PROJECT SCROLL RESEARCH NOTE 2026-06

Seven elk for the King of Italy: James E. Bonine's own account of 1875

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SUMMARY

On 1 April 1875 James E. Bonine, a Quaker farmer at Vandalia, Michigan, wrote to the New York sporting weekly *The Rod and the Gun*, replying to an article on whether wounds from deer antlers are poisonous, and described his farm along the way: "I have a park containing two elk, a very fine pair; I sold seven which went to the King of Italy." It is the earliest record of the sale we have found, and it is in the seller's own words. It supports the seven elk of the county history of 1882 against the two that a visitor wrote down in 1885, and it dates the sale before April 1875, to Victor Emmanuel II. Records of the time in Italy and America help explain why a king would buy elk from a Michigan farm: his first wapiti, bought at Antwerp and London in 1863, died within days; his agents brought more from the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific coast, reported in March 1864, and more came in 1865; a New York breeder sold him some thirty by 1866; and the herd at his park of La Mandria kept dying through 1873. No Italian record yet names Bonine or Michigan.

THE RECORD

1. ***The Rod and the Gun*, vol. 6, no. 3 (17 April 1875), p. 43, "Deer Wounds—A Deer Park," letter dated Vandalia, Mich., 1 April 1875, signed "J. E Bonine."**

   > *"I have a farm of 1600 acres of land ... I have a park containing two elk, a very fine pair; I sold seven which went to the King of Italy. I find no trouble in breeding them; they require no shelter during the winter, and can be kept cheaper and easier than cattle."*

   Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/rodgun6187unse/page/n54/mode/1up)

2. **Alfred Mathews, *History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Waterman, Watkins & Co., 1882), p. 251**

   > *Bonine's park, "established some twenty years since," and its elk, "seven of which were sold to King Emmanuel, of Italy, who sent a war vessel for them and numerous other animals of this country, he had purchased for his park of fifteen hundred acres."*

   Library of Congress; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/historyofcasscou00wate)

3. ***Michigan Farmer* (Detroit), vol. 16, no. 33 (18 August 1885), p. 1, "An Agricultural Reconnoissance," signed A. C. G.**

   > *"He has sold several elks to go to other States for city parks, and two went to Victor Emanual, the King of Italy, to grace the Royal Park."*

   Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/sim_michigan-farmer_1885-08-18_16_33)

4. ***L'Opinione*** **(Turin), no. 84, Thursday 24 March 1864, p. 2, under "Leggesi nel *Morning Post* del 21" (an Italian translation of a report in the London *Morning Post* of 21 March)**

> *Of the expedition of the Count di Castiglione and Major Devecchi: "trenta daini di Wapiti … che trovansi ora in uno dei regii parchi del Re d'Italia. Essi vennero presi nelle Montagne Rocciose e su le coste del Pacifico" (thirty wapiti, now in one of the King of Italy's royal parks, taken in the Rocky Mountains and on the coasts of the Pacific).*

Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/TO00190429_1864_00084)

5. **"Curious Farming," *Daily Davenport Democrat* (Davenport, Iowa), 22 May 1866, p. 2, from a New York paper**

> *Of a farmer named Stratton in western New York: "some thirty of these wild American elk were transferred from the woody hills of Western New York to the pleasant parks of the king of Italy, at a profit to the enterprising farmer of some five hundred dollars each."*

Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83045646/1866-05-22/ed-1/?sp=2)

6. **B. Comba, "Note sur deux nouvelles acclimatations faites dans le parc royal de la Mandria, près Turin," *Bulletin de la Société d'acclimatation*, 2e sér., t. IX (1872), pp. 486–507, at pp. 500–501**

> *"En 1863, deux Wapiti acquis à Anvers arrivèrent à la Mandria, et, la même année, quatre autres furent achetés à Londres" (all died within days). "En 1861 [sic], M. le comte de Castiglione fut envoyé par Sa Majesté en Amérique pour y acheter des Cerfs wapiti. La première expédition fut de 60 animaux, dont 47 arrivèrent vivants en Italie." The 1865 arrivals included wapiti "achetés à Londres par le chevalier Piumatti."*

New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/bulletindelasoci0209soci)

7. **Benvenuto Comba, "Sur la mortalité des cerfs, daims, chevreuils et antilopes du parc royal de la Mandria," *Bulletin mensuel de la Société d'acclimatation*, 2e sér., t. X (1873), pp. 612–623, table at p. 623**

   > *Wapiti dead at La Mandria: eleven in 1871, ten in 1872, six in 1873 to the time of writing.*

   Smithsonian Libraries; scan at the Internet Archive · See the record (https://archive.org/details/bulletinmensueld21018soci)

8. **"A Michigan Elk Farm," syndicated, *Elbert County Tribune* (Elbert, Colo.), 13 February 1908, p. 3**

   > *"Several years ago seven head were sold to King Emmanuel of Italy, and the king dispatched a man-of-war … the elk procured of the Bonines were the beginning of a herd which has become world famous."*

   Library of Congress, Chronicling America · See the record (https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn90051300/1908-02-13/ed-1/?sp=3)

WHAT IT CHANGES

Accounts of the Bonine House repeat the county history's seven elk and warship, and a visitor's account of 1885 gives two. Bonine's own letter of 1875, the earliest record of the sale we have found and in his words, supports the count of seven and dates the sale before April 1875, so the buyer was Victor Emmanuel II, who died in January 1878. Why the 1885 visitor wrote "two" is not known; he may have confused the sale with the pair the letter mentions. The Italian and American records of 1863–73 place the sale among the king's purchases of American elk, and they contradict the claim of 1908 that the Bonine elk began his herd: the king's first wapiti were bought at Antwerp and London in 1863, his agents brought more from the West (reported March 1864) and more were bought in London in 1865, and by 1866 he was buying from a New York breeder, whose remaining elk, his brother E. L. Stratton later wrote in *Forest and Stream*, as quoted by D. E. Lantz in 1910, went partly to Italy.

