

The New Zealand Elk Herd.

Original Establishment.

Wapiti, or Elk as they are known as in North America, were originally introduced into New Zealand by Sir George Grey who imported a pair and released them on Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf near Auckland, sometime in the 1870's. These animals failed to breed as the cow died and the bull later had to be put down because he became aggressive and dangerous. Some years later a bull and cow were brought out from Seattle by the captain of an American timber ship. The bull died on the voyage and the cow soon after she was landed in Dunedin. Before doing so she gave birth to a bull calf which survived and was kept as a pet for some years. However the call of the wild proved too strong and the animal wandered the hills behind Dunedin until he was shot on Flagstaff Hill. Known as the Flagstaff Bull, he carried a fine trophy rack of 15 points, which survives to this day.

The 1st attempt of substance to introduce Wapiti took place in March 1905 when 18 animals were released into the George Sound area of Fiordland. Ten of these fine young animals were a gift from American President Theodore Roosevelt, after initial approaches from a noted English Big Game hunter St George Littledale, and came from the National Zoological Park in Washington DC. These were joined by a further ten that were bought from a Massachusetts Indian Game reserve at Brookfield. The additional purchases were made by T E Doone of the NZ Tourist Dept, who was sent to accept the original gift, and facilitate their long and arduous passage to New Zealand.

The total consignment of 20 animals was assembled at the Park in Washington before being sent by the long 3,000 mile rail journey across the USA to San Francisco, and thence by ship to New Zealand. After a number of delays and difficulties en-route, the eighteen that survived the voyage were off-loaded onto the steamer 'SS Hinemoa' in Wellington Harbour. They were then transported down to the remote Fiordland region of New Zealand's South Island for release, and thus the only herd of Elk in the Southern Hemisphere was established on March 3rd 1905.

The animals were left largely undisturbed until 1921, although sightings were reported and some were illegally shot by fishermen. In that year the NZ Government commissioned a study to determine how successful the release had been and it was followed up with a survey by the Southland Acclimatisation Society.

Both returned a positive result, finding that the animals had adapted well to their new harsh environment, so different from their original homeland in America. The Southland study also determined that the herd had crossed the dividing range and spread into the valleys of Eastern Fiordland. On the strength of those reports, the 1st two hunting licences were issued in 1923 for the March - May period, with a condition that the hunters also carry out an animal survey. Three good bulls were taken and the survey outcome resulted in the issuing of seven licences in 1924. From then on hunting was allowed and the number of licences issued increased each year. This resulted in a great number of wonderful Trophy heads being taken over the following 40 years.

The removal of protection in 1935; the crossbreeding with Red Deer that spread into the area; the gazetting of the Fiordland region as National Park in 1952; and the resulting status of the Elk and all introduced game species being relegated to that of Noxious Animals, or pests, by the Government agencies of the time; has seen the wild herd go into decline. Today that herd is but a shadow of its former self, being comprised now only of crossbreeds of varying degree that have defied the efforts of Government agencies to exterminate or remove them from Fiordland.

Initial Farming.

The New Zealand farmed Elk herd was founded on animals originally live captured from the Fiordland area. The 1st Animals were live captured by Alpine Helicopters in 1978 at the request of Invermay Research Centre for research purposes. These animals all subsequently died because of a number of reasons, the main being a failure of the animals to adapt to their new farming environment at the research centre and the Centre's failure to appreciate the effects of diet change, parasitism, and stress on the animals. A further group was captured and held closer to their natural home and, from lessons learned, survived.

In 1981 the government of the day announced plans to mount a large live-capture venture with a consortium of Helicopter operators with the end result to be the removal of Wapiti from Fiordland, their upgrading back to pure-breed status, and their relocation to a more suitable environment outside of a National Park. Those animals in excess of those wanted (300 Elk Type for the Crown herd and 200 hybrid type for a Crown farming venture) would be sold to defray the costs and the consortium was to have 1st pick of them, up to the value of their costs.

It is a matter of public record that the Government never honoured its promises made to upgrade and relocate the herd to a new home environment, but instead used it as the basis for supplying breeding animals to Government Landcorp farms for farming purposes. To end the issue and the continuing embarrassment, the sale of the herd was announced in the 1990's. However the Minister of Conservation badly underestimated the reaction to that action and the sale was cancelled due to public pressure. The herd was handed over to a Trust to be set up and administered by recreational hunting interests. A condition of the hand over was that none of the animals, or their resulting offspring, would be allowed back into Fiordland in any attempt to assist in restoring the wild herd back to its former glory. Any profits resulting from the farming of the herd were to be put back into recreational hunting.

The Consortium's share of the animals found their way on to various farms and, along with sales of animals from the Landcorp farms, formed the basis of Wapiti Farming in New Zealand.

Also in 1981, Invermay Research Centre was successful in obtaining the gift of a small herd of Elk from the Canadian Government. These came from the Elk Island National Park in Alberta on the condition that they were used strictly for research, the upgrading of Invermay's Wapiti herd, and that none of the original animals could be sold to other interests.

Also in that year, the Alpine Helicopter Group succeeded in importing a number of Elk from Canada to be used over the Consortium's Wapiti herds and so the farming of Wapiti and Elk in New Zealand began in earnest.

From that point on more animals, both male and female, were imported from Canada by various interests, to supplement the gene pool and hasten the build-up of numbers during the boom years of the breeding phase of the NZ Deer industry. A nucleus of individuals recognised the potential of the Elk for both premium meat and Velvet production and looked to farm pure-breds. A further significant section of the industry recognised the venison production benefits of using Elk terminal sires over their Red Deer hinds to produce a bigger and faster growing animal that was suitable for slaughter in less than 12 months, rather than the two years required for a pure Red Deer. They opted to farm crossbreeds.

Farming today.

In New Zealand both Elk and Wapiti are farmed throughout the country, but tend to predominate closer to their traditional NZ home of Fiordland. Therefore the Southland and Otago regions tend to farm the greatest number of animals.

Generally the term Elk now applies to pure-breed animals post 1980's imported American elk and the term Wapiti to animal's descendant of New Zealand and American imported elk.

Elk and Wapiti are farmed in the same way as any other animal farmed in New Zealand today. They are farmed in completely natural conditions on open grasslands. They are hardy animals and have to put up with far colder, harsher conditions, both in Fiordland and in their ancestral home of North America, than they do on farms today. Elk are no more difficult to farm than any other form of livestock, providing their special requirements are given due consideration, and facilities that recognise that are put in place to handle them.

Grant Muir,
Wapiti Park Rocky Mountain Elk Stud,
Hari Hari,
New Zealand.
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