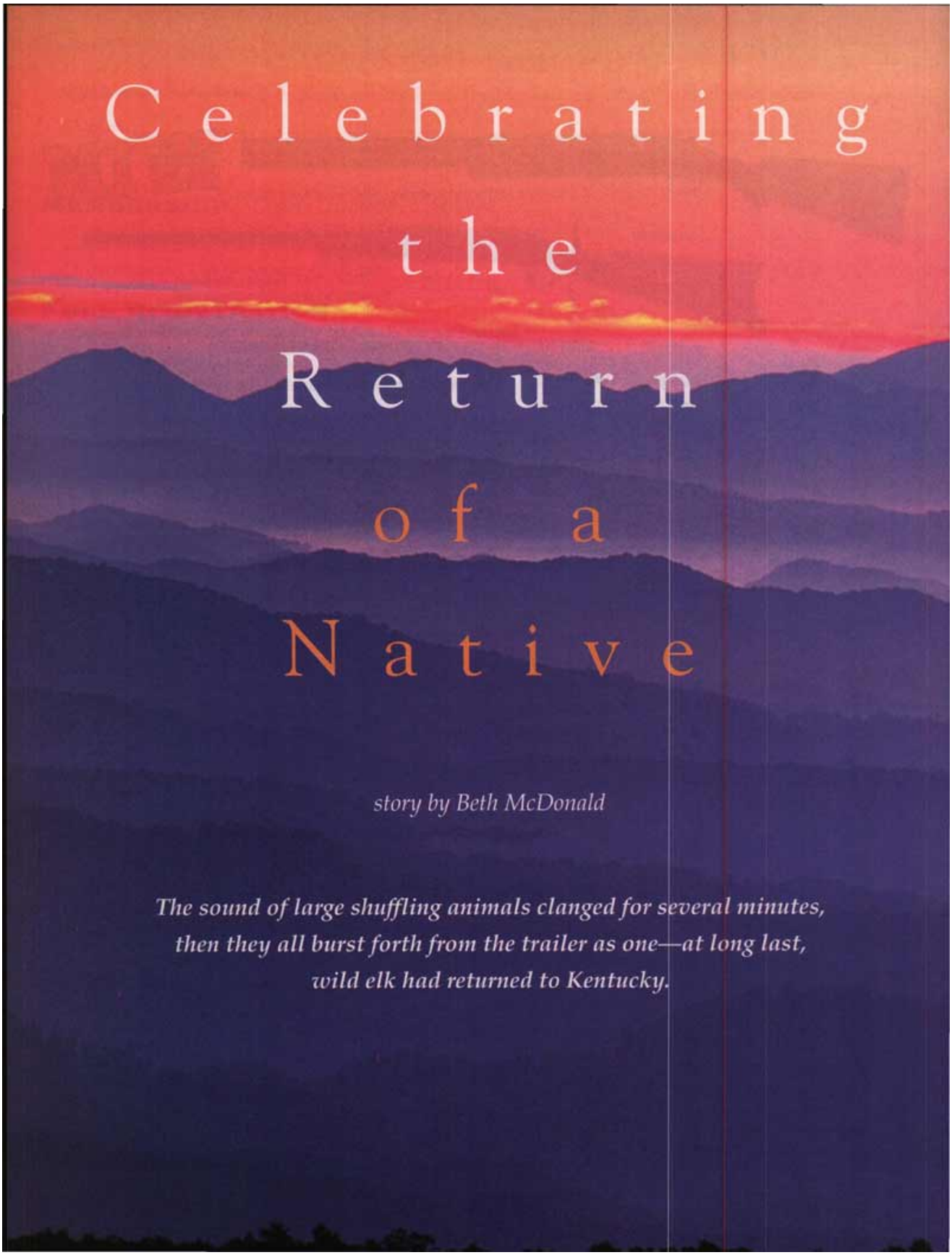
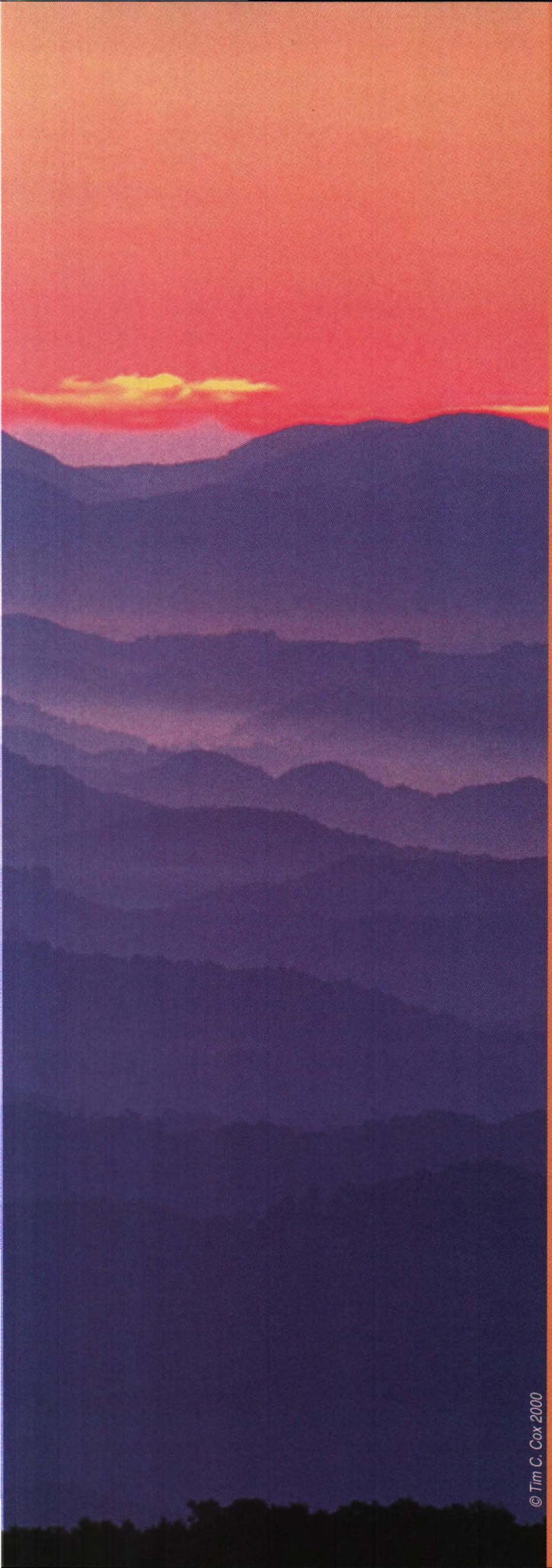


