

## Bugling and Art – A Perfect Combination

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Although I love and appreciate art, capturing the unique beauties of nature on paper is a skill I personally do not possess. As a wildlife biologist who spends as much time outdoors as possible, I honestly admit that I envy all those talented enough to be able to observe and appreciate natural things and then take it to the next level and produce something very personal for the rest of us to enjoy (this special group of people includes my son Matt). Recently the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in partnership with the Central Montana Education Center was able to host a very talented group of young Lewistown Art Center After School Art students and their instructor Jacqueline Mercenier on the Elk Viewing Tour at the Slippery Ann Elk Viewing Area.

The annual Central Montana Education Center elk viewing bus filled up quickly this year. The power of the press (wonderfully written stories about the annual elk rut and bugling show on the refuge in area newspapers) was most likely partially responsible for the larger than usual numbers of central Montanan's who decided to take advantage of this annual program sponsored by the Education Center and the refuge. Over half the people participating in this year's bus tours were from out of town and many stayed overnight in Lewistown contributing to our local economy. But - there was a downside to a full bus – there was not enough room for the young art students who were planning on attending the trip this year in order to experience sketching elk in their natural habitat on the refuge. The Center's director, Diane Oldenburg, came up with the solution – a second bus trip was quickly arranged for the following week. This bus also quickly filled up (over 100 total participants on the two trips) but this time the twenty-one students, chaperones and Jacqueline were also on board. Also on board were sack lunches for purchase from the Lewistown School District and free lunches from Valle Vista Manor for the young artist's group. CMR refuge employees' Matt deRosier and Jackie Wichman hosted the group. Matt shared information throughout the trip on wildlife and the refuge. Jackie shadowed the students while at the Elk Viewing Area and pointed out the vocal differences between the cows and bulls. She also revealed to the group her knowledge of elk biology (cow elk choose the bulls during rut – the bulls do not get to choose the cows) and made sure binoculars and spotting scopes were available for everyone. On her return from the trip Jackie let slip her feelings – *“Being an Administrative Assistant in the Lewistown office, I don't get a chance to get out in the field much anymore. When I was asked to assist with the art students on this trip I was overjoyed. To see the young artists and their parent's faces light up while they watched the elk was worth the trip in itself. I hope to be able to assist again in the future!”*

The most important part of this story involves the students and their Lewistown Art Center instructor Jacqueline. Jacqueline came well prepared for her group of artists. She provided all the materials the students needed in order to sketch the elk. She instructed the students on how to watch the elk through artist's eyes. Details such as the size and curves of the antlers, the strong thigh & leg muscles of the bulls as well as their strong swollen necks were pointed out. She also encouraged her students to observe the differences between the movements of the cows and the bulls. As an artist herself, Jacqueline knows that sketching live moving animals is not easy but she also knows that being able to see the live animals in their own surroundings gives an

artist a unique experience that helps her/him to put more "life" in their future drawings. According to Jacqueline, this is exactly what happened during the days following the evening trip to the Elk Viewing Area. When the young artists returned to classes at the Lewistown Art Center, they were excited and inspired because of their experience of observing and sketching the elk in the wild. As a result, Jacqueline says their current drawings show elk that are much more "lively" and realistic since prior to the trip many of them had only seen pictures or photos of elk. Many of the young artists mentioned how "awesome" it had been to see the elk and have asked if they can do it again next year.

A portion of my job at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge involves environmental education and I understand and believe in the power of combining biology and art. The partnership between Diane Oldenburg at the Central Montana Education Center, Jacqueline Mercenier at the Lewistown Art Center and the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge staff proved to be a great plus for this group of young artists.