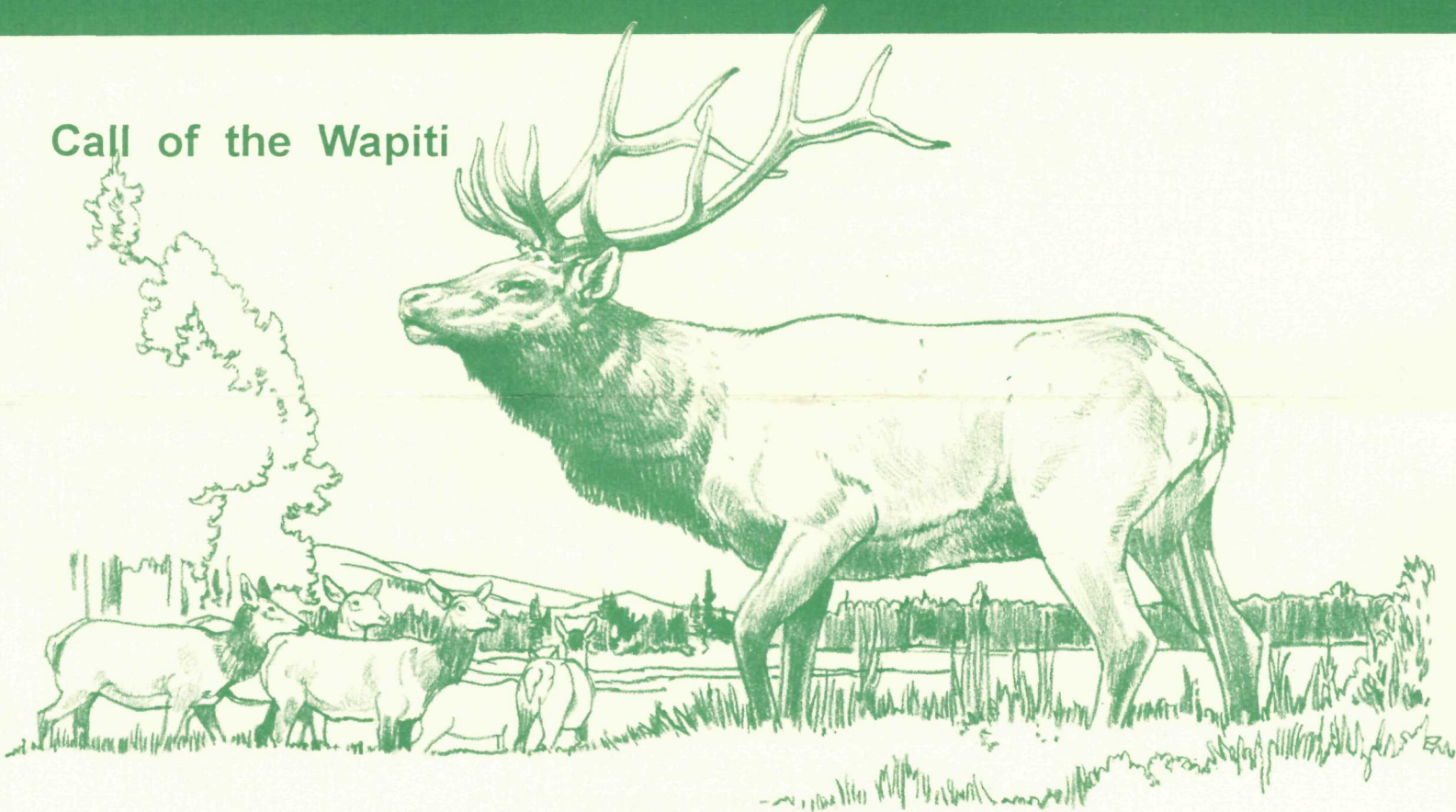


Rocky Mountain

National Park
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Call of the Wapiti



ELK HISTORY

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 Yellowstone National Park were transplanted to this area. Around the same time, an all-out effort began to eliminate predators--including the gray wolf and the grizzly bear. The resulting 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. Concentrations of 4,500 elk in summer may dwindle to 1,500 during winter as elk migrate to lower elevations.

