

Top Stories

A herd of a different color: Greene couple joins growing number of elk farmers

CORNWALLVILLE - If there's animal equivalent in usefulness to the peanut, it could well be the elk.

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By Fred Johnsen

CORNWALLVILLE - If there's animal equivalent in usefulness to the peanut, it could well be the elk.

Though meat come to mind when thinking about the largest member of the deer family, the elk provides a plethora of other products few people would consider.

Les and Debra Armstrong consider them everyday. It's their business. They are part of a growing number of elk farmers in New York state and across the continent. The Armstrongs are the owners of Armstrong's Elk Farm on Hervey Street Road in Cornwallville.

Armstrong, 44, comes from a long line of family farmers. The 35 acres he's dedicated to the 43-head herd is part of the larger 120-acre farm his ancestors founded in 1863. He said elk farming had not been his first choice. He would have preferred to go with a native species.

"I researched deer farming in general, and I would have loved to have done whitetail deer because they're natural to this area and they're the kind of animal I've hunted my whole life," he said.

Farming whitetails is top-heavy with regulations, he said, so he began researching elk and found them to be one of the most docile and low-cost species of deer to farm. This combined with the number of ways to market elk made them a no-brainer.

In addition to venison, there are markets for breeding stock, trophy bulls, and antlers - specifically velvet antlers, the soft, fuzzy antlers produced by bulls during the summer. Velvet is

arguably the most profitable and useful commodity. A pound of velvet brings in about \$35, but has been as high as \$110.

"It's a classic renewable resource. Every year we get that," Mrs. Armstrong said.

Velvet is a virtual pharmacy and has been used in various forms throughout Asia for 2,000 years. It is credited with improving circulation, endurance, strength and sexual virility; increasing energy; relieving fatigue and menstrual cramps, and helping ease the pain and inflammation of arthritis.

The Armstrongs harvest the velvet in early summer by numbing and sawing off the antlers leaving a "button" about an inch or two thick where each grew. The button falls off around January, as would a complete antler, and is used for crafts and jewelry making.

The Armstrongs began farming elk in 1996.

Armstrong's brother, Raymond, continues the family farm focusing on pigs and beef. There are currently 4,000 deer farms across the North America raising all species. In New York there are about 450, of which 70 raise elk. Armstrong said he can envision a day when more of the family farm is used for elk.

With an ever-increasing number of small farms dying out, the Armstrongs believe farming elk, like free-range chickens or organic produce, is a way to continue farms.

"The organic type thing is a growing market," he said.

"We see this as a way to keep the farm going," Mrs. Armstrong said.

Anyone interested in visiting Armstrong's Elk Farm is welcome. There is no charge for a tour, but visitors are asked to call (518) 622-8452 to arrange a visit.

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