

WINTER KEEPERS

As temperatures drop and deep snows cover the high country, a handful of hearty souls brave every dawn to take on one of the most unique jobs in Wyoming

Story and photos by Mark Gocke

On 22 feedgrounds in western Wyoming, 16 contract employees spend their winters helping the Wyoming Game and Fish Department feed elk herds in the valleys adjacent to many ranges including the Wind River, Wyoming, Salt River, Snake River, Tetons and Gros Ventre mountains.





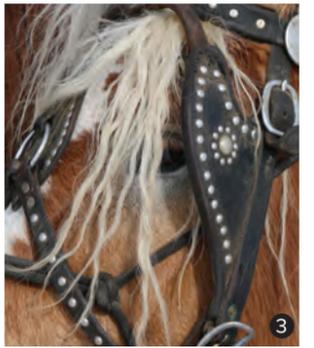
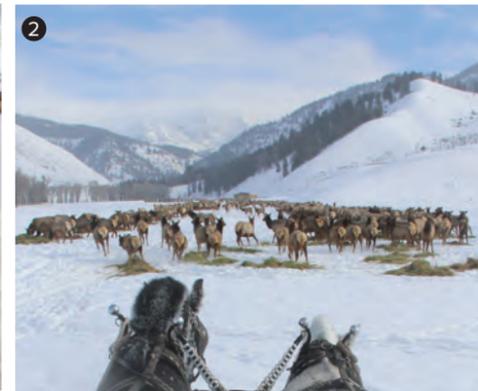
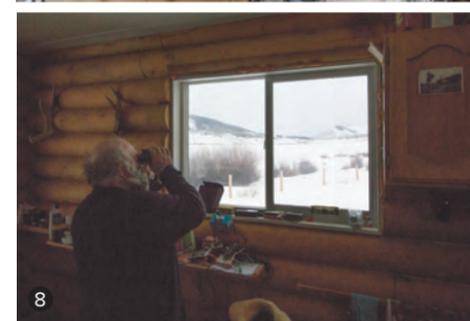
Frost gathers on Matt Izenhart's face as he heads out to feed elk at the South Park feedground south of Jackson.

Cold. Wyoming cold. The kind that wallops with a stinging slap on the face and takes your breath the minute you walk out the door. Staying indoors by the fire sounds pretty nice, but that is not an option. So you head out into the cold darkness, the snow creaking beneath each step. A cow elk calls in the distance, another answers.

The work begins with a hint of light on the horizon. The draft horses stand tall, well above your head. You grab the heavy leather harnesses and heave them onto the massive animal's back. The horses jostle a bit on hooves the size of dinner plates, but they know the routine. They have done it with you every winter day for years.



Elk feeders are private business owners who have a contract with the State of Wyoming. Josh Drewes, center, and Jay Hoggan, right, live all winter long in the feedground cabin in the Gros Ventre drainage northeast of Jackson. On this evening they were joined by Stacey Allison, left, for a game of cards after an evening meal.



Clockwise from top left: 1) Elk feeders Marty Hoopes, left, and Paul Majors dole out the hay at the Dog Creek feedground near Hoback Junction south of Jackson. 2) A team pulls a load of hay to a herd of elk at the Horse Creek feedground south of Jackson. 3) The draft horses are large animals, standing much taller than most people. 4) Ellie Parker worked at the Alkali Feedground in the Gros Ventre drainage northeast of Jackson a few years ago. This year there are two women who make up the 16 contract workers on the feedgrounds. 5) Elk nibble on a line of hay dropped from the sleigh at the Patrol Cabin feedground. 6) McCall Barrett takes a smoke break after laying out hay for a herd at the Alkali feedground. 7) Jay Hoggan and his dog walk the grounds at the Patrol Cabin feedground. 8) Jay Hoggan looks for elk in the surrounding hills before heading out to feed at Patrol Cabin in the Gros Ventre. 9) Matt Izenhart harnesses the horses on a sub-zero morning at the South Park feedground.