Celebrating the Return of a Native

story by Beth McDonald

The sound of large shuffling animals clanged for several minutes, then they all burst forth from the trailer as one—at long last, wild elk had returned to Kentucky.



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Conrad Rowe

On a cold, crisp day in December 1997, I watched the sun rise on a high bare hillside in eastern Kentucky. Far west of there, elk hunting seasons were coming to an end, but in Kentucky they were becoming a possibility for the first time in more than 150 years. There had been no elk, and therefore no elk hunting here since before the Civil War. But on this day the pioneers of a new elk herd would take their first steps on Kentucky soil. Soon, Kentuckians will see the majestic animals in the high, green hillsides of eastern Kentucky, and before long they may hunt free-ranging elk once more.

I was one of the first to arrive at the release site that winter day, but I would not be the only spectator. Others began showing up a few at a time just after sunrise. Then they came in caravans, in cars and buses, up that Kentucky hill in the middle of an active coal-mining site. A thousand people were expected to show up for the event. More than 4,500 came.

They gathered together behind makeshift rope barriers, staring down at two green trailers at the bottom of the hill. The trailers held a total of seven elk, captured in Kansas and hauled to Kentucky. They would become the first wild, free-ranging elk to roam Kentucky in seven generations.

No one knows for sure when the final elk disappeared from Kentucky, but records indicate it happened before 1850. Legend has it that John James Audubon shot the last Kentucky elk, but if so, he didn't commemorate the event on canvas. The

Dan Crank/U. of Kentucky

Jeff Larkin/U. of Kentucky

Kentucky's landscape is radically changed from Daniel Boone's day. Cities, suburbs and roads web the Bluegrass State. Farming, logging and mining have simplified forests, changed the shape of mountains and otherwise altered the land and its wildlife. Mining corporations own much of the land, digging deep into the earth along the contours of coal seams, changing slopes to cliffs and, sometimes, mountains to flat meadows. By law, though, coal companies must restore the land, planting trees, grasses and forbs after they've extracted the coal. Mining is not without controversy over its potential consequences to forests, streams and wildlife. But few dispute that white-tailed deer and wild turkey thrive on the mixture of forest and grass abundant on reclaimed mining sites.

renowned Kentucky artist and naturalist never painted an elk in a Kentucky setting.

What is known about Kentucky s elk is that they were Eastern elk, the subspecies native to the eastern half of North America. Long extinct, Eastern elk slipped away through habitat loss and unregulated hunting. Now elk of the Rocky Mountain subspecies are being brought to a portion of their cousins historic range. People are the reason that Eastern elk disappeared. Now money from hunter-conservationists is funding the return of elk to Kentucky, and cooperation between farmers, industry and the descendants of Kentucky settlers is making the project possible.

