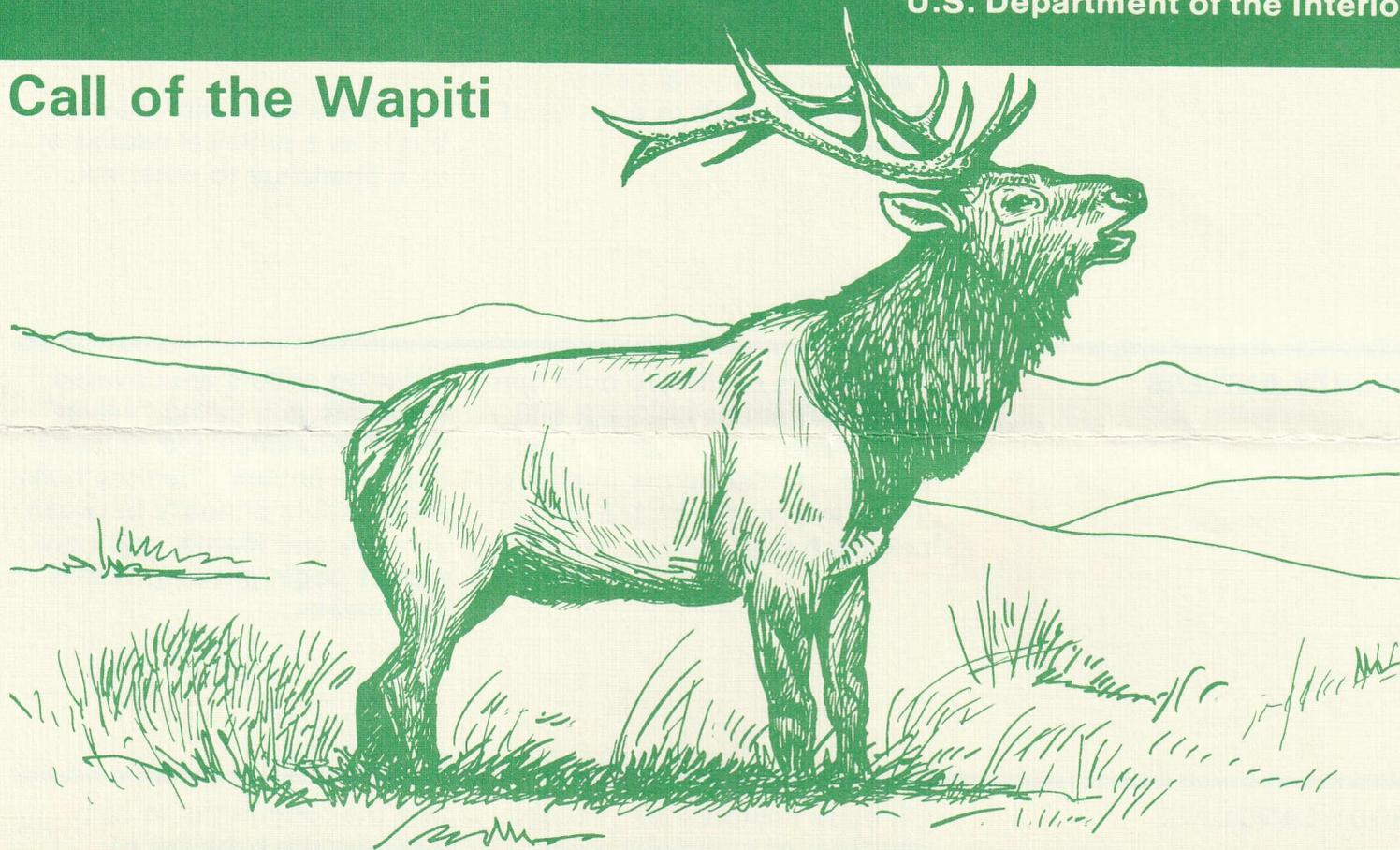


# Rocky Mountain

National Park  
Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## Call of the Wapiti



North American elk, or wapiti, were once plentiful in the Rocky Mountain National Park area.

