

Where are the Elk?

By Annemarie Eveland

When I first came to live in Pine, a small mountain village in the north central mountains of Arizona, I was pretty much a city slicker. I locked my doors, dressed warmer than needed and was careful about talking to strangers who later became dear friends. I also thought I needed to get a cultural city fix every now and then since there “wasn’t much to do.”

I also held a passionate search for wildlife, especially elk. I had seen the deer and my heart leaped upward but the lure of seeing a massive four-legged furry beast with antlers extending into the sky was all too exciting.

I would ask, “Where are the elk? How can I see them?” An amusing smile crossed the local faces. No matter where they pointed me, the elk did not arrive. Finally, it was explained to me that elk have their own paths, places and nocturnal times. They decide to come around when they want to. Elk can’t be ordered up like a cup of Starbucks in the city.

Glumly, I resigned myself to the fact that I would be one who would have to look at photos or listen to other stories from those more fortunate to see the big guys.

One day, when I came out of our little town market and went to get into my car, I saw a street sign along Hwy. 87 that intrigued me. It read “Cemetery” Road. I was intrigued by the odd spelling of the word cemetery, certainly different than my Webster’s Dictionary. I am not ghoulish by any means but I thought maybe it was named in the early days of pioneer history of Pine when not everyone could get a formal education. I decided to investigate.

I headed up the dirt road which, of course, ended at the village cemetery. It was late afternoon and sun filtered through the trees, casting magical looking shadows. I stopped my vehicle at the gate entrance, opened my car door and stepped out.

I thought I saw distance statues of ...yes, elk! Then I mused, “What a community! These folks like the elk so much they made elk statues for grave markers in their cemeteries.” Under my breath, I whispered, “Hooray! These are *my* kind of people!”

Suddenly, one of the large statues moved. Then I saw four statues ...all moving. These were the *real* elk with five and six pronged antlers, which later I came to properly call them “racks.” My heart raced excitedly. Leaning on the door frame of my vehicle, I wondered how I could get closer to them. I really needed to see them *much* closer. I didn’t want to scare them. Not that these solid massive mammals couldn’t handle themselves against a small object such as myself.

Then I noticed that one was always on “guard,” watching while the others munched tender green morsels on the ground. Then, by some unspoken signal, the guard would put his head down to graze and one of the others would take the watch. As this cooperative watch continued, I devised my own plan.

Each time their “shift happened,” with my arms stiffly outstretched from my sides and my fingers spread wide, I took one large step forward and stopped immediately as the guard’s head came up. I stood still, silently repeating in my head, “I am a tree. I am a tree. I am a tree.”

Each time they shifted, I stepped one long step forward. Each time they stopped, I stopped, ever thinking “I am a tree.” This process continued until I was more than half way across the cemetery, getting closer and closer to my ultimate goal...to see the elk close up.

Then an unsettling thought crossed my mind, “What if they came running towards me? What if I got trampled in their exiting?” There wasn’t really anything to hide behind. I felt a rise of fear. Even though I didn’t move a muscle, the instant I had this thought, all the elk heads jerked up and stared straight ahead in my direction. I took a tiny breath inward and forced myself to relax. I repeated in my head, “I am a tree. I am a tree. I am a tree.”

All four elk then went back to grazing, and I to my one-tree-step-at-a-time, getting closer to them, one secret step at a time. Finally, I stopped and just watched them graze. Minutes ticked by and then they turned, one by one, and as if by silent agreement, gracefully leaped over the fence and disappeared into the forest.

My own tree limbs shivered a bit as I saw how easily they could leap over the high fence from a standing still position. What magnificently powerful animals, I thought. What a memorable visit to a cemetery. And I am still standing.

Now I tell people, if you are looking for the elk, you might try looking for them in the late afternoon at the Pine cemetery. You might see the elk there, or you might see me. I am the tree.