On that December morning, I sat behind a stack of hay bales in the photographers section, watching the crowd gather on the hill above. I could see the men and women who were responsible for organizing this event. They looked like kids on their first roller coaster ride excited but nervous.

There s a moment on a roller coaster when you ve reached the top, it s way too late to get off and you come almost to a complete stop before plunging down the first hill. The same feeling was in the air when four men from the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources walked down the hill to the trailers. Just behind them came Governor Paul Patton. Then the governor moved to the front of the pack and slid the trailer gate open. When he did, the dull sound of large hooves against metal arose from the trailer. Nothing happened.

The sound of large shuffling animals clanged for several minutes, then they all burst forth at once. Five cows and calves jumped out the back of the trailer and ran up a hill opposite the crowd. As if on cue, they stopped and turned for a long pause to look at a sea of people looking at them.

The second trailer was not so easy to empty. It held two mature bull elk. The first one came out after 20 minutes of coaxing. The second elk didn t emerge for an hour, after most of the crowd had left.

It was frantic, said Roy Grimes, director of wildlife for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources.

photos © Tim C. Cox 2000

"I was worried about the crowd of people, how the elk would react; would there be anything for them to see? When those elk came off the truck I was overjoyed. Then media folks bombarded me. It was really neat to see the public interest in this project."

That first release is now two years in the past, but the enthusiasm has not faded. No other elk have come to Kentucky from Kansas, but nearly 300 have arrived from Utah, with help from a crew of seasoned biologists from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

"I still run into people who tell me they were at that first release," says John Phillips, the state wildlife biologist who wrote the Kentucky elk proposal. Phillips is retired now but continues to keep an eye on the project.

"It was a pleasure to take the proposal before the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Commission," Phillips says. "I knew that it was well thought out and that a lot of the members
of the commission supported it. I knew that we had done our homework and had a good plan."

When Phillips drafted his free-ranging elk proposal, he drew on the research and experience of others as well as his own experience in bringing a captive elk herd to Kentucky's Land Between the Lakes recreation area.

"Once we knew what we had to do to bring elk back to Kentucky, it was really exciting," Phillips says. "We found a big chunk of forest away from crops in eastern Kentucky. We identified an area bigger than

On December 17, 1997, Governor Paul Patton ceremoniously unlatched two trailers used to haul seven elk from Kansas to the Bluegrass State, releasing the first wild, free-ranging elk to roam southeast Kentucky in more than 150 years. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources expected 1,000 people to attend the historic event; more than 4,500 showed up—indicative of the overwhelming public support for the state's elk reintroduction effort.

Yellowstone where we would release the elk.

"Ours is a full-scale release project with the intent to fill a large habitat," says Phillips. "It is ambitious, but already a lot of the fears people had going into the project, like crop damage and poaching, aren't panning out because we picked the right spot and because we have the people's support."

The first Kentucky elk release took place in a rugged section of southeastern Kentucky on the Breathitt-Perry county line. The area was known for coal mining. The actual release site, at the 16,000-acre Cyprus Amax Wildlife Management Area, is owned by Addington Enterprises Incorporated, one of the largest coal companies in the nation.

Over the years, mountaintop removal and strip mining left flat expanses and bare hillsides. In these changed landscapes, the state and Addington Enterprises saw an opportunity to create wildlife habitat. Where coal deposits once lay, there are now expanses of open grasslands surrounded by forest, and mining pits have been transformed into ponds. This is the heart of the terrain that became the first release site for the elk of Kentucky.

The Kentucky elk project has been funded mostly by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, which has contributed more than half a million dollars and pledged another $400,000. Tom Baker, now a member of the Elk Foundation's board of directors, was the Foundation's Kentucky state chairman when the elk reintroduction project was first proposed. He was instrumental in obtaining the necessary funding and support to make the project happen.

"It's easy to get people involved with a project like this," says Baker, who is also now a commissioner for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. "Elk are magnificent. People are just in awe

