Chapter One
From Kenya to Canada

Three weeks after completing an elephant project in Rwanda, I was winging my way north via England, a one-day visit to Germany, and then west to Canada. It was neither a joy ride nor a holiday. My weekly call home from the only available public phone in Kigali's grimy post office had delivered a wonderful surprise. On the party line to Kenya and our home in Nanyuki, my doctor-wife, Jo, told me that she had received a call from Dr. Ole Nielsen, Dean of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. She said he had offered me a position at the university on the faculty as a wildlife vet.

When I'd paid for the call, I used the counter, where I was separated from the clerk by a heavy iron grill, to print a telegram on the faded yellow paper used in 1975. My message explained the situation and caused some amusement at the other end. It was the message app of those years:

UNDERSTAND JOB OFFER SASKATOON STOP ON SAFARI RWANDA TRANSLOCATING ELEPHANTS STOP WILL MAKE CONTACT ASAP ON RETURN TO KENYA STOP.[1]

I handed over some francs to pay for each word, including the three STOPs.

Back home, I called Dr. Nielsen and asked if I might visit because I knew almost nothing about Canada and wanted to learn more about the job. In our atlas, neither the province nor Saskatoon were shown. He agreed to cover the cost of the trip, and we set up a visit for the first week of May.

As we left the airport building, I was astonished to see some flakes of snow landing on the tarmac. I had not expected the 20-plus degrees of Nanyuki, but minus 3°C (27°F) was a surprise. Dr. Nielsen had brought a well-insulated coat that I learned was called a parka. Outdoors, I wore it every day until I left for home. It didn't take long to learn that long-term records revealed that it had, at one time or another, snowed in every month in the city.

Dr. Nielsen explained that my duties would involve the medical care of the city's small Forestry Farm Zoo and free-ranging wildlife work. Even though I struggled with jet lag, a visit to the zoo was a priority. There, I met the red-haired foreman, Brent Pendleton, a couple of inches shorter than my 6 feet. We walked around to see the animals, and he told me about the management problems. The only visit by any vet had been to dart a distressed young bear to rescue it from the top of a pole where it had clung for a full day.

The moment we passed through the gate from the car park, the first creature to greet us was a magnificent peacock, his bright blue neck and head glistening in the morning sunlight, his gorgeous tail raised, showing dozens of bronze circles surrounding iridescent green rings with dark blue centres. He shook it, let out a piercing squawk, and strutted in front of us, stating in his own language, "Aren't I beautiful? This is my patch, and don't you forget it."

Several ducks were swimming in a pond near the gate. Among them, small teals and mallards I knew well from school days in England and Scotland, the drakes' green heads glistening in the sunlight, made them easy to identify. Others with dark red heads were new to me. Within 15 yards of the water, it came as a nasty shock when we stopped to look at a pair of lions in a horrible six-sided pen, no more than 40 feet across, surrounded by page wire reaching up about 20 feet. The 'house' (a generous term) was a length of concrete culvert with a steel trap door fixed at each end. What a huge contrast to the scenes I

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[1] Punctuation in cables was not an option. STOP indicates the end of a sentence

knew so well from trips to the Serengeti and other game parks in Africa. I chose not to comment rather than set off on the wrong foot.

After that disturbing sight, we went on past pens with other species I'd never seen or even heard of. Standing on top of a big pile of rocks in the middle of the first one was a big male sheep, its heavy horns curved a full circle at the side of his head. It was a Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep. Their gray coats were of hair, not wool, but the bighorn part of the name was a perfect fit.

One magnificent, gentle giant with a sleek, pale russet coat and a cream-coloured circular patch about 3 feet in diameter at the rear end, a deer of some kind, caught my eye. His antlers, covered in a soft-looking chestnut-coloured material that looked a bit like velvet, the tips rounded, stood about 2 feet above his head. Grazing nearby were four females, with them two small calves with whitish spots dotted on their coats and dainty legs that looked too long for their skinny bodies. Two of the cows had rounded bellies, obviously very much pregnant, were near term.

"That male looks like an overgrown version of a Red Deer stag, maybe a tad more than double in size. I saw lots of them in the Highlands during my university days in Glasgow. The hinds are at least twice the size of the Scottish ones."

"It's an elk," Brent replied. "We call them bulls, not stags. The females are cows, not hinds."

A metal plaque attached to the fence, too small to be read at more than 3 feet, had an engraved image of a bull elk and a few words on four lines about its geographic range in Canada. It didn't help much, certainly not enough to satisfy me.

After that interesting encounter, we carried on around the zoo to see the other members of the collection. Opposite the elk, across the path, were two reindeer. Brent corrected me.

"They're caribou," he said.

Then, after a pause, he let me off the hook and told me reindeer and caribou are one and the same thing, known as caribou in North America.[2]

Next to them, in adjacent pens, were two species of deer I'd not heard of. They were white-tailed deer,[3] whitetails, as Brent called them, and mule deer, both native to the province. Their coats were a similar grey colour.

In the closest pen to us were the whitetails. The buck stood just under 3 feet at the shoulder, shy of 6 feet from nose to tail, the females smaller. Their tails were almost 12 inches long and had a just visible white patch on the underside. They bounded away from the fence, raising their tails, revealing bright white undersides, waving like a flag, which at once explained the name. I later learned that, if alarmed, they bound in graceful arcs, and the flagging is a pronounced warning signal for any other deer in the area. No wonder they are called whitetails.

The mule deer were a bit bigger with a stockier body shape. The ears were almost twice as large as the whitetail's. The small patch of white above the tails was only half as long as their neighbour's, with a black tuft at the end.