LIMITS

No Italian record yet names Bonine, Michigan, the number sold or a ship; the proof of the purchase would be in the Royal Household accounts in Turin or Rome, which are not online. The letter gives no date for the sale and says nothing of a warship, which first appears in 1882; a family account printed in the 1930s says the king bought a buck in 1869 and had it shipped from New York on an Italian war vessel, and we have not found that ship. “Royal Park” need not mean La Mandria; wapiti were also kept at San Rossore. The *L’Opinione* report is an Italian translation of a London report. Comba dates the Castiglione expedition 1861, against the March 1864 report of its return. The 1866 Stratton story is an unsigned reprint whose New York original has not been found. The 1885 figure is the visitor’s, not the owner’s, writing.

WHAT WE SEARCHED BEFORE CALLING IT NEW

The county histories of 1875, 1882 and 1906; the Internet Archive’s full text for Bonine with elk, Italy, Victor Emanuel or Emmanuel, war vessel and man-of-war, and for wapiti with Mandria, Castiglione, Racconigi and San Rossore; the Harvard copy of *The Rod and the Gun*, vol. 6 (1875); Chronicling America, 1863–1925; the *Bulletin de la Société d’acclimatation*, 1870–78; *L’Opinione* and the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* on the Internet Archive; Google Books; the Underground Railroad Society of Cass County’s pages; Wikipedia (English and Italian); Lantz (1910); and the research repositories Zenodo, OpenAlex and Crossref, with Google Scholar, JSTOR, Academia.edu and ResearchGate through web searches. OSF, Semantic Scholar, CORE, SSRN and arXiv could not be searched from our tools. HathiTrust, the Biodiversity Heritage Library and the Italian royal archives could not be searched inside.

Our standard for calling a finding new is set out in How we research (projectscroll.com/how-we-research/).

“New” means new to print as far as we can tell. If you know of an earlier publication, tell us and we will credit it here and raise the note’s version.

WORKS CITED

Earlier work, catalogues and databases named in this note, besides the records quoted above.

1. D. E. Lantz, *Raising Deer and Other Large Game Animals in the United States*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Biological Survey Bulletin 36 (Washington, 1910), p. 31, quoting E. L. Stratton's letter to *Forest and Stream*: his brother's remaining elk "bought by some foreigners and shipped ... thence some to Italy and the rest to Germany." Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/raisingdeerother00lant
2. *News* (National Live Stock Producers Association), vols. 16–18 (about 1937), p. 49: the family account of a buck sold to Victor Emmanuel in 1869 and shipped from New York. Google Books (snippet), accessed October 2026. https://books.google.com/books?id=TwYfAQAAMAAJ&q=%22war+vessel%22
3. Underground Railroad Society of Cass County, "The House," accessed October 2026. https://urscc.org/the-house.html
4. Wikipedia, "Parco naturale La Mandria," accessed October 2026. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parco_naturale_La_Mandria
5. Internet Archive, full-text search. https://archive.org/
6. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, accessed October 2026. https://www.loc.gov/collections/chronicling-america/
7. Zenodo, OpenAlex and Crossref, searched October 2026. https://zenodo.org/
8. Howard S. Rogers, *History of Cass County, from 1825 to 1875* (Cassopolis: W. H. Mansfield, 1875). Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/historyofcasscou00roge
9. L. H. Glover, ed., *A Twentieth Century History of Cass County, Michigan* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1906). Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/twentiethcentury00glov
10. J. D. Caton, "Wounds from Deers' Antlers," *The Rod and the Gun*, vol. 6, no. 2 (10 April 1875), p. 22, the article Bonine replied to. Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/rodgun6187unse/page/n33/mode/1up
11. *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 1863–1878, on the Internet Archive, searched October 2026. https://archive.org/search?query=gazzetta+ufficiale+del+regno+d%27italia
12. Google Books, searched October 2026. https://books.google.com/
13. HathiTrust Digital Library (catalogue only; full-text search refused our tools), October 2026. https://www.hathitrust.org/

14. Biodiversity Heritage Library (not reachable from our tools), October 2026. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/
15. *Forest and Stream* 48 (5 June 1897), p. 445: E. L. Stratton's letter, as cited by Lantz (1910), p. 31; not seen. https://archive.org/details/raisingdeerother00lant
16. Wikipedia, "La Mandria Regional Park" and "Victor Emmanuel II of Italy," accessed October 2026. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Mandria_Regional_Park

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THE FULL STORY

The finding is set out in context, with the rest of its sources, in The Bonine House at Vandalia (projectscroll.com/news/the-bonine-house/). In the discoveries register:

- `bonine-elk-letter-1875` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#bonine-elk-letter-1875)
- `bonine-elk-italy-1885` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#bonine-elk-italy-1885)
- `bonine-italy-castiglione` (projectscroll.com/discoveries/#bonine-italy-castiglione)

HOW TO CITE THIS NOTE

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