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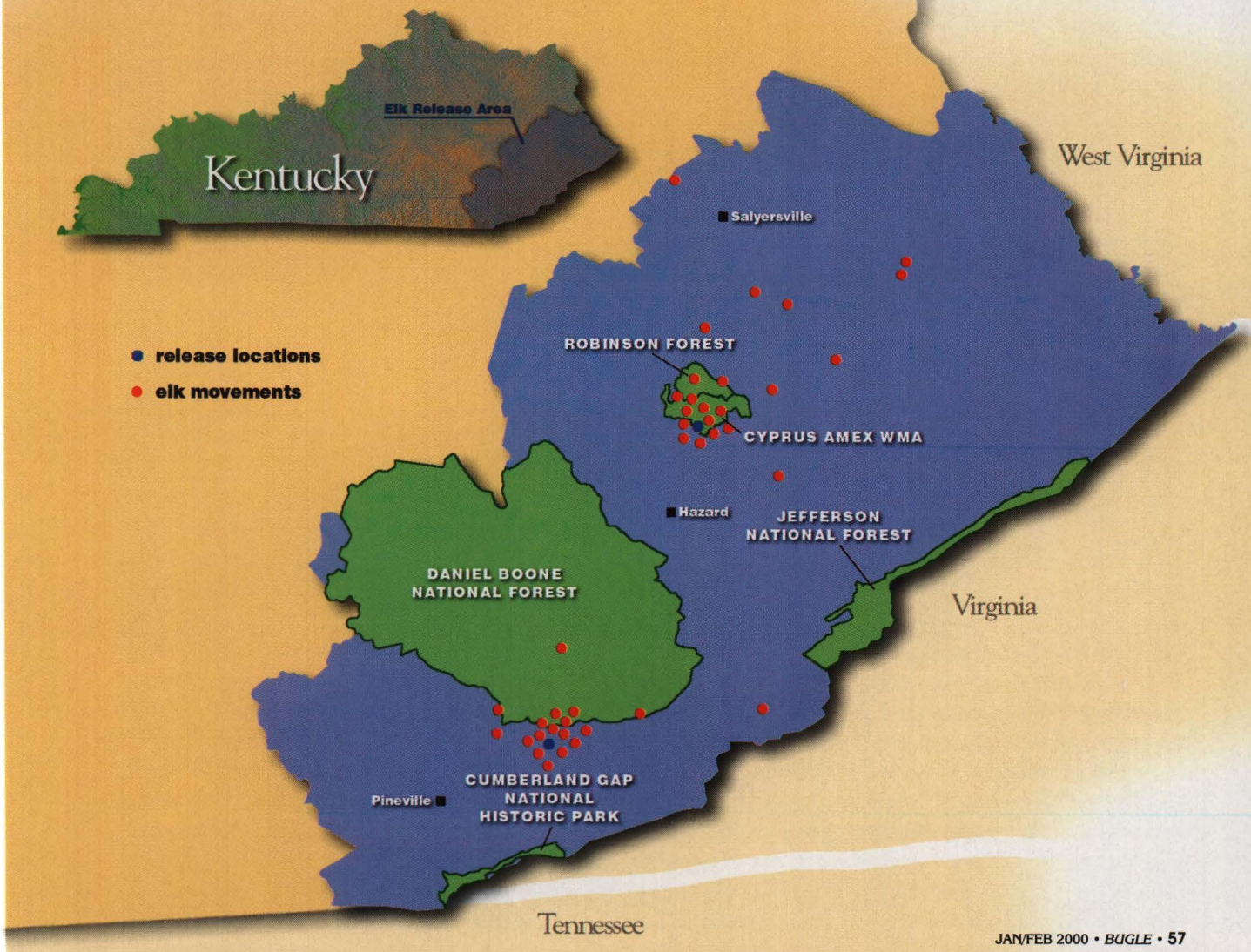


of such a grand animal, especially if they are hunters or outdoorsmen.

A passion for nature, wild animals and hunting gave rise to the dream of bringing elk back to Kentucky. A lot of hard work brought the vision to fruition.

Elk are a native of Kentucky, says Baker. We are restoring a part of the ecosystem to the way it was 150 years ago, before elk and bison disappeared. We re doing a good thing for the ecosystem and for our kids by bringing elk back.

When Kentucky first proposed an elk reintroduction, I wondered if it would work. I questioned if the idea was sound. But when I saw that first elk step onto Kentucky soil, the doubts were gone and excitement had taken over. Kentucky would be changed forever. I felt that I had regained a piece of the past.

Since that first release, I have developed my own passion for the return and survival of elk in Kentucky. I ve helped trap and transport elk. I ve spent hot Kentucky

