

# UP ELK CREEK



by Lee Lamb

What do elk, beavers, trout and people have in common?

Easy. We all need cool, clean water—and lots of it. Most elk country across the West is pretty darn dry. Much of the summer and fall, it's brown. But find a creek and you're in the Green Zone. Ahhh. It's cool there under the trees. Birds flitter among the willows. A trout gobbles a grasshopper with a loud slurp. Elk calves call to each other as they chow tasty, healthy salad. Suddenly, there's a loud smack on the water. Could it be a skydiving beaver?

## SKYDIVING BEAVERS

Have you ever seen a beaver fly? Eighty years ago, it really happened. Fur trappers had nearly wiped out beavers. But in the 1930s, the Soil Conservation Service put beavers in wooden crates, tied parachutes to the crates and dropped them out of airplanes. When they landed, the beavers gnawed their way to freedom and started doing what beavers do best—cutting down trees, building dams and making healthy streams.

## SLOW THE FLOW

Beaver dams make a creek flow slower and deeper, cooler and cleaner. What good is a slower creek? It causes way less erosion. That's when a creek chews up its bank, tearing out grasses and trees and sending tons of soil churning downstream. When a creek slows down behind a beaver dam, the soil that's being carried along settles to the bottom, leaving the water cleaner as it flows on.

## SWIMMING SNAKES & BROOMSTICKS

Healthy streams look like swimming snakes or a bunch of giant S's. Plants line the banks of these creeks. Animals, too. Sick creeks look like broomsticks—straight and mostly bare.

Plants need water. But did you know water needs plants, too? The sedges, willows and cottonwoods that grow beside creeks send their long, strong roots deep in the ground. Like thousands of tiny fingers, those roots catch and hold soil, making the banks strong. Their leaves shade out the sun.

All this keeps creeks, narrow, deep and cool when everything around is hot and dry. And that makes Green Zones great places for elk to feast, drink and relax on a summer day.

Can you help this beaver find its way into the lodge?



FINISH!

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

