

THE ELK OF THE PACIFIC COAST

NATURE'S GRANDEST HUNTING GROUND

By T. S. VAN DYKE

THE elk was once found on the great prairies of the Mississippi watershed. But so was the deer. For there were belts of timber, lakes surrounded with a heavy growth of reeds, and swales full of slough grass, with plenty of rough cover about the bluffs and river bottoms that intersected it in all places. But who would expect the elk to be at home where the land was too bare for the deer, and only the antelope roamed the many leagues that seemed fit but for wild cattle and horses. Yet it seems certain that the bands of elk that once roamed the great San Joaquin Valley in California surpassed all that has been told in song or story about the elk of the Rocky Mountain parks or plateaus. Leagues away from anything approaching cover they lived upon plains as open as any on which the buffalo ever flourished. For before the discovery of gold there was no demand for them except at long intervals, when a traveling native found it a little easier to lasso one for a camp than one of the cattle that on the great expanse were about as swift of foot and even more wild.

But the miners soon created a demand for meat, and traveling bands of explorers also murdered everything in sight, much as the white man always does. Even the great novelist Dumas turned market hunter as soon as he landed here in 1849, and one of his first performances was to kill an elk in the Sacramento Valley, on whose wide plains bands were roaming the same as cattle. Most of the lakes and sloughs of the San Joaquin Valley are very broad and shallow, with a vast margin between high and low water that has a dense growth of this cover, which also runs over many of the islands of the rivers far up the Sacramento and the other streams leading into San Francisco Bay.

Instead of going to the mountains, which spread their robes of chapparral and timber down to the edge of the plains, and, higher

up, offered fastnesses as good as any of the Rocky Mountains, the elk retreated from the open plains with the advent of the American, and hid in the vast tule swamps that covered hundreds of thousands of acres. Here they made great trails that ramified until lost in myriad mazes, while hogs that had gone wild made it extremely interesting for the hunter who dared enter on foot, especially if he had a dog to retreat between his legs at the first charge of a big boar. As it was impossible to see any distance, even on horseback, and the mud was too thick for horses, the elk were quite safe for a time. But as the swamps began to be drained and the cover burned off, and roads made through the drying ground, it was again the same old story of the white man. By 1875 the antelope were a curiosity on the great plains where so many thousands lately glimmered through the dancing heat, while the elk were almost as rare in the great tule swamps that so lately seemed inaccessible. By 1885 only one band was left, and that was on the immense rancho of Miller and Lux in the upper part of the valley some twenty miles from Bakersfield. In 1895, when I last saw this herd, it was under rigid protection of the herdsmen of the ranch, and, though even wilder than in the years gone by, and roaming a part of the Coast Range where the grizzly yet laughed at his pursuers, no one ventured to trouble them. They then numbered about twenty-eight. It is said there are now over one hundred, and they have been turned over to the care of the Lodge of Elks in Bakersfield. But the turning over is merely nominal, for they are as wild as ever. It means only that any man who dares shoot one will repent it. These are the last wild elk known south of Mendocino or Humboldt County in the far north of the State, the lonely survivors of countless thousands.

South of this point some fifty miles the great valley is brought to a close by the

Sierra Nevada swinging around to join the Coast Range. But in doing so it falls several thousand feet into the low pass of Tehachipi, through which the Southern Pacific Railroad goes. This is broad, open, and low, and has for a century been a thoroughfare for cattle, antelope, and everything else that travels. South of it, in Antelope Valley, is as good feed as in the San Joaquin, while farther south is still better pasturage, with abundance of country in the mountains that is the natural home of the deer. Yet I can find no evidence of the elk ever having passed south of this mysterious line, though so open and so easy. The oldest Indian and Mexican settlers know nothing of him, even by tradition, except as the great *alce* of the northern plains.

