The Relocation of Wildlife at Banff

by Fred Stenson

If elk were to suddenly take up writing, a Banff National Park elk might write the following:

For my parents, life was simpler. Besides the cougars and the wolves, there was the railway and the highway. Because we couldn't get the hang of these, and too many of us were dying there, it seemed like a good idea for some to live on one side of the highway and some on the other. It was sad, but we got over it.

Ever since this time, my family have been South Side Elk, and, because of the way the highway and the railway and the river worked, and because people in Banff grow such succulent lawns and shrubs, we of the South Side have always hung out a lot in town. It's a surprisingly good place. Unlike on the highway, the cars in town stop for us. The people are no trouble at all. They either stand still or run off screaming.

Of particular appeal in Banff is the golf course, a large area of grass close to water. The people there hit hard white balls at us all day, but their aim is bad and there is little danger, unless they really lose it and throw their metal stick.

The Banff Centre for the Arts is another pleasant place to rut and graze. Though not on the same scale as the golf course, the lawns there are at least uncontested. There are many people around but most of them stay on the cement paths.

I have to confess it is a constant source of amusement for us to crap on their sidewalk and watch them tiptoe around it, or slip and fall. They get quite vexed about having the slightest bit of elk dung on their hoof covers, and absolutely theatrical if it ever touches their hems or trousers.

Mind you, during the rut, it's hard not to get pissed off. You know what you want to do. You're in a powerful mood, not a good mood exactly. And there they are. Pale. Gawking. Putting the boxes on their faces and making the clicking sound. You really want to smoke the little bastards. Put an antler where the sun don't shine. For the most part we catch ourselves. But not always.

On the whole, life at Banff has been good. The golf course and the ornamental gardens are a smorgasbord. Most of the people are pleasant, and, in the case of the urban Europeans, awed and reverent. Who doesn't like to be worshipped?

The only real problem for us is when the people in the earth-tone uniforms (tree camouflage, we think) come and chase us or shoot the "dart of temporary oblivion" into our asses. Then the lucky ones awake with a plastic card in one ear, while the less fortunate—and they seem to pick on our strongest and most beautiful—return to the light wearing a heavy,

Illustration: STEVE ATTOE

ugly neck yoke. This terrible thing has to be worn for months or even years, at the tyrannical whim of the uniformed ones. This has always sucked, deeply.

Who can blame one's fellow elk, come the rut, if they choose other partners? An elk who does not in the dramatic moment beep or hum. Who is not in continuous communication with a satellite. Who, in short, does not look like a goof.

Then there was The Great Expulsion. The uniformed ones came on horseback that time, and with trucks. In no time flat, half of us were loaded and gone. Never to be seen again. The pack wolves and the cougars were (though less sentimentally) as bereft as we were. It was as much trouble for them, in so far as staying alive was concerned.

But what the hell. You move on.

Those of us who are left still go to The Banff Centre for the Arts on occasion; for nostalgic reasons, I guess. To watch the management types in their colourful Goretex jackets try to build lean-tos or haul each other up hills on ropes. We also like to look through the big glass windows at the people with the naked arms and legs who climb imaginary stairs and lift heavy metal objects that aren't even in their way. We have always been appreciative of the singing and the playing of musical instruments that goes on there as well.

The people of Banff who used to run away so excellently afraid don't run away much any more. I guess that makes sense. We elk have to realize that you cannot be rare and strange and common and a nuisance and wild and fearsome and deep expressions of Nature's creative genius and lawn ornaments—all at once. Familiarity breeds contempt, as the poet said.

After many conversations with my brother and sister elk about all this, we have decided the time has come for the humans to go. In many ways we like them and are amused by them. Their funny habits: denning above ground for short periods in the summer, expending vast amounts of energy sliding down mountains on sticks during the winter, hiding from their mates and rutting in the dark under the trees with others, making smoke come out their noses. Funny little sods, really. But all the same, we are now convinced they must go. They are simply too erratic. Cooing to us one day, making kissy sounds. Hitting us with cars and rubber bullets and herding our kinfolk into trucks the next. It has to stop.

Why them and not us seems a fairly straightforward question. We did not seek out their home territory and live in it. It was they who came in the trains and buses and with the cars. They who so love movement can move again, is our position.

We don't talk much with the wolves and cougars, but we assume they will be in agreement with this. We have talked to the bears, and they are thrilled. For some reason, the humans, in addition to shooting them in the ass with the dart of temporary oblivion and placing them in the humming yoke, actually kill them. They're not sure why but have figured out it has something to do with entering their aboveground denning sites in pursuit of bacon. They're beginning to think that humans are very territorial when it comes to guarding their food.

Getting rid of the humans should be for good. I can't imagine it turning out any better if we were to try sharing the mountains with them again. But perhaps I shouldn't be so absolute about that. Let's get rid of them for ten years and then we can review the situation. Even humans, one presumes, might be capable of change.

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 films and videos, and eight books of fiction and non- fiction, most recently the best-selling *The Trade*.