Jeff Larkin/U. of Kentucky

Kevin Swank

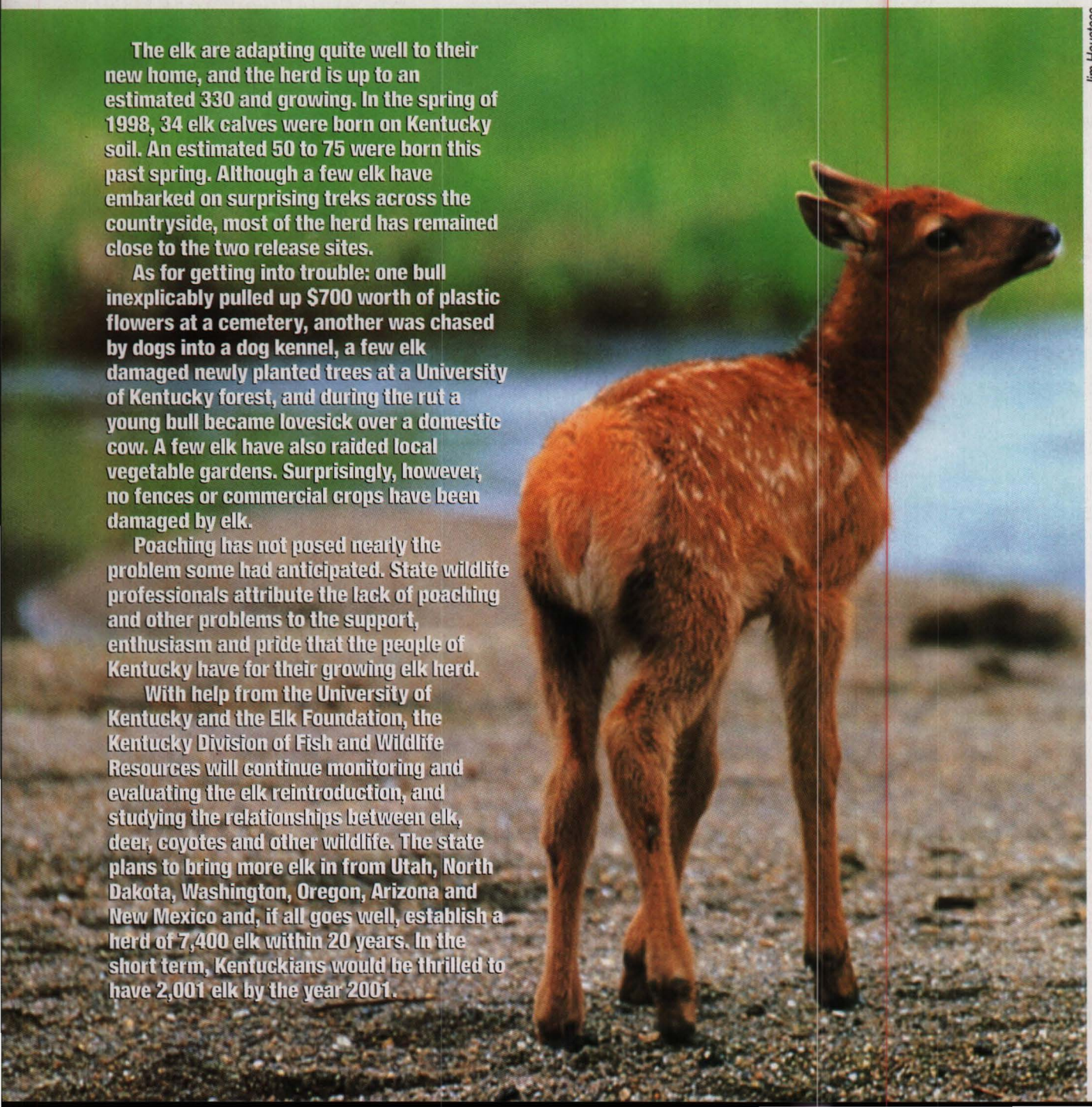
It's no simple matter moving elk 1,900 miles from Utah to Kentucky. After capturing the animals, biologists ran them through a battery of tests for blue tongue, brucellosis, tuberculosis, Johne's disease, anaplasmosis and vesicular stomatitis. Then they fitted each elk with a radio collar, loaded them on cattle trucks, and headed south by southeast.

The first 167 elk were released in 1998. Unfortunately, 43 of them died within the first eight weeks. Some were stressed or injured during capture and testing, seven were hit by vehicles, two were killed by poachers and two died from a parasite commonly known as brain worm. A tough winter in Utah, before the elk were moved, most likely weakened the animals and made them more susceptible to stress and injury. The next winter proved milder, and biologists streamlined their capture and handling techniques and redesigned the trucks to better haul elk. Of the 143 elk captured in Utah and released in Kentucky in 1999, only three died within the first five months.

summer days following pregnant cows, trying to determine when they will drop their calves, then trying to get radio collars on them before they could get up and move away. When you experience elk in the wild, you realize their majesty. I have a lot of experience with, and fondness for, deer. Yet to me, elk seem more independent, more confident than deer. More alluring.

When that first drawing for elk hunting tags comes up, my name will be in there. And on the day I get to hunt elk in my home state, I will think back to another day in the winter of 1997, when on a hillside in eastern Kentucky seven wild elk helped make history.