Nor does he seem to have gone into the high ranges of the Sierra Nevada even in summer, though nothing is wanting there that an elk should desire to complete his happiness. Heavy forests, broad meadows, rocky glens, secluded thickets, and all that one could wish he ignored, to stay on the great, dry, blazing plains, and left them only for the still less attractive tule swamps. No trace is found of his existence over the range on the east, and strangely enough he does not seem to have spent much time in the Coast Range. Much less did he cross it, and scarcely ever was seen on the rich slopes that roll away to the silvery sea in such long swells of the finest feed in the world. He appears no more until we reach the great redwoods of the northern coast of California, where he made his last camp. Here the vast forest, with its tremendous undergrowth, maintained him for a time, but the insatiate greed of the white man for "heads," and for elk teeth for watch-charms, was fast consigning this grand deer to the things that were, when the hand of the law stepped in. Public sentiment sustains the law, and few are those who now dare molest the elk that remain. But for their remoteness they would long since have been sought out, but it was too far from market in early days, and was always uncomfortably wild for the tenderfoot and his murderous guide.

In Oregon the elk fared better, and better yet in Washington and British Columbia, though murdered by thousands. But the vast forests were too big for the leg,

if not for the heart of man. Thousands of square miles yet remain where the foot of man is hardly known, thousands more where it is very difficult for him to go with a horse and almost useless to go without one. This leaves plenty of room for one who can find pleasure in hunting such a grand animal and be satisfied with one or two. Hence there are still large areas on the upper coast where the elk is yet very abundant and always will be. And here, and not in California, is where he should be sought by one who wants to set him at his best in the most splendid home nature has given his race.

Modes of hunting elk on the Pacific coast have always been of the simplest kind. There were no greater hunters in the world than the old Spanish Californians who lassoed the largest grizzlies by the light of the moon, and dragged them, bound on rawhide, to fight the wild bull of the hills at their numerous *fiestas*. To them the gun was ridiculous for such work, and generally the last thing they used on game. They had their pick of horses, which, for their weight and for swift work on rough ground, have had no superiors in the world. To run down an elk and rope it was for them a trick so simple that they never did it unless for a change of meat. They had thousands of cattle raised only for their hides and tallow, and why kill an elk when no more skill was required than to rope a cow? They rarely failed to uncoil the rope for a deer if they could catch one far enough from the hills, and they loved to match their fleetest horses against the antelope; while they rarely failed to make a dash at a coyote or a wolf when the plain gave a good chance for a race. The great herds of elk, however, they rode by, not in disdain, but with none of the American's love of murder.

But miners came, and they brought a string of camp followers, with gamblers and loafers of every kind, who loved play better than mining. These speedily went to work like swine in a garden of roses. Delighted to find that he could ride into a band of elk without tumbling off the horse, the new American cowboy rioted in herds where he could put a pistol against the flank of the biggest bull, most of them being so clumsy that any fool that could coil a noose could lasso one. For a time

this murder was the only hunting done for elk. But as they began to retreat to the cover of the tules, and the price of meat rose with the demand from the mines, the natives began to watch for elk outside the tules at daylight, while hunters by the score with rifles followed them in all directions. In the northern part of the State the elk left the valleys as early as 1855, to retire to the majestic silence of the great redwoods of the Coast Range, where he could be found only by true still hunting. And even there the great bands were no longer seen, but only scattered bunches of a dozen or so, with plenty of single ones. The day passed very quickly when one could go and wait beside some grassy glade to see a score come in from the woods to feed, and stand so confused when the leader fell that the butcher might pile the rest almost one upon another. This day is about gone, even in the far north, where few hunters have ever penetrated, for, like the deer, the elk has learned from civilization.

In judgment of a certain kind the elk is far superior to the deer. The deer merely laughs at civilization so long as it gives him—leaves him—a certain amount of cover, with half a chance to feed and rest. He cares nothing for noise, if not too close. I have known the wildest Virginia deer lie all day within plain sound of the axe, and where the choice vocabulary of the teamsters in the pinery could be plainly heard in the clear, cold air. Yet by no amount of ingenuity could one get within rifle shot unless the combination of softness in the snow, openings in the brush for quiet walking, rolling ground behind which to keep out of sight, with the wind and other conditions all right, conspired to help out the most extreme care of which man is capable. So I have known the mule deer time and again spend the day on the hillside, where he can plainly hear the hunter calling up his dogs and discussing with his companions the chances of getting venison. And, generally, the chances are rarely worse than on just such ground. The deer seems to love to take chances on such matters, and knows so well the distance of sounds that he is rarely deceived in that way. For the report of a rifle a little too far to be dangerous he cares no more than for distant thunder, trusting to his judgment to avoid any possible interview with the owner of it.

