



Above and left: While on a trip to North Mountain in the South Piney Creek drainage, longtime Big Piney resident Ron Manning snapped a few photos of an elk with a stunted neck and other pig-like features. Although the cow elk was deformed, the calf with it didn't exhibit any abnormalities. (Photos courtesy of Ron Manning)

## Finding a legend

A novice photographer came across a deformed elk 35 years ago, and people still talk about the images he captured and what happened to the animal

By Mark Gocke

It was a typical spring day in 1984, but longtime Big Piney resident Ron Manning still remembers it well. On that chilly day in western Wyoming, Manning saw something unlike anything else he's seen, and his photographs of the encounter helped build the legend of an elusive creature that once roamed the mountains.

A hand injury forced Manning to take a few days off from his job. Not one to sit idle, he headed to the nearby Wyoming Range to see if enough ice had melted to allow some beaver trapping. He noticed a herd of elk on the south-facing slope of North Mountain in the South Piney Creek drainage. As he got closer, he noticed a cow elk and her calf lower on the mountain, separated from the bunch. Something about the cow didn't look quite right, so he took a closer look.

He could hardly believe his eyes. The cow elk appeared to have no neck and an odd-shaped head, almost like it was half pig. "It was just one of those goofy things where you just kind of double take. And I thought, I have to try and get a picture of that," said Manning.

Fortunately, Manning had an interest in photography and had his trusty Minolta XG-1 35mm camera. He put his hunting skills to work, got downwind and was able to sneak behind a large rock within 60 yards of the animal. The unusual elk eventually noticed him. "She just stared at me for about five minutes. I have to say it was a pretty eerie feeling," said Manning.

The elk never spooked, and Manning watched the pair for a couple hours. After getting a closer look, Manning noticed the cow had a severely kinked neck. The calf did not have any obvious abnormality.

Manning returned to watch the pair on multiple occasions over the next couple weeks. "I never saw them mix in with the rest of the elk. The larger herd always seemed to keep a distance of about 400 to 500 yards," said Manning. "And I almost always saw the pair on a steep slope. I assumed it was easier for the deformed cow to graze. One time, when they were on some flatter ground, I did see the cow get on her knees to graze."

The abnormal cow elk was legally taken by a local hunter that fall, but where her body ended up remains a mystery. Word has it that a local businessman purchased the carcass from the hunter and took it to a taxidermist in Jackson to be mounted. However, it is said to have been lost by the taxidermist and has not been seen since.

Still, Manning's photographs of the elk continue to circulate locally and online. And so the legend lives on.