Beth McDonald is a writer for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. Her work with the elk restoration effort has taken her to Utah, Virginia and all over the hills and hollows of southeastern Kentucky.



Jim Heustess

The elk are adapting quite well to their new home, and the herd is up to an estimated 330 and growing. In the spring of 1998, 34 elk calves were born on Kentucky soil. An estimated 50 to 75 were born this past spring. Although a few elk have embarked on surprising treks across the countryside, most of the herd has remained close to the two release sites.

As for getting into trouble: one bull inexplicably pulled up $700 worth of plastic flowers at a cemetery, another was chased by dogs into a dog kennel, a few elk damaged newly planted trees at a University of Kentucky forest, and during the rut a young bull became lovesick over a domestic cow. A few elk have also raided local vegetable gardens. Surprisingly, however, no fences or commercial crops have been damaged by elk.

Poaching has not posed nearly the problem some had anticipated. State wildlife professionals attribute the lack of poaching and other problems to the support, enthusiasm and pride that the people of Kentucky have for their growing elk herd.

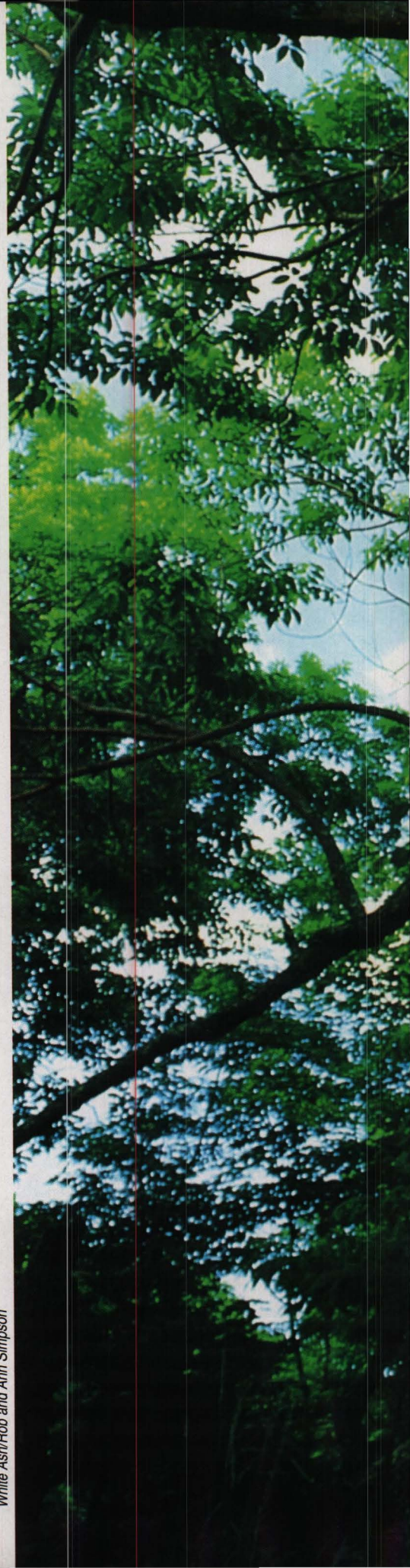
With help from the University of Kentucky and the Elk Foundation, the Kentucky Division of Fish and Wildlife Resources will continue monitoring and evaluating the elk reintroduction, and studying the relationships between elk, deer, coyotes and other wildlife. The state plans to bring more elk in from Utah, North Dakota, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and New Mexico and, if all goes well, establish a herd of 7,400 elk within 20 years. In the short term, Kentuckians would be thrilled to have 2,001 elk by the year 2001.