But the elk will have none of this intellectual treat. Though he may act the fool worse than any of the deer tribe when hit with a bullet, or when shot at close by, the sound of shooting is apt to start him moving out of the country at a pace few care to follow. He knows something is wrong, and cares not to trust himself to decide so important a matter. If such noise should be near enough to alarm a deer he would only go half a mile or so, stop and look around a while, go another quarter, perhaps, and look a little more; then fall to feeding a bit, listen a while, and finally lie down again within sound, probably, of that same rifle. But the elk will travel over hill and dale, crossing vast gulches, and scaling stupendous heights for league upon league, until away beyond all danger. And even then he may keep traveling for a day or two more. No matter how much you may scare the deer he will be back to the same ground before long, for he has been twisting and turning and doubling on his course during most of the run, however long it may be. But you may not see the elk again that season if you have once run him out with noise. And it is almost equally futile to try to overtake him in a stern chase when on such a journey. He can walk too fast and too far, while as a trotter he is a master even among great windfalls. With his long legs he can cross a log so large that few horses care to leap it, even where raised in the woods. The great horns, which look all the time as if they would entangle him in the first bush, he carries with lordly grace through fallen tree tops, tangles of vine maple, ivy, grape vine, and all the network of the woods, the same as a deer—which means the same as a rabbit or bird. Although his weight makes the track of his big hoof very easy to follow on almost any kind of ground, the contract for overhauling him is a good one to submit. For even if you succeed it will be leagues away from your starting point, and probably in country so rough that you cannot even take out the coveted horns. For this chase must be on foot for much chance of success. With a horse you are apt to make too much noise, and cannot afford the time to stop for him to feed. You will probably have to lie out one night at least, and have to make ramp where night overtakes you without hunting feed

for the horse. I have known two Indians follow a dozen elk on snow over a hundred miles, and would not have overtaken them then had the elk not been intercepted by a hunter with a dog, which so confused them they huddled up while the man shot the whole band. This was many years ago in Northern Wisconsin, but the elk is the same traveler all over the Pacific coast.

When the elk once starts on a trip, even when not suspecting danger, the work is bad enough, and about the only chance there is for the hunter nowadays is to find him where he is at perfect rest. That is, where everything is to his liking, but especially silence and remoteness from any trace of man or any of his works. The elk is the most omnivorous of the vegetarians. He loved all the wild, dry feed of California as much as the cattle and horses, and became equally fat on it. In the woods he likes all the grasses, bushes, and herbs, so that one need never inquire on what he is feeding. You want mainly to know whether there are any other hunters ahead of you on his range, and if so, you may almost as well stay home. The next question is that of feed for your horse, for the elk will thrive where a horse will starve. And though he may not starve he may fall off so in a few days from the scarcity of grass in the deep shades that you may have to come out on foot.

You should also go prepared to camp on the trail even without the horse. For if you leave fresh tracks too late in the evening to work them out and attempt to go to a distant camp and come back and pick them up again in the morning, you may be left too far in the rear. This trick, that can so often be used to advantage with deer, will not do for so wide a ranger as the elk. For this trip neither can you load yourself down with a blanket, but must depend on fire to keep you warm; and you had better carry provisions enough for at least two days. For a good chance to trail up a band of elk, or even a single one, is now so rare that if you have gone to the trouble of going so far and spending the time and money necessary, you cannot afford to let the question of comfort interfere with your farther proceedings. And though the nights may be cold, you cannot dress very warm, as you will have to move rapidly by day.