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[2] See *Reindeer Reflections: Lessons from an Ancient Culture.* Rocky Mountain Books. 2002

[3] White-tailed deer is the full name of the species *Odocoileus virginianus.* Whitetail or whitetails are often used. Those are the ones I've used throughout.

The short developing antlers of both species, only a few inches long, looked soft and, like the elk, had rounded tips.

Then, around a corner, stood a group of another hair-coated sheep, a mix of dark brown and black, also with large circling horns but smaller than the bighorns.

“These are Moufflon,” said Brent.

At the top of the sign, a map of the Mediterranean and information about their origins gave useful information.

Next were four adjacent pens of deer that triggered a 25-year flashback to my boyhood years in Germany, where my soldier father was posted. During our afternoon walk, a small herd of these deer, their coats of different colours, had burst from some trees and run past us.

The difference here was that each pen held unique coat-coloured animals. There were all black, all white, and two varieties with spots. The background coat of one spotted group was a dilute chocolate milk colour, the other darker, with a black forehead leading to a full-length stripe along its back. Both had white underbellies, lower legs, and throats.

Brent explained, “The pale ones are called menil fallow; the other spotted ones are common fallow.”

A menil fallow deer buck and a yearling ‘common’ one.
© Murray Woodbury

“The menils are gorgeous, beautiful,” I replied.

He also told me that the fawns of each group stayed the same colour as the parents. He kept them in separate pens because he wanted to show the four colours off that way. Over time, I noticed in other zoo collections and on several deer farms that they ran together, and the colours were mixed, just like those in Germany. I decided to follow up for more information. One answer appeared 45 years later when a German group, using DNA techniques, found a single gene mutation in the white variety (which is not albino). The varied colours of the others have not yet been explained.

After the deer, we stopped to look at the South American camels, fawn-coloured, curly-coated guanacos, relatives of the llama, alpaca, and vicuña.

The curiosity button told me to learn more about the elk and the other creatures I'd seen. Back at the college, the helpful librarian suggested the 483-page *The Mammals of Canada*[4] by W.F. Banfield, which turned out to be a mine of information. The bold type heading "**WAPITI** or **AMERICAN ELK**" set me off on a fascinating trail. Right under the header came the taxonomic name *Cervus elaphus*, the same name used for those red deer in Scotland.

The first paragraph explains the wapiti name. Banfield refers to the red deer but wrote, "I prefer the name 'wapiti', which comes from its Shawnee Indian name meaning white rump."

To muddy the waters, during that brief stopover in Munich on the way to Canada to attend the Wildlife Disease Association meeting, I saw a large, dark brown, antlered animal in an enclosure with the sign *elch* on the fence. It also had words in other languages, English both as elk and moose. Swedish, and Norwegian, *älg*, *elg*, respectively. That male's antlers looked like huge palms with several small spikes along the edges. It bore no resemblance to the multi-branched structures on the head of the big elk at the Forestry Farm.

After the chapter on elk came information on whitetails and mule deer. Right up front, he wrote that in North America, whitetails are the most important species for big game hunters, and millions are shot every year.

They are found all the way from Great Slave Lake, 500 km[5] south of the Arctic Circle, to Peru and Bolivia, about the northern third (2500 km) of South America, the greatest distribution of any member of the entire deer family. In Canada, they exist from east of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, my neighbouring province, to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The average buck is about 92 cm tall at the shoulders and weighs 90 kg, but there are reliable records of double that. The does weigh less, maybe 60 kg. The South American ones weigh less than half of that. An estimate of the current population in the USA alone is between 35 and 36 million.

The mule deer section was also very detailed. Most are found west of the Rockies from way north in Yukon and Great Slave Lake south to the northern part of Mexico. There are some in southern Saskatchewan and the very south-west of Manitoba. The tail characteristic leads to the name Black-tailed Deer, the smallest member of the species that lives in the extreme west, on Vancouver Island and some of the Gulf Islands.

Banfield[6] wrote only a few short paragraphs about fallow deer, so I went to other sources. Like the mouflon sheep, fallow deer originated around the Mediterranean. The Norman victors are reputed to have introduced them to England sometime after the death of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. A scene in the famous 224-foot-long Bayeux tapestry shows an arrow in his eye.

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[4] *The mammals of Canada*. A.W. F. Banfield. University of Toronto Press. 1974.

[5] Banfield used units of weight and distance throughout the text, even when describing one species. I have done the same because all though these chapters they are used in different countries (metric in New Zealand, Imperial in the USA and both kinds in Canada). In science writing all units are metric.

[6] *The mammals of Canada*. A.W. F. Banfield. University of Toronto Press. 1974.

The figure second from left shows the arrow in King Harold's eye at the battle of Hastings in 1066 that marked the beginning of the Norman Conquest of England.

They have since spread far and wide and today are found in 30 countries. I've seen them in several parts of Europe, Texas and other US states, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia, so their arrival in Canada is no surprise.

After meeting several members of the college faculty and staff during the coffee breaks, it was an easy decision to make the big move. Dr. Nielsen told me that the academic year began on July 1st, and he'd hoped I'd be able to start then. That created a problem. My wife Jo was pregnant, due in the first week of July. He at once agreed to let me delay arrival until early September and went even further, letting me draw salary from July 1st.

This made a huge difference to us. Currency restrictions were in place, and we were only permitted to take $7,000 when we left Kenya. It was not nearly enough to cover airfares and many other expenses that we hadn't even thought of. We left with Karen, our four-year-old, and six-week-old Charles.