

elk only once before and have seen deer countless times and it did look like a very large deer. It wasn't until afterwards that we realized that it was what we hadn't seen that would provide the clues needed for the identification. What we didn't see was a white tail nor did the animal bound into the woods. These two characteristics are seen every time one encounters a startled deer. Wapiti do not wave a white flag of a tail when alarmed and they trot rather than bound. Although we did not observe a yellowish rump which is a diagnostic characteristic of wapiti as are the antlers, the size of the hoofprint and the other observations that we did make convinced us that the DELK was actually an elk. Were we ecstatic? Does wapiti start with a w?

Later that day we found a scattering of weathered leg and skull bones belonging to a small deer, moose, or elk. Along the Pickerel River we passed a cottage on the south shore just west of the railway trestle, that boasted two huge sets of wapiti antlers. (41-I/2 205940)

The story of the disappearance and subsequent re-appearance of wapiti and bison in Ontario is not only fascinating but also encouraging. Both wapiti and bison were naturally occurring components of pre-European Ontario. The wapiti in particular were widespread. Their range included the Eastern Townships of Quebec as well as Ontario south of Lake Nipissing. By the 1830s the eastern subspecies of this animal, known as the Ontario elk, was already near extinction. The last reported sightings of Ontario elk was one near North Bay in 1893 and one near Ottawa in 1914. Today wapiti are restricted to isolated pockets of unexploited habitat and are primarily thought of as a western animal.

Though bison were never common nor widespread in Ontario, their history is strikingly similar to that of the Ontario elk. Both wapiti and bison were re-introduced into Ontario during the early 1930s. The re-introduction was part of a deal where Ontario received Rocky Mountain elk from Buffalo National Park near Wainright, Alberta (which was abolished in 1947). In exchange, Ontario helped to re-stock Quebec beaver preserves and Ontario shipped smallmouth bass to Alberta. One of the elk re-introduction sites was Burwash Correctional Centre, on the Wanapitei River approximately 25 km north of where the Wanapitei joins the French. In fact, a private camp in the area is still known as Camp Bison. Originally the animals were kept in an enclosure. Fortunately, some bison broke down the fence and wapiti along with bison roamed wild in Ontario once again. In 1949, the wapiti, which numbered about 500 head, and the bison were wrongly accused of harboring a parasite that was endangering cattle and sheep livestock. The management decision was to kill all the wapiti and bison. Within the next year as many as 115 wapiti and 200 bison were killed. It wasn't until

1979 that the animals were exonerated and hunting was banned. Miraculously there were survivors, partly due to the survival instincts of the animals and, I am sure, partly due to the lack of road access and development in the area.

Karen Laws, the district biologist for Sudbury, was most informative when I called her after our trip. She estimates that the wapiti population is about 25 animals and that it has stabilized. The MNR does an aerial census of the herd once a year. Currently there is no management policy concerning the wapiti except to leave them alone. It is believed that the herd migrates between Burwash and King's Island, most likely spending the fall and winter around the island. I was disappointed to hear that the last bison was seen in 1983 and Karen thinks that they no longer roam the area. When asked when would be our best chance to hear the famous high-pitched bugling of the males as they challenge other males during the rut, Karen suggested mid-October to November. As you might have guessed we are already trying to schedule a fall trip back to the lower French as soon as possible.



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