

# Elk and the Meramec



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The time was centuries ago, before the arrival of Europeans. It was late August at the main village of the Osage people, located on the river now named for them. A group of men, women and older children were departing for the fall hunt. Many had only recently returned from the summer hunt to the west in the Great Plains, where bison were plentiful. Upon their return they had harvested the corn, beans, squash and pumpkins they had planted in the spring. This fall hunt would be to the east, into the Ozarks, land claimed by the Osage people, and it would last several months. Temporary camps would be established as the people moved through the hills, and they would spend time in the Meramec Valley.

This hunt was for elk, deer, bear and smaller game such as turkey, all plentiful in this land. While the men hunted, the women butchered the animals, dried or smoked the meat and prepared the hides. Virtually all of an animal was used. The elk, for example, provided meat, the hides were prepared as buckskin for clothing and moccasins, and rawhide was made into binding and waterproof pouches. The fur was left on elk hides that were to be used for bedding. Sinew was used for sewing thread. Antlers were often used by medicine men. The elk was of significant importance to the Osage.

*Cervis canadensis* is the largest deer species in North America. It's common name is American Elk, though it is often referred to as wapiti, its Shawnee name. It can weigh up to 900 lbs. in contrast to the White-tailed Deer that may reach 300 lbs. Like other deer, elk males grow antlers annually, and they may span five feet.

Elk are referred to as generalists in terms of their survival needs, meaning they can prosper in several natural habitats. They feed on a wide variety of grasses, plants, twigs and leaves. And while they seem to prefer semi-open woodlands, they were common in various prairie, glade and woodlands communities in the Ozarks, including the Meramec region. These natural communities, all relatively open rather than deep forest, were very common in those times. A major reason was frequent fires that retarded forest expansion, and a major reason for the fires was the Osage, who wanted to preserve such habitats for the elk and other desired game species.

Naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton estimated that the population of elk living in North America at the time of our Osage story was ten million, and this number was steady even with Native American predation. The species appears to have reached North America during the time of Pleistocene glaciers and lower ocean levels, when a land link existed between Asia and Alaska. *Cervis canadensis* still occur in eastern Asia as well as North America.



It was the arrival of Europeans and their decedents that drastically impacted the elk, the Osage and the Meramec Valley.

Lewis and Clark were certainly not the first Europeans or Americans to explore Missouri or the American West, but their 1804-1806 Voyage of Discovery was the first in which detailed records were kept. The abundance and importance of elk is reflected in the 570 references to them in their journal. Elk and deer constituted their main meats during their journey, and they killed nearly 400 elk for food. They recorded sightings of elk in Missouri. While exploring the Loutre River, a tributary of the Missouri River, Clark wrote of observing elk, partridge, grouse, turkey and deer and referred to the area as "delightful lands".

Fifteen years later Henry Schoolcraft partook another voyage of discovery, exploring the interior of the Ozarks, including the Meramec country. Schoolcraft's intent was to locate valuable mineral deposits, such as the lead found on the Big River, which was even then being actively mined. He would later write a book on his findings.

Like Lewis and Clark, Schoolcraft kept detailed records of his observations including descriptions of the land, vegetation, animals and people, in addition to the rocks and minerals. Near the Meramec, for example, he visited villages of the Shawnee and Delaware peoples, who had been dislocated from the East by American settlement. Also on the Meramec, and later on the White River, he located American settlers. These were hardy pioneers, whose main focus was hunting bear, elk and deer. The skins would be traded for firearms, ammuniton, tools and necessary utensils.

These people warned Schoolcraft to beware of the Osage, who at that time were in the Ozarks on their fall hunt. If found, the settlers warned, they would take his horse and other possessions, and maybe take him prisoner.

The Osage were attempting to retain their traditional way of life on their ancient hunting grounds, but their world was changing. Already tribal leaders had ceded all Missouri lands to the United States Government, hence legalizing the intrusion of European Americans and other Native Americans into the Ozarks. Some of the Osage resisted and there were conflicts along the frontier. Fortunately for Schoolcraft, he did not encounter the Osage. Soon the Osage people would be forced out of Missouri.

As the nineteenth century progressed there was more settlement in the Ozarks and hunting pressure on the elk and other game animals increased. Elk disappeared from the Meramec Valley before century's end, and remnant populations in northwest and southeast Missouri were gone a few years later. In fact, the population of elk in all of North America by 1900 had fallen to an estimated 100,000 individuals.

Yet in Missouri their legacy remains as namesakes throughout the state, including the beautiful Elk River in southwest Missouri, Elk Creeks on the Big Piney, Chariton, Gasconade and James Rivers, the Elk Fork of Mark Twain Lake and Elk Hollow on the upper Meramec River.

Osage Chief *Soldier of the Oak*



Today elk are gone from the Meramec River area. Well, almost. A small herd of American Elk free range within several hundred acres of St. Louis County's Lone Elk Park in the Meramec Greenway. Within this fenced park visitors may observe these magnificent animals up close, either from vehicles or, more exciting, while hiking the park trails. It is a unique opportunity to see and appreciate a part of our rich natural heritage. Lone Elk Park is open daily.



Bull elk with his cows in Lone Elk Park.