild game that lived just outside its fences. So far at least seventy-five game-farm elk across the state are known to have escaped, and no one can say what effect they are having on wild herds, or what diseases or parasites they may have introduced.

Valerius Geist, a professor emeritus of environmental science at the University of Calgary, had been warning the Canadian government for years that disease would sooner or later sweep the game-farming industry. One of the infections that Geist had predicted would show up in captive elk and deer was chronic wasting disease (CWD) -- a member of the mysterious family of degenerative brain diseases that includes mad-cow disease, which devastated the British beef industry in the early 1990s, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, which produces dementia and rapid death in human beings. The diseases, known as transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs), cause destructive changes in the protein structures of the brain but trigger no response from the immune system, so there is no test that can determine infection. "We knew that CWD existed in the wild, in a small area of Colorado and Wyoming," Geist says, "and we knew that theft of wild elk was occurring, so it was just a matter of time." By the end of last year elk farms in South Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Colorado were under quarantine for CWD. The brisk trade in shooter bulls and breeding stock had given speed to a disease that had been extremely slow to spread on its own.

The Kesler Game Farm, near Philipsburg, Montana, was one of the six Montana game farms placed under TB quarantine during the early 1990s in response to the epidemic in Alberta. After the quarantine ended, the owner, Dave Kesler, made a series of shipments totaling eighty-four elk to a rancher in Oklahoma in 1996 and 1997. In May of 1998 one cow elk fell sick. The animal lost weight rapidly, slobbered uncontrollably, and demonstrated the staggering that is symptomatic of TSE infection. The elk died, and a lab test of fresh brain tissue revealed the presence of CWD. A year later an apparently healthy bull elk was killed in a brawl with other bulls on the ranch, and it, too, was found to be infected. The Oklahoma ranch was placed under quarantine, and a new quarantine was imposed on the Kesler farm. A trace of intra-state elk shipments from Kesler led to the Elk Valley Farm, placing that farm under a separate quarantine.

For three days early last December the Kesler ranch was sealed off from the outside world. Game wardens and livestock officials provided security and kept the press at bay. Strategically placed farm equipment and haystacks blocked photographers. Eighty-one elk were killed, and dozens of tissue samples were collected by a team of researchers and biologists from state and federal agencies. The elk carcasses

were packed into plastic-lined dumpsters to await disposal, the nature of which sparked an angry debate. One of the mysteries of TSE is the resilience of the infectious agent: CWD is suspected of persisting in soil for years and resists most routine disinfectants. Finally, livestock officials imported a special incinerator from Mandan, North Dakota, and burned the elk carcasses and ranch equipment suspected of CWD contamination. Wildlife officials have begun trying to determine if the disease has escaped into the wild mule deer and elk that use the land around the Kesler ranch; shooting from the ground and from a helicopter, they have killed nine mule deer and one elk for testing.

ONE result of the emergence of chronic wasting disease is that the game-farming industry may never again enjoy the kind of free-for-all expansion that characterized it in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1996 Wallace applied for a new permit to enclose another 1,100 acres of his Big Velvet property. The enclosure would have displaced both a herd of wild elk and more than 750 mule deer. "There is absolutely no benefit for me in feeding the public's wildlife," Wallace said at the time, "and I have no intention of doing so." Wildlife officials, citing negative impact on public hunting opportunities due to loss of winter range and overwhelming negative public opinion, denied the permit request and successfully fought subsequent legal appeals. This was the only game-farm permit ever denied by the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Prices for breeder cow elk are down, and the marketing of elk meat has so far been slow to get off the ground. In South Dakota the brains of farm-raised elk must be certified CWD-free by a lab before the carcasses can be sold for meat. Game farmers complain that CWD-infected wild game is threatening their industry, and that they must be protected from the wild elk and deer that surround their enclosures. Experts disagree. "CWD is just not a widespread problem in free-ranging wild game," says Michael Miller, a veterinarian for the Colorado Division of Wildlife. "And the only tool we have to deal with the disease in the small area of the wild where it does occur is to do a density reduction, which basically means clobbering the wild game animals. I don't think the public really wants us to do that."

Nevertheless, there remains a financial base for game farming. The Asian financial crises temporarily stymied the market for velvet antler, but prices have recently rebounded. Paula Southman, a spokesperson for the North American Elk Breeders Association, says the alternative-medicine market in the United States is in any case picking up the slack created by the fall in Asian demand. The market for shooter bulls is thriving.

Game farming will be an issue in the upcoming Montana

governor's race. State Auditor Mark O'Keefe, who has announced his candidacy, is the first politician to fight the game-farming lobby, which involves the risk of also angering the loud and forceful property-rights movement. "We have to decide whether to bring this whole thing to a halt before we do irreparable harm to our wildlife," O'Keefe says. "No new permits, no more transport of game animals into the state." Under such a moratorium, many newcomers would fold. Game-farm representatives are already talking about "takings legislation" and what compensation farmers would accept if new regulations made conducting their business impossible.

Len Wallace should not be concerned. With so many breeding elk within his fences, he will probably be able to weather any coming regulatory storm. If the worst occurs and the state shuts down the Big Velvet, Wallace can be expected to demand ample payment for the loss of his products -- which is, after all, the point of game farming.

Hal Herring writes for *Field and Stream*, *High Country News*, and *Bugle*, the magazine of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

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