



Our Illustrious Elk Herd

By Paul Beachnau

It was a normal fall morning last week when I, with my trusty companion and best pal MAC (arguably the most relaxed golden retriever in town), rounded the corner heading north on the Aspen Park trail system toward the Rotary Pavilion. As we came out into the open of the trail, the loudest, most blood curdling sound I have ever heard echoed throughout the park. Without changing my stride, I glanced over into the enclosed fence area to witness the largest bull elk standing once again at attention and bugling with all his might to the other 10 enormous bull elk. *Just another fall morning at Aspen Park*, I thought to myself.

Wait a minute, I pondered, *who gets to routinely witness such an amazing act of nature while taking a morning stroll, basically within the city limits of Gaylord?* If you live here or visit Gaylord and the surrounding area, however, it is quite a common occurrence.

In the late 1980's, the City of Gaylord by gift and good fortune was the recipient of a small but vibrant herd of elk that they have lovingly cared for within the property adjacent to the public works garage. The 80-acre enclosed area with open fields and small forest is the perfect habitat for the herd. The site offers multiple viewing opportunities including Aspen Park and the area adjacent to the BPOE Elks Lodge, arguably the only Elks Lodge in the world with their own elk herd.

The herd of approximately 40 elk, maintained with pride by our City Department of Public Works staff and supported with equal enthusiasm by our City Council and Mayor, is part of a much larger story, and one that we should all be proud of here in Michigan.

Elk were native to Michigan in the late 1800's. However, during the tumultuous and unregulated assault on our natural resources at the time, the elk in Michigan became extinct. In 1918, a few forward-looking environmental giants in Michigan reintroduced a small herd of elk, delivered via train from Colorado to Michigan, in an area that is now Pigeon River Country State Forest. Through sound natural resources management with practices geared specifically for wildlife habitat, the herd has flourished over the years and now numbers in the range of 1,200 to 1,500 healthy and thriving elk.

Why is this important? In a recent traveler survey for those visiting the Gaylord area, over 40% indicated that viewing elk or the potential to view elk was important to their trip. It is something unique to our area, and amazingly, many Michiganders do not realize Northern Michigan contains one of the largest free-ranging elk herds east of the Mississippi River. More importantly, by caring for our resources and managing them correctly, we can all have something unique to enjoy.