

WAPITI COUNTRY

MANY an American has come to our shores since the days of colonisation but few have stayed to settle. In 1905, however, eighteen unwilling immigrants with the family name of *Cervus canadensis* were settled in George Sound in the far south, and proceeded to make a large part of inhospitable Fiordland their home. These immigrants were wapiti, known also in America as the North American Elk. The Algonquin word wapiti, in international scientific usage, applies to a large group of the deer family, of which the North American Elk (ancestor of our not-so-new New Zealanders) are but a part.

The Listener's introduction to wapiti took place recently at the NZBS Talks Department, where we found Jim Henderson editing a tape. The noise that stopped us in our tracks was, he explained, a bull wapiti bugling, and a wapiti hunter trying to do the same thing. Both noises sounded to us like ships hooting in a fog, but no doubt wapiti cows would hear in them the poetry of love.

This backwoods fanfare is the starting point of a programme, *Wapiti Country*, which will be heard from YA and YZ stations at 9.15 p.m., Tuesday, March 12. But the tape recording of this bona fide bugling was originally made with great trouble and effort for quite a different reason. This particular wapiti bull was to be, Mario Lanzawise, as you might say, the singing star of a film, a colour documentary about these big deer.

Jack McKenzie, of Leithen Downs, Gore, Southland, one of the group planning this film, with Max Kershaw, of the New Zealand Forest Service, and Ken Miers, of the Wildlife Branch of the Internal Affairs Department, recorded the bugling wapiti in the upper reaches of the Lugal Burn, under Mount McDougall. When the wapiti came within range of the recorder it was incited to make noises by competition from one of the party 100 yards away in the bush, and the result on the tape makes as authentic a racket as one would care to hear in any film.

Ken Miers, run to ground in his office in Wellington, gave us something of the geographical and zoological background to the wapiti in New Zealand.

The Lugal Burn (even that name was imported, from Ayrshire) is a river running into the North Fiord of Te Anau, he told us. "It's not very far in miles from George Sound, where the wapiti were first liberated, but there's some very rugged country in between."

The general southern boundary of the wapiti country is from south of Charles



ABOVE: The wild country around George Sound where wapiti were first liberated. RIGHT: A wapiti bull snapped at close range near the snowline

Sound, through to the south-west arm of the Middle Fiord of Te Anau, and northwards they are found as far as the Milford Track.

"East and west, the lake and the sea are the boundaries. You could also say that the very rough country around Milford serves as a geographical barrier like the lake and the sea. And both south and north the wapiti would have to compete with very heavy red deer populations. But within those limits they are still spreading into previously unoccupied pockets."

"Then they've adapted well to New Zealand conditions?"

"Yes, even though the originals were park-raised animals—some came from the Washington Zoological Park and the others from a private game park—they have adapted well to conditions in Fiordland; that is, to steep terrain, deep-cut valleys and the heavy forests."

"Would this country be more rugged than their relations are accustomed to in the American backwoods?"

"Some sub-species of wapiti live on country that is on a par with our conditions here. The Olympic Elk, for instance—you may remember the Disney film of that name. It is not known for sure what sub-species was imported into New Zealand."

"What is the difference between red deer and wapiti?"



"Wapiti are much larger, half as large again as red deer—an animal that has a shoulder height of five feet is pretty big. Then another difference is the bugle; a stag has a call that can be described as a roar, but a bull wapiti bugles. There are, however, altos and basses in both species—hi-fi tweeters and woofers, you might call them—in whom either the roar or the bugle may be predominant. We are coming around to thinking that the calls are an acquired characteristic—that a young wapiti isolated among red deer might learn to call in a sound akin to a roar, and, of course, vice versa."

On the question of big heads, Mr. Miers said that the biggest he had seen was the sixteen-pointer (see cover picture) shot by P. W. Maurice in the Upper Glaisnock Valley. That head had a spread of 58 7/8 inches. The greatest spread recorded, however, is 74 inches, so there is still plenty of scope for trophy hunters.

Ken Miers and the Wellington hunter Frank Tully, who are heard together in *Wapiti Country*, both stressed the dangers faced by the inexperienced in going into this part of New Zealand. Of the rivers, Mr. Tully said: "The

water is so cold that you would only have to fall in a river and roll over once or twice with a pack on, and you would lose interest in things altogether."

Ken Miers was even more blunt: "It is horrible country, horrible for wapiti and for man. I think hunters take quite a lot of risks simply going into places where wapiti are. The experienced man knows how much he can take, but these days every other stalker wants to get into wapiti country. My advice would be to go in only with someone who has been there before."

As a postscript to this story we hear that Jack McKenzie (who snapped the wapiti bull illustrated on this page) is going in with a tape recorder again, this time under the auspices of the NZBS, on a trip (scheduled for April) from Sutherland Sound to Lake Te Anau. And later in the year in the ZB series *This is New Zealand*, Jim Henderson will tell the story of the only pet wapiti in New Zealand, which lives on Newton McConochie's property at Glenhope, Nelson. Taken from her wet and sandfly-infested home when three days old, Wan'a, as she has been named, plays a leading part in the same film as the vocal bull of *Wapiti Country*.

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