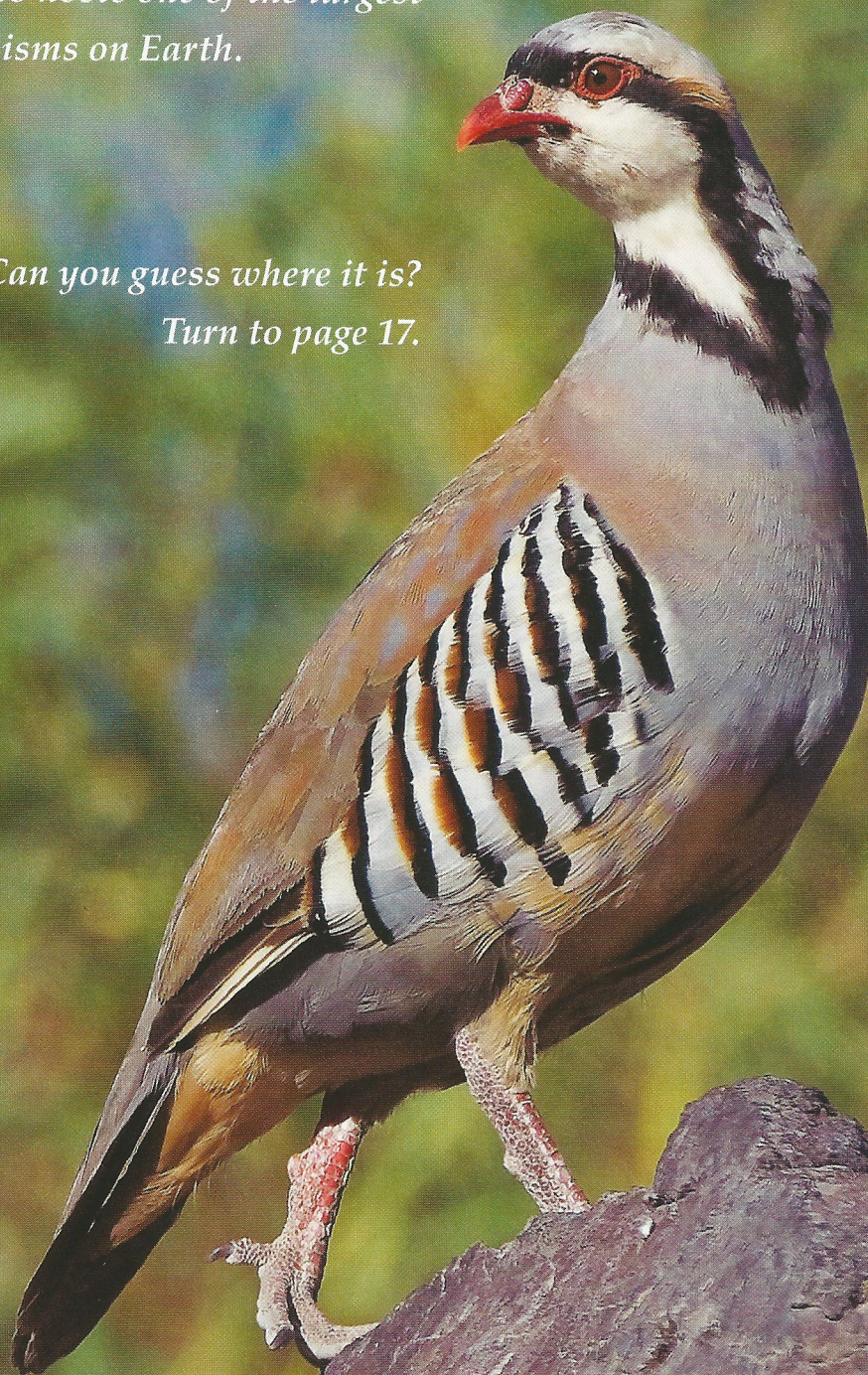


# NAME THAT ELK COUNTRY

*An import from Eurasia, chukars have found a dream home in this land of basalt and grasslands. It also hosts one of the largest and oldest organisms on Earth.*

*Can you guess where it is?  
Turn to page 17.*



TIM TORELL

# NAME THAT ELK COUNTRY

## *Blue Mountains, Oregon and Washington (from page 14)*

**C**hukars are perhaps the Blue Mountain's most challenging bird to hunt, an exotic from Eurasia that takes full advantage of the rugged, steep terrain to outrun and exhaust its predators. They are often found living amid another less-appetizing exotic—cheatgrass, which the birds use for its plentiful seeds and sprouts. Most native wildlife, though, find little or nothing to love in this invasive and highly flammable grass which offers almost zero forage value to grazers like elk and deer.

