

SNOWY Egret



EDITOR	·	PHILIP C. REPP
MANAGING EDITOR		RUTH C. ACKER
LITERARY EDITOR	·	JANICE DUKES
WOODNOTES EDITOR		JANE ROBERTSON
STAFF EDITORS	·	MICHAEL AYCOCK
		JUDY DUKES
	·	RICHARD L. ROWE
PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS		CRAIG EBERHARDT
	·	KEN PELL
REVIEWER		MICHAEL HOFFERBER
ECOLOGICAL CONSULTANT	·	MARION JACKSON
CALLIGRAPHER		JANET LORENCE
PUBLISHER	·	KARL BARNEBEY



OF ELK AND PONDS

by Bruce H. Ransom

I had been traversing a high talus slope deep in the remote Olympic Mountains one August, heading for a favorite hidden lake, when I stopped to catch my breath and survey the valley and white-topped ridge in front of me. Straight across stood a row of snow-capped, high-pointed peaks, and far below them lay the thick, green ribbon of the Quinault River. Between these, a thick mat of dark green rain forest extended up the sides of the glacially carved U-shaped Quinault Valley.

Returning to my side of the river, I noticed a small, muddy pond a mere quarter mile below. My eyes had caught a slight movement, and squinting into the sun, I tried to focus on its source. The pond was surrounded on three sides by a neat meadow dotted with a few large boulders. A field of smaller brown boulders nested near one shore, matched by another group lying in the pond itself. As my mind questioned the uniformity of these boulders, one of them moved.

They weren't boulders at all but a massive herd of Roosevelt elk, half of which was huddled in the pond while the other half lounged in the meadow. I'd seen elk seek ponds before—they provide refuge from the insects and high temperatures of summer—but I had never seen so many. And the herd's size was exaggerated by the small pond, about the area of a small house. A quick tally of those in the water came to a couple dozen. Dropping my pack, I slipped out my camera and twisted on a telephoto lens. Quickly but carefully descending the talus, I paused to take a few pictures before entering the forest at its base. Picking my way through the trees and brush in the general direction of the pond, I became more cautious as I eventually came within earshot of the elk.

I'd heard old-timers say that deer and elk won't become alarmed unless two of their five senses are triggered. Assuming I could avoid being felt or tasted, and being in thick Douglas fir with the wind in my face, my main concern was being heard. I carefully picked my way through the rocks, twigs, and branches littering the forest floor. Every little click and snap of debris seemed to shoot through the trees until I was sure the elk must have heard. But each time when I stopped to listen for the rumble of their stampeding flight, all I heard was the soft breeze drifting through the surrounding Douglas fir.

Even though I could not see the elk through the dense forest yet, as I neared the pond I could hear their light splashing of water and an occasional squawk or snort. Eventually I came upon a well-worn elk trail and was able to move more quickly, soon getting close enough to the meadow to glimpse the elk through thin breaks in the trees.

I was surprised to see how close I was to the herd, a mere camera's throw away. Slowly lifting my camera, I took a picture, but it was more of tree limbs and moss than of elk. I continued down the elk trail toward the meadow, the herd wading and lounging about, still unaware of my movements just inside the forest surrounding the pond. After what seemed like an eternity of cautious maneuvering, I came to the edge of the meadow. One more step would put me out into the open meadow, giving me a clear shot of the elk. Hiding behind the trunk of a large Douglas fir, I slowly and methodically removed my pack and placed it on the forest floor. Gripping the camera and planting my feet, I took a deep breath, then in one long step was out into the meadow.

Instantly two, then three heads sprang up and looked me in the eyes. *Click* went the shutter. A cow moved two steps toward the edge of the forest on the far side of the pond. As I took another step, I pushed the shutter again, and in the time it took to raise the camera to my eye, the half of the herd in the meadow had risen to follow the cow. I tripped the shutter another time as the elk reached full flight, and by then the half in the pond was frantically stumbling toward shore, water splashing everywhere. As this group climbed out of the water and began following the others, I pushed the shutter button a fourth time.

A slight bottleneck developed where the elk all tried to file into the narrow game

trail leading into the forest. But by the time I had thrown the film-wind lever a fifth time and looked through the view-finder for another shot, all sixty-odd elk were in the cover of the forest and well on their way down to the Quinault River. The whole thing took a few seconds.

I was disgusted with myself. This was as close as I'd ever been to a full herd of elk, and I didn't even get a decent shot. If I'd just been a little more patient. . . . The fading thunder of fleeing hooves convinced me of the futility of giving chase, so I retrieved my pack and dragged it over to one of the large boulders in the meadow surrounding the pond. Sitting with my back against the cold granite, I stared at the empty, muddy pond and chastised myself. After a sigh I took out a bag and began to eat a sandwich in stone silence.

Halfway through my Hershey bar dessert, strange, intermittent sounds began filtering toward me from the forest on the far side of the pond. They gradually grew louder, and soon I could distinguish two distinct vocalizations. The loudest was a short, high-pitched squawk, the other a much more resonant low snort. Before long the sounds were coming from just behind the line of trees, and I could hear hooves shuffling and stamping at the ground just out of view in the dense, dark rain forest. The elk had returned! Never before had elk returned to a spot from which I'd spooked them. Or maybe I had just not waited long enough. I could only guess that these elk liked the pond and grassy meadow so much that they'd hoped their intruder had left.

I dropped my chocolate bar, nervously fumbled for my camera, and steadied it on my knees in front of me, consciously measuring my breathing to minimize the noise that it made. The squawkers became more vocal and seemed to number about half a dozen, while the snorting came from about twice as many animals and sounded as if it were directed at the squawkers, to lecture them. And it sounded as though the whole herd was nervously milling around just out of my view in the forest.

In unison the snorters launched one quick volley, and the squawkers grew silent. But that silence was short-lived, and without warning five chest-high elk calves ambled nonchalantly out of the forest and into the muddy pond, defiantly squawking back at the trees. From the forest the others invisibly snorted their disapproval to one another. The calves waded into the water up to their bellies and stood there, contented in their blatant insubordination. While much unseen shuffling and fidgeting could be heard, eventually a lone cow crept out of the woods and was joined by another. And before long most of the herd's cows, calves, and yearlings were either in the pond or pacing along the shore nervously. Apparently feeling the way was adequately tested, the bulls finally edged out of the forest and into the meadow with the rest of the herd, their heads pitching and nostrils testing the air.

By this time I was furiously shooting pictures, so close to the herd that I was sure the elk could all hear each shutter trip, afraid that at any moment they would startle and rush back into the forest for good. Once my roll of film was

finished, I was free to just sit back against the boulder and watch the elk grazing and lying in the meadow and wading in the pond, totally unaware of my presence downwind.

Too soon, shadows struck me, and I realized I'd have to be on my way. Sneaking away without disturbing the herd was impossible, so this time I simply reached for my pack and stood up. As expected, the elk were alarmed by the movement but left their oasis more reluctantly than before, the stragglers patiently waiting their turn to file into the trail that led down to the valley of the Quinault.