Unless you have a very rare dog he will

be of little or no use to you in this chase. You must go too fast for him to "slow-track," and you cannot trust him to bring such game to bay. While elk will often turn and fight a dog much more quickly than deer, especially cows with calves, they are more likely on rough ground to depend on leaving him in the rear. Or if the dog overtakes the elk it will be so far ahead of you, and in such broken ground, that before you can come up with the procession the dog will have been whipped, or retired to some bush for rest, or gone off to hunt much needed water.

Subject to these inconveniences, which, for a tough person, amount to almost nothing, such a chase will take you now among the grandest scenery the forest primeval has left to offer. On this coast are still millions of acres where the axe has left no scar, some of it too rough even for our great government to survey, but where Nature has done all she could to pile sublimity on high and yet leave soil enough for the shaggy robe of timber that makes the mountains still the home of the elk. In other places she has substituted shade and silence hedged about with such a vast tangle of green, brown, and gray from great trunks and broken limbs that you feel still more as if you were living in a different sphere.

Here you may find great hills standing almost on end, ridge joining ridge in endless chain, where you may descend a thousand feet from the top only to find it break off in a precipice of dozens or hundreds of feet into a cañon still farther below. Nowhere can you find a place where you can take your horse down, and if you find one where you can make a toboggan of your trousers, it is by no means certain that you can return. I was once on such a ridge for four days with a party of four and nine horses. It was but six miles long, and not over two thousand feet above the gulches that yawned all around it into the different forks of the Coquille River in Oregon, yet we had to spend all our time in trying to descend to the river. A big drove of elk was just ahead of us, their tracks were everywhere, and many more were on the same ground. Everything showed that we were in their chosen home. There was hardly a sapling of any size from which a long strip of bark had not been rubbed by the elk cleaning the velvet

from their horns either in that year or the one before. Horns in all the stages of decay were around us, with elk trails innumerable. But there was no trail of man to tell us where we could go, no feed but wild peas, and a few small patches of grass that the horses would eat up over night, so that we would have to move on in the morning. Shade almost solid ruled over all. The Douglass fir towered 150 feet on the hills, with trunks like ship-masts, mingling their feathery tops so as to shut out the sun, while down in the gulches the great Port Orford cedar deluged the depths with heavier gloom. Through the few openings from which we could look out upon the world there was nothing in sight but ridge after ridge cutting the sky line with serried ranks of pine, and great gulches between, hazily blue with solid timber. The whole was interlaced with such a tangle of fallen trees that one would suppose an elk safe anywhere.

But the wary animal knew better. Though no white man penetrated those shades except at intervals of years, the elk took no chances on the movements of the butcher. Hence, when done feeding, he wandered off to the heads of the great slides and washes that broke in ragged seams from the tumbling hills. There, where the pine sprung in lusty life from the chinks in great layers of conglomerate that looked as if they could support nothing, and giant ferns choked the spaces between the fallen trunks that could not lie save for their erect brethren which held them in place, the elk lay down to ruminate. One would suppose this a fine place to slip upon him and take him at a disadvantage. And so it was, but not exactly like slipping up on an old cow under a tree in the pasture.

In the first place the eye becomes so used to the big timber that after a while it begins to look much smaller than it really is. But in the meantime you have not had your eye fixed on elks' heads so as to see how they dwindle on such a landscape. On the contrary, they increase in size in proportion to the time you spend without seeing one. So that when you do see it you may not notice the tips of a pair of mere sticks that, like a thousand odd bits of dead branches, rise just a little over the level of the fallen logs. If

you do, and recognize the points by their sheen, you may have an easy task, for the elk, with all his care to keep a man at a distance, is a great fool when he fails. When man is near the elk is an idiot, compared with the deer and the antelope. About all you have to do is to avoid his nose. You need trouble yourself little about those senses that make the deer so difficult to circumvent—sight and hearing. Yet if he does see you and takes a notion to go, it may be but one plunge into the dark depths and your hunt is over with that one.

Not so very much better is your chance when you set a dark brown or yellowish gray line fade in the darkness as you are traveling along. The heavier the wind-falls the faster the elk seems to go, and the more the necessity of his rising into sight to pass over the fallen timber as the deer does, the more he fails to swing high enough to give you a shot from the saddle. Vainly you spring from the horse to scramble on a log so as to get high enough. By the time you are there the brown or gray line is low, or perhaps nothing is in sight but a white patch that makes a beautiful target if it would only stay in view long enough for you to raise the rifle.

