



Elk Neighbors

I was living in a 144-square-foot treehouse with my family the first time I encountered a herd of elk.

Straightening the quilt on one of the cots, I glimpsed movement through a window and rushed—barefoot—to the narrow deck to see what it was: a herd of 200 elk galloping along each rise and dip of the valley below the treehouse.

The vibration of their hoofbeats flowed across the land, up through my feet and, eventually, my heartbeat synchronized with it. It was the loudest quiet sound I'd ever heard.

Their long legs brushed and crushed the foliage as they ran, activating a perfume of mint, grass, wind, sage, soil, and fir needles overlaid with the scent of elk, which is not unlike that of a horse, though wilder and deeper.

Treehouse living was simply a stopgap in housing for my family as we built our modest home on the same land. But it ended up being much more.

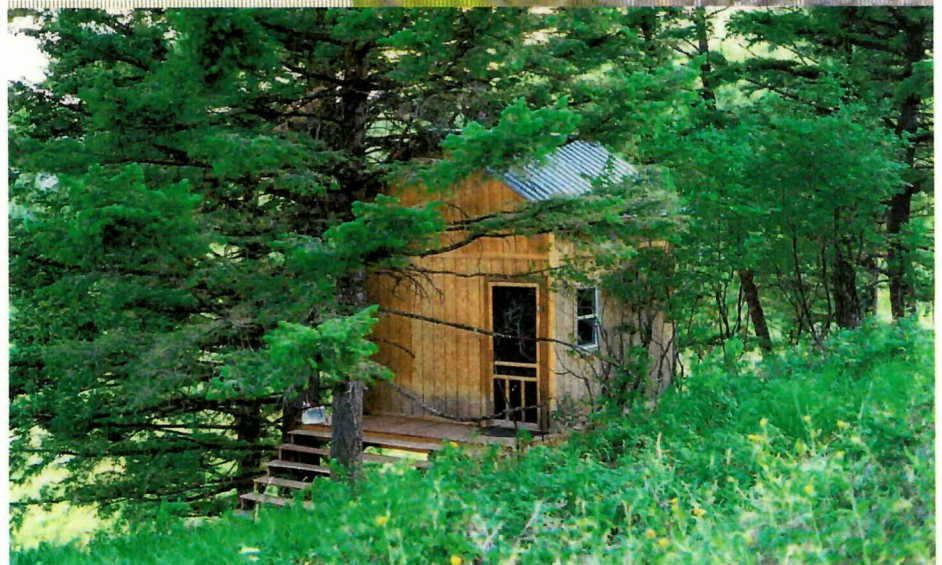
Despite living in an elevated treehouse, I'd never felt more connected with the earth. Every day there was a new flower to study. A bird family made a nest in the eaves. A mini-museum of rocks, shells, sticks, bark, lichen, bones, and plants sprang up on the stairs. Fairy houses magically appeared around trees whose trunks were surrounded with lush

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KELSI TURNER

Above: Our elk neighbors, bedding down in the meadow during an early snow.

Right: We quickly discovered that along with elk, moose, bears and so many different kinds of birds, that fairies also were our neighbors.

Below: Hawk House, nestled in the trees.



moss. Squirrels explored the Lego houses my kids built on the deck.

But it was the elk herd that gave me something majestic to set my sights upon—much needed long-term perspective when my days were filled with hauling water, preparing nourishing meals with only a cooler and camp stove, dashing into town for supplies from the hardware store, cleaning up after workers.

One morning, paralyzed by the day's to-do list, hot coffee in hand, I sat on the treehouse steps, flipping through one of my old journals when I found a handout about Zuni fetishes—small carvings made primarily from stone by the Zuni people—that I'd saved after visiting historical sites in the Southwest. According to the page, the elk teaches that pacing yourself will increase your stamina. I sat quietly with this wisdom.

From our perch in the treehouse, we watched the elk like some people watch television. Through binoculars we observed the elk as they moved through the distant aspen stands, visited the creek, moving closer to us as they slowly grazed their way uphill. A brief rainstorm would make it through the valley most afternoons, and the grasses and forbs grew to a rich blanket of emerald. The cows and calves fed on the abundant asters, daisies, dandelions, elk thistle, and grasses.

As the elk climbed, they'd eventually reach shelter in the mature Douglas-fir forest just to the east of our treehouse—entire herds disappearing into its deep, protective shadows. The mosaic of grasslands and forests seemed well-suited to provide what the elk herd needed most: food and shelter.

This habitat was well-suited for my family as well. Our lives were flensed to the essentials: food, shelter, sleep, love. And beauty.

In deep summer, I hiked the ridge to the west to see the wildflowers. I was engrossed in observing the new-to-me flowers when two large, dark animals exploded into my field of vision. I dropped to the ground, heart thudding like a bass drum. When I looked up, two Golden Eagles—with wingspans of more than six feet—were above me. I quickly abandoned my hike. Weeks later, I returned to the spot and discovered the picked-clean carcass of an elk calf.

Our lives and the lives of the elk became more interwoven as the days progressed.

At supper one evening, we all sat on the deck stairs, silver camp plates balanced on our knees. Mid-bite, my daughter spotted a group of six bachelor bulls in the gloaming, alert, belly-deep in grasses. We could sense their excitement, their energy. The seasons were shifting.

When the rut started that autumn, I kept the windows of the treehouse open so we could listen to the bulls' bugles ringing out. We had never heard anything so sonorous, urgent. Lying in our cots in the dark, I teased my kids that it wasn't elk living in our small valley of the Gallatin Mountains, it was a herd of elephants.

One day, we watched, rapt—two enormous bull elk, antlers locked, battling for control of a harem of females. Like the calls of the migrating Canada Geese in my childhood, the elk calls helped my body understand that autumn had arrived.

When an early autumn snowfall left 10 inches on the ground, the elk nestled in the fluffy snow on the south-facing slope amidst the stand of Douglas-fir trees where our treehouse stood. In the morning, we tromped through the snow, noting the oval-shaped depressions in the ground. We marked it as our first elk slumber party.

Two days before the permanent winter snow fell, we moved into our new home. After a week of steady unpacking, it dawned on me that the valley was quiet. The elk were absent. They had migrated downslope—across steep hillsides, through raging rivers, over rough terrain—to the valley grasslands where they wintered to seek shelter and new sources of food and to escape the deep, immobilizing snow of higher elevations.

That winter, my family had winding conversations about living in tandem with the elk. We considered what living in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem means and what responsibilities come with that gift. We studied maps created by Montana State University and learned that the land where we live was historically considered common hunting ground by Native American tribes. This knowledge helped us better



Top: The mini-museum's exhibit changed daily.

Above: One of the best parts of living in Hawk House was our epic pillow talk sessions. The kids slept in the loft, just above the cots.

understand our place in a deep, abiding culture of stewardship.

Beeswax candles glowing, hot peppermint tea in hand, my family made plans. We talked about what modern stewardship looks like. We sketched plans to grow native plants where the soil surrounding our home had been disturbed by heavy machinery. We reached out to experts to find ways to make existing fencing in our area more wildlife-friendly. We read books. We asked questions. We decided not to raise fences, not to spray chemicals, not to get a dog.

And then early summer arrived and with it the heavily pregnant cows. Slowly, we began to recognize some individuals in the herd. We watched, through binoculars, as a cow elk gave birth. When the herd made their first run down the ridge and into the valley, we raised our arms over our heads in wonder and gratitude and welcomed them home. 🦋

—*Kelsi Turner is a writer and visual artist whose work centers on connection to and stewardship of place. Find her at kelsiturner.com and kelsiturnerwrites@gmail.com.*