

## Neighbors From Hell

The elk are welcome at Banff Springs GC, but they tear up turf and smash flagsticks to smithereens. However, superintendent Kevin Pattison has learned to live with his unruly companions

BY ANDREW PENNER

**T**he approach shots at the Banff Springs GC in Banff, Alberta, are made against by massive granite walls, stately pines, and the emerald blues and greens of glacier-fed lakes and streams. It's world-class golf in the heart of the Canadian Rockies — a stirring experience for any



MIKE KLEMMER

### Problem

Elks are one segment of an abundance of awesome wildlife at Banff Springs, but they can cause several problems — from damaging greens and fairways to getting in the way of golfers.

### Solution

You just have to deal with them, especially since the elk are protected by the Banff National Park, where the course is located. Strategically planting montane grass is effective in controlling their flow, as is using dogs to herd the animals.

golf connoisseur.

While the approaches and their stunning views can be distracting, it's what's often in the foreground that can pose a problem. That would be the elk — and there are plenty of them.

Not only can these large animals cause problems for golfers navigating the course (power cars often have to weave in and around herds feeding on the fairways), but they also present challenges for superintendent Kevin Pattison to keep the course in top form. This isn't an easy task when hundreds of 1,500-pound crea-

**The elk are fun to watch on the course, but they can wreak havoc.**

tures are continuously urinating, sparring, feeding and generally acting like the wild beasts they are on the pristine property.

While Elmer Fudd may offer a quick solution to the problem, the elk are protected in Banff National Park, where the course is located. Elk can't be hunted, and they are watched closely by park authorities for disease and injury. "We're in a position where we must work with the animals," Pattison says.

The elk present many problems agronomically. The animals continuously urinate on the course, which Stanley Thompson designed in 1927. Elk urine is secreted at body temperature in high volumes. During fall and winter, when the air and soil temperatures are low, the turf is stressed considerably and can't synthesize the chemicals in the urine nor handle the severe change in temperature. Consequently, the greens and fairways in Banff are dotted with dead spots in the spring. "We spend 120 hours in the spring repair-



ing urine spots on the course," Pattison says.

That's not all. The bulls have a tendency to spar with flagsticks, shattering them into pieces.

"We remove the flagsticks every evening; otherwise, we'd be cleaning up shrapnel on a regular basis," says Doug Wood, Banff's longtime director of golf. The elks' fixation with the flagsticks begins with their love of salt. When the golfers handle the flagsticks, salt is left behind from hands and fingers — a tasty treat for the elk.

Elk hoof prints also cause considerable damage to the turf.

"It takes us 25 percent longer to cut the greens in the morning because hoof marks must be repaired prior to cutting," Pattison says. "The worst situations in green damage arise when the bulls dig up large sections of the greens with their antlers. Sometimes these areas of destruction are the size of a car. Unfortunately, when this type of devastation occurs, the mangled turf must be painstakingly repaired and put back into place like a jigsaw puzzle."

Urine isn't the only substance that elk secrete in large quantities. While elk dung isn't anything to worry about from a plant's perspective, most superintendents and golfers consider it displeasing from an aesthetic standpoint. Interestingly, the maintenance crew in Banff uses leaf removal equipment to clean

up elk dung in the spring and fall. It's an immense job that requires over 600 working hours a year.

Many people don't realize that elk can be dangerous animals, and one must use common sense around them. Elk have charged golfers at Banff Springs, but there have been no reports of physical contact or injury.

The most dangerous time of year is mating season in late fall. Just like any man wooing the woman he loves, the male elk tend to get a little defensive, protective and downright stubborn when it comes to outside interference. The course enforces a free drop rule if a golfer's ball comes to rest near a bull defending his love interests.

Mothers with calves can also present a problem. Keeping a safe distance from a cow with her calf is the safest bet. "On occasion we have moved tee markers up to the fairway if, for instance, a mother is parked by a tee box with her calf," Pattison says.

Elk are as much a part of Banff Springs as the panoramic mountain vistas, beautiful bunkering, and elegant green complexes. But controlling the movement of the animals is critical to keeping the course in decent shape.



GORDON HUNTER

**Banff's fairways are marked with dead spots in the spring, thanks to elk urine.**

The course has a number of strategies in place to help guide the animals to positions where they'll be least affected by Joe Hack and his titanium artillery.

Montane grass, which the elk eat and bed in, has existed naturally on many areas of the course since its inception. However, when Pattison took over four years ago, he began an extensive program to strategically plant montane grass in areas where he wanted the elk to gather. Incidentally, the young elk also find protection from predators as they are camouflaged in areas where the grass grows long.

The areas containing the natural grass are situated between holes, behind greens and in other open areas on

the course.

Other steps include using scare tactics to move large herds off fairways into areas off the course or out of high-traffic areas.

Occasionally, "bangers" or "screamers" are used, which make loud noises and excite the animals into moving away from the threat and into safer areas.

In addition, Parks Canada implemented dogs to herd elk away from the town site. It recently began using

dogs on the course, and the elk consider them predators. This method is an effective way of moving elk in a controlled fashion.

The elk were at Banff Springs long before Thompson was commissioned to design the course in Banff National Park. They are permanent fixtures. But finding ways to work with and around the animals will continue to challenge superintendents long after Pattison is gone.

Educating the golfing public and implementing natural systems which help minimize confrontation and turf damage can go a long way in ensuring this mountain golf getaway will leave all parties at peace, Pattison says. ■

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