Above: Cow elk at a feedground sometimes stand on their hind legs to box at each other with their front legs. Boxing can be a display of aggression or dominance among the cows.

Right: Feeder Matt Izenhart, left, and Game and Fish Elk Feedground Manager Dave Hyde bring the sleigh around to load more hay on a cold morning at the South Park feedground. A busier feedground may use around 12,000 bales of hay in one winter season. The South Park feedground is one of the largest state-owned feedgrounds, it feeds herds that can number more than 1,000.



The two are like brothers, inseparable. Nip and Tuck are a team. Side by side, bound together, hitched to the wooden tongue between them. They must work in unison to move the heavy sleigh that weighs 2-3 tons when stacked with a full load of hay.

“Nip, Tuck, step up!” Their powerful bodies jar the frozen sleigh from the snow and off you go with the horses in a trot, the cold air biting at your face. With a firm tug on the reins and a stern “Whoa!” the horses bring the sleigh to a halt next to the towering stack of hay, right where you left off yesterday.

You tie off the reins and scramble to get atop the stack, sometimes using hay hooks like ice axes to pull yourself up the vertical wall, hoping the bales hold. Brushing the loose hay aside, you find the snugly-wrapped twine, force your gloved fingers under it and hoist the 100-pound bale.

Hopefully, you don’t punch your foot down a crack between bales while you carry your heavy load across this makeshift mountain. Skillfully you toss the bale over the edge and it hits the sleighbed below with a thud. If you’re good at this, it lands flat and doesn’t tumble off the side. Your muscles repeat this routine over and over until bales



Above: Josh Drewes uses hay hooks to climb the hay stack as he prepares to load the sleigh at the Fish Creek feedground in the upper Gros Ventre.

Below right: Jay Hoggan controls the draft horse reins at Fish Creek feedground in the upper Gros Ventre drainage. A full sleigh loaded with hay weighs 2-3 tons, which the draft horses pull around the grounds as workers flake hay into small piles on the ground.

Below: Coyotes are common visitors to the elk feedgrounds. While they do not present much of a threat to the elk, animals do die on the feedgrounds, and coyotes and other scavengers take advantage of the spoils.



are stacked four or five high across the sled. The sweat soon beads up and an outside layer is shed despite the cold air.

“Nip, Tuck, step up!” The sleigh creaks and the horses breathe heavy as they pull the big load through deep snow and out into a herd of calling elk. The less wary animals cautiously run in closer to get first dibs on the green hay. Nip and Tuck are slowed to a walk as each lash of twine is cut and hay is flaked off onto the snow.

Steam from the excited herd of calling elk forms a layer of fog in the dense, cold air. A pair of cows rear up and box at each other for their space on the hay line. You recognize the unique ones as you pass them only feet away, the bull with the drop tine, the cow with a white patch of hair, the tiny calf born late, the bull with a limp. You get to know them well.

This is what must be done every day, no matter the brutal weather, until the snows recede in the springtime. It is hard work, no doubt. But you may just have the most unique job in the world.

—Mark Gocke has served as the information and education specialist for the Jackson and Pinedale regions for more than 20 years. He continues to torture his friends, family and co-workers with an over-the-top interest in photography.



Left: Todd Stearns, who has been working at the feedgrounds for 31 years, breaks open bales of hay at the Green River Lakes feedground.

Above: Paul Majors and Marty Hoopes navigate a herd of elk at the Dog Creek feedground south of Hoback Junction. The elk become accustomed to the feeders, but usually remain wary. They tend to bunch closer to the sleigh on colder days, when they are hungrier.

Below: Game and Fish employees help Jay Hoggan load hay in a driving snow at the Patrol Cabin feedground. Blizzard or sun, elk are fed every day during the winter. The process usually takes about three hours, and some contract employees work more than one feedground a day.