

WELCOME TO “THE OUTDOOR LIFE”

By
Robert D. Sopuck

Welcome to a new column designed to kindle, stimulate, and reinforce the passion for Manitoba’s outdoors. Thousands of Manitobans use our natural resources and participate in nature by hunting, trapping, fishing, or otherwise harvesting nature’s bounty. For many of us, nature’s most profound lessons are learned as we fish, hunt, pick berries, trap, harvest wild mushrooms, or just enjoy a nice afternoon splitting wood.

I know that I’m breaking the first rule of column writing when I use the “first person” but my editor said it was OK, just this once, to introduce myself. I am a biologist by trade and have done fish, wildlife, and natural resource work across most of western Canada and in the Arctic both in the public and the private sectors. I’m an avid hunter, angler and outdoorsman. We live in a modern log house just south of Riding Mountain National Park. We live a seasonally-based rural life of “modern pioneers” in that we heat with wood, grow a big garden, and eat mostly wild fish and game that we harvest ourselves. But we are connected to the world via Internet and email. Nice work if you can get it!

In the next few months we will explore many facets of Manitoba’s outdoors from hunting and trapping, to game recipes, to neat wild plants you can eat, and then on to the more “weighty” matters of wildlife and conservation policy. We’ll leave the fishing to my able and talented colleague, Don Lamont. We’ll try to be as positive as possible since there’s a lot more good in Manitoba’s outdoors than bad but from time to time we will be taking stands on some mighty contentious issues. And below is one of them. No sense in being timid, is there! Oh yes, one final note is that any conclusions are mine alone and cannot be attributed to the fine organizations with which I am affiliated.

Our big game animals (deer and elk) face a new peril, Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), described by Dr. Valerius Geist, the renowned biologist, as“...its greatest crisis in decades.” As CWD spreads across the continent in elk and deer, the question in Manitoba is: will the government take the necessary steps to keep CWD out?

CWD is similar to a family of diseases called TSEs – transmissible spongiform encephalies. That group includes Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, Mad Cow Disease (affecting humans), and Scrapie, which is found in sheep. They attack brain tissue, are always fatal and can only be tested for after death. There is no evidence to date that CWD can be transferred to humans.

CWD was first reported in Colorado in the 1960s. It now appears that the sheep disease, Scrapie, “jumped” the species barrier at a research facility where infected sheep were pastured with mule deer. A bad situation became a disaster when some of those deer

were released into the wild while others were sold to the budding game farming industry. CWD became established in wild deer in that region and, with the ranched deer, the effects of captive rearing and the country-wide trade of animals fast-tracked CWD to a continental issue in only three decades.

Links between CWD's spread, and the growing game farming industry, and the inter-state and inter-provincial movement of farmed deer and elk, cannot be ignored. Today CWD has been identified on game farms across the United States and in Alberta and Saskatchewan. More importantly it's now known in wild herds in at least five states and western Saskatchewan.

CWD outbreaks on Saskatchewan and Alberta game farms have cost taxpayers more than \$30 million to compensate for destroyed animals. Larger sums have been spent in the U.S. and control programs are only getting started. For example, game farms in Colorado are being bought out, whether CWD is present or not, just to prevent its spread to wild populations. Amazingly, Canadian authorities have allowed CWD-affected game ranchers to resume operations with new animals even after infected herds have been destroyed.

If you think this is mainly a problem for game ranchers consider this: the State of Wisconsin just released a proposal to cull 75% of the deer population in a ten county area to control a CWD outbreak in the wild. Wisconsin is also proposing to totally eradicate the deer population in the core, an area of 287 square miles.

As CWD spread, many jurisdictions closed their borders to elk or deer imports. Amazingly, in the last few months the Manitoba government came very close to *allowing* elk imports, which would have been a first for the province. Manitoba's elk ranchers, reeling from the loss of markets, a penned shooting ban and an overall price collapse, lobbied hard for this change.

When the disease jumps to wild elk and deer, we're all stuck with CWD. Intense lobbying by hunters, led by the 14,000 member Manitoba Wildlife Federation, helped convince the Manitoba government to back down on elk imports but the wildlife community is still waiting for a firm provincial commitment against elk or deer imports. The government made a good first step but a permanent ban on elk imports is the only answer. Our wild deer and elk herds deserve the very best of care.

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