

# Amber Elk Ranch

where majestic animals are at arm's reach



## Field Trips

by Alex Rossman

Like many other large and magnificent animals, elk once roamed free across Michigan's great wilderness. Even today, their image continues to be associated with our Great Lakes State. An elk stands proudly on the state seal, echoing its sentiment "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look around you." Though Michigan's native elk population disappeared around 1875, they can still be found roaming the north woods—a reintroduction of the animals in 1918 has yielded a herd of 800-900 today. But there is one place where you can get closer to these animals than any settler ever could: Ludington's Amber Elk Ranch.

Ludington has always been an ideal "Up North" destination, with its beautiful beaches along Lake Michigan, but the Amber Elk Ranch offers a distinct diversion from the usual family fare. Cooped up in the cottage on a cloudy day, or looking for a fun pit stop while admiring the fall color? An outing with the ranch's 200+ resident elk will renew the spirits of kids and adults alike, and provide unparalleled interaction with wildlife that embody Michigan's great outdoors.

Amber Elk Ranch was founded by Al Hardman and Bob Northrup of Ludington, Michigan. The two shared a passion for elk, and decided to create a place where everyone could share in their appreciation for the animals. The 130-acre ranch began as a hobby, but has grown into a successful business. The elk are raised for breeding stock, velvet, and most importantly, for community education and appreciation provided by the tours.

May through October, Bob or one of the ranch's other staff (including Bob's wife, son and daughter) will fire up the green John Deere tractor and serve as your ambassador to the world of elk as you embark on the one-hour tour. All aspects and phases of elk life are encountered as the wagon trailer rumbles through the ranch's 14 different pastures. Female cows, with their soft mewing, nuzzle newly-born calves. Sprightly young "spikers" outnumber their elders in some of the male herds—but still cower and scamper at the slightest stomp or snort in their direction during feeding time. Dominant and seasoned bulls bugle and snort behind their partition, wearing mud like war paint and clashing antlers like sabers.

There is no greater experience than observing an animal in the wild, but in addition to their statuesque nature, the elk at the ranch have developed a keen sense of showmanship.

When each gate creaks open, Pavlov's dogs get another nod: the subsequent presence of people means it's feeding time. Moments earlier, the grand animals were warily staring down the passing tour as trespassers on their turf, but now are at the wagon's side. Bob and his staff dole out handfuls of corn that get lapped

up as quick as they can be refilled. The female cows are most approachable, and will often eat from your hand.

From a distance, the elk are remarkable animals, but up close, their stature is almost overwhelming. Equally unusual are their soft calls—like seeing a lion with a kitten's meow—as they vie for snacks and harangue their young. When the wagon moves on to the next stop, exhilaration stays with the group. So does the confidence that there is not a single crumb of cornmeal left in your palm.

The big bulls are the main event. These heavyweights can reach 1,000 pounds and a height of 6' at the shoulder (no antlers needed to bolster these stats, though several of the ranch residents are also frequent award-winners at the International Antler Competition each year). When they're in the "rut," they clash and crash antlers like titans, sending echoing cracks across the fields and giving observers a rush of adrenaline.

When the tractor rumbles back into the station the tour is at its end, but there is still plenty more to do. For even more animal interaction, visit the petting zoo's array of interesting occupants—from pygmy goats and pot-bellied pigs to miniature horses and even a yak! Or stop in the Antler Shed Gift shop, offering one of a kind wildlife and antler items. Browsing beneath the antler-adorned walls, you'll find nearly every elk item under the sun, from Christmas ornaments and tee shirts to kid's souvenirs and antler velvet supplements (an immune system stimulator).

The ranch is located just east of the beautiful town of Ludington in the northwest part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The ranch is open daily from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and on the weekends in the spring and fall (ending October 30). The gate opens at 9:00 a.m. all season, closing between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m., depending on the day and time of year. Admission is \$8 for adults, and \$5 for children over four, with group rates and hours available. To plan your visit, call 231-843-5ELK or go to [www.amberelkranch.com](http://www.amberelkranch.com). 🏡

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