Cave Salamander/Rob and Ann Simpson

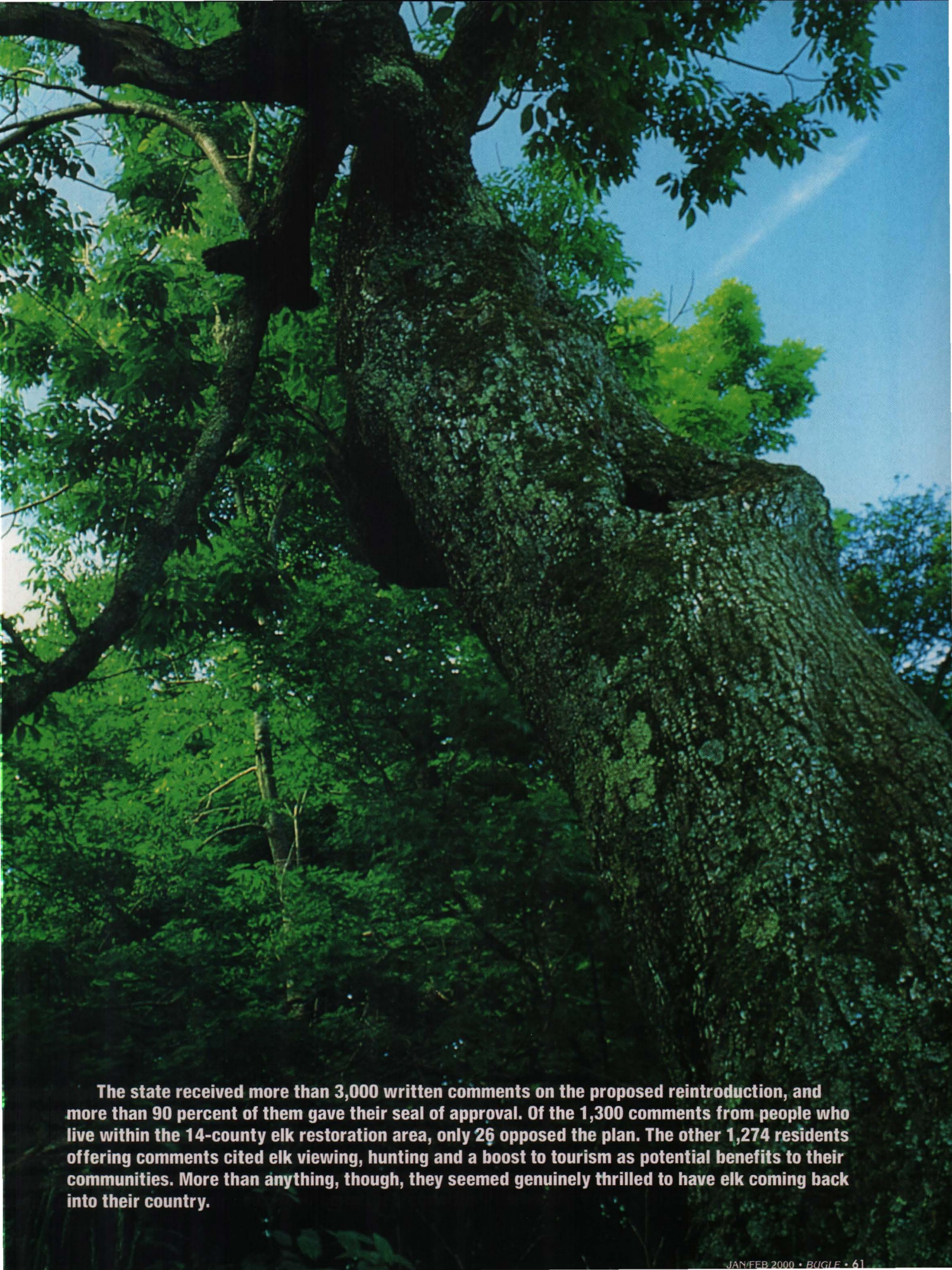
Bloodroot/Rob and Ann Simpson

The location for Kentucky's elk restoration efforts was not chosen randomly, nor did the decision to return elk come lightly—the project was conceived, born and grown through cooperation, research and public input. In the end, the 14 counties in the southeast corner of the state stood clear as the best home for a herd that may ultimately rival the size of some of the West's "big herds." At 2.6 million acres, the "elk restoration zone" is more than twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. Of course, the zone also encompasses roads, towns and mines, but 93 percent of this rugged, mountainous land is what ecologists call a "mixed mesophytic forest." That translates into the wonderfully rich mix of deciduous trees that define Appalachia: oak, basswood, buckeye, ash, beech, poplar, maple and a hundred or so other hardwoods.

Walk through these forests and you may see blood root and wood lettuce, maidenhair fern and wild ginger, spicebush and lichens, salamanders and spiders, grouse and deer . . . the most biologically diverse temperate woodland in the world. And now, of course, if you're lucky, you'll see elk, back from their long absence.



White Ash/Rob and Ann Simpson



The state received more than 3,000 written comments on the proposed reintroduction, and more than 90 percent of them gave their seal of approval. Of the 1,300 comments from people who live within the 14-county elk restoration area, only 26 opposed the plan. The other 1,274 residents offering comments cited elk viewing, hunting and a boost to tourism as potential benefits to their communities. More than anything, though, they seemed genuinely thrilled to have elk coming back into their country.

Partners and Volunteers: Kentucky s Key to Success

To know Thomas Baker's passion, simply check out the first part of his e-mail address: kyelkman. "Ky," of course, stands for Kentucky, but could just as easily mean "key," since Baker is one of the key players in the return of elk to the Bluegrass State. When Doug Hensley, a petroleum broker who serves on the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources Commission, first conceived the idea back in 1995, Elk Foundation Regional Director Ron White and then State Chairman Baker formed an elk project committee to build support and raise funds.

