

PHOTO BY AMY KYLLO

Elk rummage through a blanket of snow Feb. 24 at Harvest Grove Farm near Plainview. The Wurst family have 40 head of elk and sell elk meat to customers and a few restaurants.



UNIQUE FARM DIVERSITY

Wurst raises elk, grows chestnuts

BY SARAH COLBURN | STAFF WRITER

PLAINVIEW - Kraig Wurst delved into creating an elk farm after reading a magazine article. Years later, an article on chestnuts prompted him to diversify his farm and add those too.

Today, he has about 40 head of elk and sells elk meat, cows and bulls. He's awaiting his first crop of chestnuts from the 1,000 trees he has planted across 10 acres at Harvest Grove Farms.

The farm has a seasonal rhythm.

"Chestnuts are spring, and I'm busy with elk early summer," Wurst said. "In September the chestnuts should drop, and October becomes a busy time for the elk – moving them and getting them into pens for breeding."

His elks calve in late May or early June, and he takes the bull calves to auction when they are a year old.

"They're a pretty animal to deal with," Wurst said. "It's fun. They've got their own personalities. They're different than a beef cow would be."

Wurst said elk are fairly low maintenance, and he said they are hardy animals who aren't bothered by Minnesota winters. He processes the elk a couple of times each year for shots and said the animals are susceptible to worms, so he works to prevent them.

The elk graze the pasture – eating grass – and are raised on hay. The young ones get oats throughout the winter as does the bull as he grows his antlers. He keeps the animals on 15 acres and said he can put three elk where one beef cow would go. He has five different pens he moves the elk through.

"The more you're around them and deal with them, the tamer they get or calmer they get," Wurst said. "The first couple years there were always one or two who would never go where you wanted them to and it was a battle."

He's still careful with the bulls during the rut.

"They're ornery. I try not to handle them any more than I have to," he said. "They're in with the cows, and I try to stay out of the pen most of the time."

The mothers, he said, tend well to their calves. Wurst used to cut velvet from antlers to be used in arthritis/pain medication, but he doesn't do that anymore. Now, he has a market for the hard antler sheds. People use them as dog chews.

Wurst used to ship his bulls out of state to ranches out west where people could hunt animals, but he said,

with tightened regulations due to chronic wasting disease, that has become a lot more difficult. He does still sell cows and bulls to other farmers.

"It seems like we're making good progress on chronic wasting," he said. "But, the state wants to keep making things more strict."

He's concerned there's a movement to ban imports of elk or elk semen from states that have CWD in the wild.

"That would really cut things down," he said. "It's something to worry about. It's hard to get people interested in elk farming when there's this much regulation over it."

Wurst has an eight-foot fence around his herd and double gates due to regulations although he said, unless he leaves a gate open, the animals aren't prone to leaving.



PHOTO
SUBMITTED

Kraig Wurst tends to a three-year-old chestnut tree at Harvest Grove Farms. This year will be the first in which he gets to harvest a crop of chestnuts.



Wurst

from front

Regulations do require that every elk that dies has to be tested for CWD, but he said the animals are less susceptible to it than white-tailed deer. Still, his farm is inspected every year by the Minnesota Board of Animal Health.

Wurst processes eight to 10 of his elk a year for meat, and he's working to double that in the coming years.

"The demand for elk meat seems like it's pretty high," he said.

He sells a lot of burger as well as steaks, and he sells not only to individual consumers but to a couple different restaurants.

"It's a healthier meat," Wurst said. "It's basically got the same properties as chicken breast – low calorie, high protein, low fat – but it's a red meat."

Wurst said elk doesn't have a gamey taste and many people have trouble telling the difference between elk meat and chicken.

While he used to look for antler size when he chose animals for breeding, now he looks at the size of the animal and breedability. Typically, he said, animals have a hanging weight of 300 to 350 pounds.

When Wurst isn't working with his elk, he's working with his chestnuts. He hand-planted the grove of trees four years ago along with the help of his wife,



PHOTO SUBMITTED
The Wurst family – Vienna (from left), Vince, Kraig, Vale, Violet and Jenny –stop for a family photo during vacation. Members of the Wurst family all contribute to work on the farm.

Jenny, and their kids, Violet, 11; Vince, 9; Vienna, 7; and Vale, 3.

"We're as far north as you can get to grow chestnuts," he said. "We're right kind of on the edge I think."

The trees begin producing four to five years after planting and reach their full potential at 10 to 12 years. As Wurst anticipates his first crop, he, with the help of his father, Herb, mows around the

trees. He also fertilizes them and prunes them.

Wurst said he's looking forward to providing chestnuts to consumers once the trees start producing.

"It just seems like there's a big demand for them and there's not very many farms around who grow chestnuts," he said.



PHOTO BY AMY KYLLO
The 40-head herd of elk at Harvest Grove Farms eats in the pasture.



PHOTO BY AMY KYLLO
(Above) Elk frolic in their paddocks Feb. 24 at Harvest Grove Farm near Plainview. When processed for meat, an elk carcass hanging weight is 300 to 350 pounds.

PHOTO SUBMITTED
(Right) An elk bull calls to the rest of his herd. In the fall, bulls are placed with cows for breeding.