As the Estes Valley became increasingly settled, elk were hunted extensively, and their habitat shrank as cattle began feeding on lands originally grazed by elk. As a result, the elk population declined and by 1890, few elk remained.

In 1913 and 1914, before the establishment of the park, 49 elk from the Yellowstone National Park area were released here. Around the same time, an all-out effort to eliminate predators--including the gray wolf and the grizzly bear--began. A decrease in predators probably hastened the recovery of Rocky's elk population.

Currently, the elk population in the park fluctuates dramatically from summer to winter. As many as 4,500 elk in summer may dwindle to 1,500 during winter, as elk migrate to lower elevations.

Increasing development along the park boundary threatens to diminish open space and traditional migration routes, thus decreasing winter forage and habitat.

Efforts to preserve elk and other wildlife habitat are growing. Specifically, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation--in addition to assisting in the printing of this brochure--raises funds used to enhance and protect wildlife habitat. Ample natural habitat is critical in supporting these magnificent herds.

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## THE ELK RUT

Elk descend from the high country to montane meadows for the annual breeding season, or "rut."

During the rut, bull elk compete with each other for the right to take over and breed with a harem of cows. Prime bulls, eight to nine years old, stand the best chance of mating with cows.

Competition among bulls includes little fighting, since fighting causes injury and depletes energy. Instead, mature bulls compete for cows by displaying their antlers, necks and bodies, and by emitting strong, musky odors.

Bull elk get little rest or food during the rut which makes them very susceptible to the rigors of winter.

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## THE BUGLE

Another bull elk courtship display is the "bugle"--a call that begins as a deep resonant tone, then rises rapidly to a high-pitched squeal before dropping in pitch to a series of grunts.

Cows and younger bulls sometimes bugle, but they are unable to match the nuances of the older bulls' calls.

Scientists speculate that elk bugle as a physical release or as a challenge to other elk.

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## MIGHTY ANTLERS

The antlers of mature bulls can weigh 50 pounds (23 kg) and can measure five feet (1.5 m) across. Antlers grow in about 140 days--a rate of 1/2 inch (1 cm) each day!

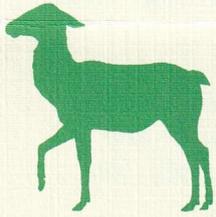
Growing antlers are covered with soft skin called "velvet" which nourishes and protects the new antlers. Healthy bulls shed antlers annually between January and March, and new antlers begin growing within two weeks.

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## BODY LANGUAGE

Elk body postures are probably one form of communication among the herd.

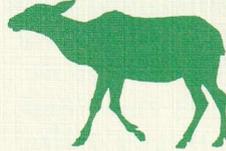
Use the silhouettes to help interpret the behavior of individual elk in the herd.



threatened



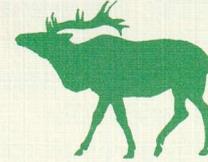
courtship



submissive



alarmed



herding



fighting

## ELK VIEWING AND PROTECTION

During autumn, good places to see elk and to hear them bugle include the Kawuneeche Valley, Horseshoe Park, Moraine Park, and Upper Beaver Meadows.

Bugling is most often heard at dusk, but watch for elk along the edges of clearings early in the morning or in the evening.

To minimize disturbance to the animals and to ensure a pleasant experience for all visitors, please observe these viewing guidelines:

■ Turn off car lights and engine immediately. Shut car doors quietly and keep conversations to a minimum.

■ Stay by the roadside while in Horseshoe Park. Travel on foot or horse off established roadways and designated trails is prohibited during the rut, as signed.

■ Remain by the roadside and out of meadows if elk are present--observe and photograph from a distance that is comfortable to the elk. If the elk move away or if their attention is directed toward you, you are too close.

■ The use of elk whistles or spotlights in the park is prohibited.