"Tom's a real shaker and mover," White says. "He has been instrumental in raising the necessary funding and support, and has been a spark plug on that committee."

But Baker, a commercial real estate executive, is quick to give credit to another "shaker and mover," John Tate, regional land manager for Addington Enterprises. Tate initiated the land agreements that allowed for the release of elk on privately owned mining lands, and he was one of the first to volunteer for the elk committee.

The project committee epitomizes what can be achieved when a diverse group of dedicated individuals work together for a common cause. In addition to Baker, Hensley and Tate, the committee includes: Tom Bennett, commissioner of Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources; Wink Irvin, an insurance executive; Jim Lindsey, an advertising and public relations executive; Don Muller, a retired insurance executive; Paul Van Booven, deputy legal council for the University of Kentucky, Roy Grimes, director of wildlife for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, and Elk Foundation Eastern Regional Development Director Gary West.

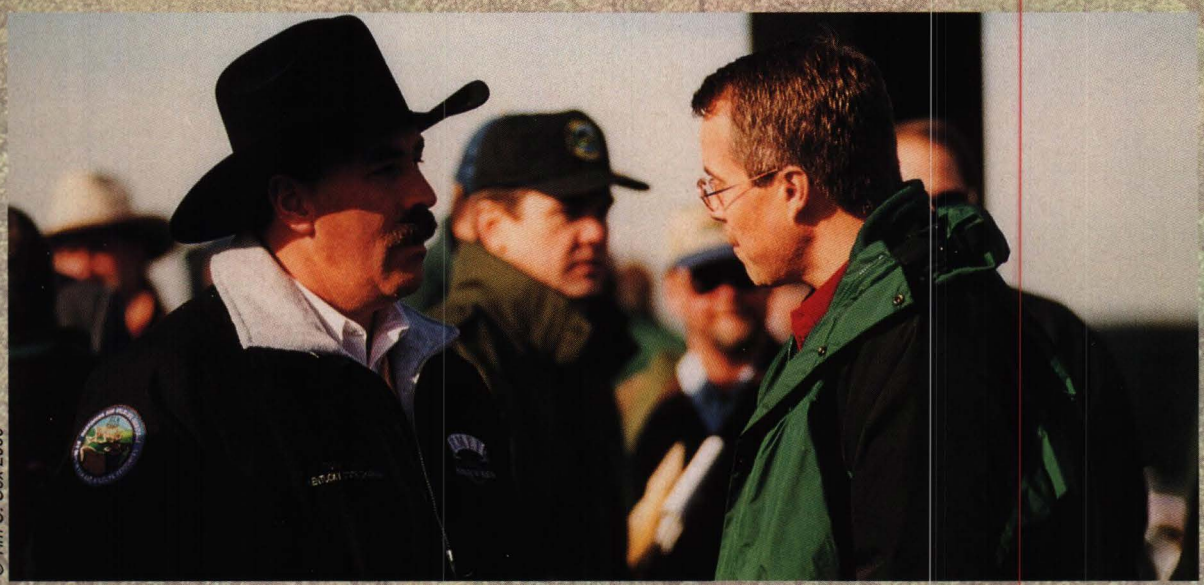
Hensley won the support of the other nine members of the state game commission, and helped organize public meetings to see if state citizens supported the concept. Like a herd of wild elk spooked from a timbered ridge, the project quickly gained seemingly unstoppable momentum.

"The idea started off as something that really seemed far-fetched," Hensley says. "But once we got people to support the concept, and when we got partners involved, it all started coming together."

Key partners in the project include the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, Kentucky Coal Marketing and Export Council, University of Kentucky, Addington Enterprises Incorporated, Cyprus-Amax Coal Corporation and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

In addition, hundreds of Elk Foundation volunteers, local chapters and nearly 130 Habitat Partners have contributed time and money to make the project happen. Thus far, these partners and volunteers have raised a total of $515,000 for the Kentucky Elk Project, and hope to raise an additional $480,000 in the next two years. Unfortunately, it's not possible to list everyone in such limited space. Other major contributors making the project possible include the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels.

If you would like to contribute to the reintroduction of elk to Kentucky, please contact Elk Foundation Regional Development Director Gary West at (270) 924-3226. Or, call the Elk Foundation at 1-800-Call Elk (1-800-225-5355), Ext. 521.



Dave Maehr/U. of Kentucky

Tom Baker (left), with Tom Bennett (center), and Kevin Crutchfield of Addington Enterprises Inc.