Yet this is the very sublimity of forest draped in silence so broad and impressive that you can hear the distant footfall of your game, and still farther off hear the crack of brush as it leaves you forever. Not the bark of a squirrel or the chirp of a bird may break the silence for hours; all the conditions of the hunt are here; Nature at her grandest and wildest, with about all that you call success depending on your own skill and endurance.

Such is much of the country you will now find in the lower part of the Coast Range of Oregon, but you will not find it so much more easy in those portions of the Cascades where the elk yet lingers. The greater part of this range is more easy to penetrate with a horse on account of the greater abundance of grass. Over much of it one can also go with a wagon. There you may find the deer in all the abundance you wish, but to find the greater elk you must go to where the streams that drain the mighty western face break in deep gorges from the upper slopes. There again you will find the land rising on end to meet you, the forest shaggy with bristling trees, whose tops interlace into

eternal shade; torn and ragged hillsides, where the fallen logs almost slide at your touch; jagged rocks that topple over depths so blue that you dare not step on them to look for your game. Many a band of elk yet lingers around the headwaters of these streams, and with the increasing vegetation, caused by stopping the fires in the forest reserve, they will all increase as the years go on and interest in game protection proceeds at its present pace. But even if you should fail to see one you will be well rewarded, for only on this northern coast can Nature duplicate such charms as she here spreads along the path of him who loves her for her own sake instead of a pair of horns to fasten on a wall.

Perhaps, though, you are not adapted to climbing such rough hillsides and scrambling over such great windfalls on slopes so steep that you know not where you may land on the other side. Well, in the deep silence where the redwoods have not yet felt the hand of man, you may find smoother slopes and forest aisles that reach farther without a bend, with vaster columns of fluted brown supporting the great canopy of green that shuts out nearly all the sun. The dim, religious light that sleeps in this great temple is well suited to set off to the utmost the rich colors of the elk, but you must have keen eyes to see it. If you have never been here before, you will naturally be looking for something the size of a horse on the open plain, with the additional advantage of horns so large that they will sparkle afar through the gloom. Little do you imagine that you cannot see more than the tips of them, and these tips so lost in the great jumble of dead branches which twist in a thousand directions, that your eye might rest on them without suspecting it. Even in the more open places ferns rise upon ferns to hide the legs of the tallest elk, while salal and a score of other shrubs which flourish in the shade are so rank that a patch of hair is the most you can see. And if your game starts to run you will see little more than a succession of such patches moving in a panorama of surprising shortness. Yet the feeling of awe which overcomes you, with the consciousness that the great game is all about you, staring at you, perhaps, over the very next log, and that nothing in nature is at fault but your eyes, makes the hunt a continuous pleasure,

though it is very likely to end about where it began.

And thus it will be as you go farther into the north, where the increasing rainfall makes the woods more sombre. More elk, for a while at least, but also more ferns, higher salal, ranker vine maple, and more expansive salmon berries; and trees standing even more like brothers, with dimmer light falling from the sky through the damper air, and more sombre shades in these shorter forest corridors. With the increasing, rain come increasing wet spots that may bog your horse, an increase in the dampness on the logs that may let you slide off into some mire covered with a growth of ferns so rank you could not see it. Windfalls with great tangles of moss adding to the confusion of the vines multiply, fallen trees piled high on each other and becoming all the time more difficult to go around as well as to cross over confront you, until at last the obstacles make the best horse a burden to you. It is not much farther to where you are a burden to yourself, where you could not see an elk if there were a score within a few rods; where you would not attempt to pack out alone the finest horns in the woods, and where you might never be able to find them again if you left them to go for help. Immense areas of such ground yet remain that for ages will remain the nursery of the elk; but on the great plains and lower slopes of California, as well as in the more open woods of the Coast Range, and the beautiful upper slopes of most of the Cascades, he is gone, probably forever. For, while easily tamed and restored in a park, there will always be too much shooting on these grounds to suit him, with too many hunters who will evade the law often enough to make it a little too human for the taste of this fastidious deer.