One of the Blue Mountains more notable natives is also one of our planet's oldest and largest living organisms. *Armillaria solidipes*, the honey mushroom, has a web of underground roots that cover 2,384 acres of Oregon's Malheur National Forest. Biologists used DNA fingerprinting to show it was one massive individual plant, estimated to be at least 2,400 years old and perhaps as ancient as 6,000 BC.

Not far from this mega-mushroom towers the 9,000-foot summit of Strawberry Mountain, surrounded by forests of ponderosa

pine, firs and western spruce—trees that gave the mountain range its name. The Blues' lower slopes are covered in bunchgrasses and wheatgrasses as well as bitterbrush, rabbitbrush and at least eight species of sagebrush—all delectable forage for mule deer and elk.

The Blue Mountains host one of the largest elk populations of any single range—currently around 55,000 animals. Elk, though, have struggled to maintain their numbers here in recent times in the face of many challenges. Washington's portion of the Blue Mountains herd numbered more than 6,000 in the 1970s, but declined to 4,500 by 1990. That was the year state and federal agencies began looking to quantify the economic importance of elk to the Blues. They found that more than 72,000 hunters a year spend upwards of \$15 million in local communities. Out of this awareness and the recognition that elk herds were struggling, the Blue Mountains Elk Initiative (BMEI) was born.

The Elk Foundation was a founding member of the BMEI and has contributed funds and

volunteer work to the effort ever since. Through the BMEI and other RMEF-funded projects, the Elk Foundation has helped improve nearly 250,000 acres of elk habitat through dozens of prescribed burns, noxious weed treatments, aspen restoration, fence pulls, forest thinning and other work. RMEF has also helped fund more than 20 research projects, including a new four-year study of the effects of mountain lions on the herd.

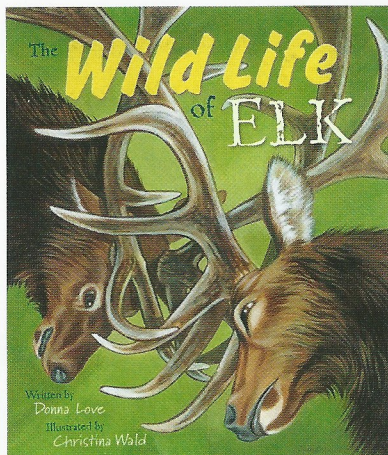
Habitat work and changes in hunting regulations since the Initiative launched 22 years ago have helped raise Washington's Blue Mountains herd back to 5,500 today. The state made the Blues a highly limited area for branch-antlered bulls, and today hunters lucky enough to draw tags have a great chance for world-class trophies.

With continued efforts from the Initiative and the Elk Foundation, the Blues should remain a haven for chukars and ancient fungi—and keep their standing as one of the West's premier elk hunting destinations for generations to come.

—Tim Kukes, Bugle Intern

## Check out *The Wild Life of Elk*

**New children's book explores everything about elk.**



**E**lk can weigh half a ton, run 45 mph, belt out haunting bugles that carry for miles, and endure 100 stab wounds a year from fighting. And these are only a few of the things you and your little hunter will learn when you read the new and beautifully illustrated book for children, *The Wild Life of Elk*, published in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Mountain Press.

*The Wild Life of Elk* captures this legendary animal in all its

glory, following it through the seasons and centuries. It explores the many habitats in which elk thrive, the mythic growth cycle of their antlers, and the intricacies of their social structure. Readers will learn how elk defend themselves during fights and from attacking predators, give birth and care for their calves, and survive in sometimes brutal climates.

You can order your book for \$12 through RMEF's Elk Country Trading Post at [store.rmef.org](http://store.rmef.org). Click on books in the left-hand margin.