Nothing can be done with the elk by fire hunting, because he moves so little at night, and he cares so little for salt on this coast that a salt lick is of no use. Driving with hounds as with deer is quite out of the question, so that the hunting is narrowed down to still hunting. Deer care little for dogs, but have a mortal fear of the sly step of man, and the elk has even greater fear. It would be strange, therefore, if still hunting, which so quickly changes the habits of the deer and even

the antelope, should not have the same effect on the elk. Deer soon learn to feed entirely by night where it is too dangerous by day, as in a vineyard or alfalfa patch, and even when on native feed learn to stop sooner, and go much farther back into rougher ground to lie down. The elk is naturally a day feeder, though, like the cow and the horse, he can eat at night if he chooses. It has not taken him long to learn that it is far safer to breakfast before daylight and get out of the way, to go without lunch, and dine very late, so as to remain during the day stowed away in some wild place where no man is likely to intrude. He used to love the open sandbar of a stream to lie on during the day in order to escape flies or mosquitoes. He now finds it safer to bear a few flies for the sake of keeping out of sight. So he used to lie in the sun at times—to harden his horns—as the old hunters say. But now he is an ardent admirer of shade, and cares little for sunshine except on cold clays or frosty mornings. And even then you had better spend most of your time looking for him in shade that will hide his coat better than sunshine. But he has not yet learned the advantage of silence, as has the quail of this coast in the last few years, so that his shrill whistle of defiance to some rival bull still pierces the depths of the forest in rutting time, and gives even the tyro the best of opportunities for his undoing.

It seems an incongruity in nature that this grand deer, which appeals so vividly to our imagination, and in everything imposing easily surpasses all the antlered tribes of earth, should fall such an easy victim to the tenderfoot just at the time when it would seem the most easy to escape. But the elk often fails just where the deer begins to show his wisdom. With the deer the hunter's real troubles generally begin when he is within a few hundred feet of his game, but with the elk they generally end at such a point. Too often when one simple twist around a big log would take him out of sight, and when a dozen little rough gulches, such as shelter him so well when lying down, are there ready to engulf his fleeing form, he will stand like a goose and await the hunter's lead. And then, instead of running away like the stricken deer, the elk often stands to see if there is any more coming. More

easy to hit and more easy to kill, ignorant of the many ways in which the deer throws his pursuer off his bleeding trail, the elk is quite apt to be too easy a victim for almost any one with a good rifle, if he can once get within fair shooting distance. But just there is the rub. While the elk has learned little about handling himself in the immediate presence of man, he knows better than all other game how to beat him with distance. And in this he improves each year, although he may not see a man or hear the sound of a rifle in all that time. It seems a wonderful intuition, with which he is gifted even more than the bear.

The elk of California, especially on the southern valley, is a trifle smaller than that of the farther north and a little smaller than the elk of the Rocky Mountains. But the difference is not very great. A good bull stands about fourteen hands high, or about the height of the native horse. Farther north, larger ones are found, and some of the grandest horns ever seen have come out of the deep, dark woods where one might suppose nature would make the horns smaller so as to enable the animal to thread the heavy brakes with greater ease. Like elk elsewhere, they vary very much in the horns, as also in size, weight, and proportions. It is doubtful if any California elk ever weighed over 800 pounds unless unusually fat, while the majority run much below that.

The general colors are the same as those of elk elsewhere, with the same general build. In fact, he has suffered less from change of habitat than almost any of our large game animals. His natural history, times and mode of breeding, and all else are much the same as elsewhere, except where persecution has compelled him to abandon some of his old habits that might lead him into trouble, such as spending too much time wallowing in mudholes, standing around in open water, lying out in the open in large droves, migrating on old well-worn trails, etc. He seems to know more about the white man than any other animal, and when you consider the space that must now be traversed to insure an acquaintance with one in his wild state, the elk of the Pacific coast is probably the hardest game animal to secure by any means of hunting.