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

THE MATING SEASON

As Autumn approaches, elk descend from the high country to montane meadows for the annual breeding season. Within the gathering herds, the larger, antlered males, weighing up to 1100 pounds (495 kg) and standing five feet (1.5 m) at the shoulders, move nervously among the bands of smaller females.

In this season of excitement bull elk compete with one another for the right to breed with a herd of females. Prime bulls, eight to nine years old, stand the best chance of mating.

While competition is high among bulls it includes little fighting, since fighting causes injury and depletes energy. Instead, mature bulls compete for cows by displaying their antlers, necks and bodies. They emit strong, musky odors and bugle.

With little rest or food during the mating season, bulls enter the winter highly susceptible to the hardships of the coming months.

Cow elk, weighing up to 600 pounds (270 kg) carry the new life for 250 days through the rigors of winter and early spring. In June, a lightly spotted calf of 30 pounds is born. Nursing and foraging through the rich seasons of summer and fall, the calves may reach 250 (115 kg) pounds by late autumn.

THE BUGLE

Bull elk signal the season of mating with a crescendo of deep, resonant tones that rise rapidly to a high-pitched squeal before dropping to a series of grunts. It is this call, or bugle, that gives rise to the term "rut," for the mating season. Rut is derived from the Latin word meaning roar.

The eerie call, echoing through the autumn nights, challenges rival males and may serve as a physical release of tension.

Cows and younger bulls may also bugle, but they are unable to match the strength or range of the older bull's call.

MIGHTY ANTLERS

The antlers of mature bulls, weighing 25 pounds (12kg) or more and measuring five feet (1.5 m) across, can grow in about 140 days--a rate of 1/2 inch (1 cm) each day!

Bull elk shed their antlers yearly between January and April: new growth begins within two weeks.

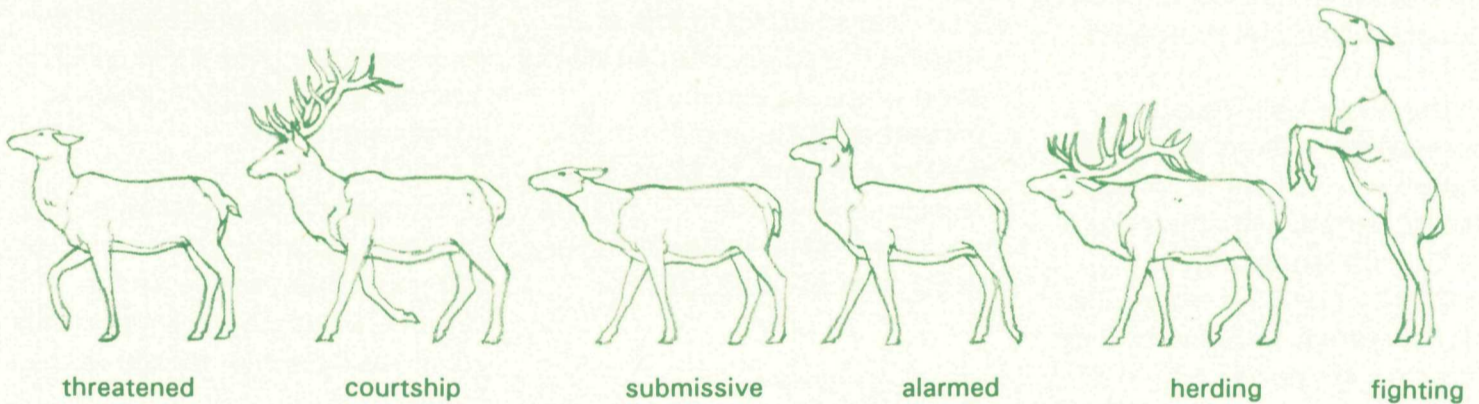
Growing antlers are nourished and protected by a soft skin covering called "velvet". In late summer, bull elk vigorously rub their antlers against trees and shrubs to remove the velvet and polish the newly exposed surfaces.

Fallen antlers are consumed by smaller life forms and vital nutrients are returned to the life cycles of the landscape. To preserve these nutrient cycles, all antlers and bones must remain in place and must not be removed from the park.

BODY LANGUAGE

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

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



threatened

courtship

submissive

alarmed

herding

fighting

ELK VIEWING AND PROTECTION

During Autumn, elk congregate in the Kawuneeche Valley, Horseshoe Park, Moraine Park, and Upper Beaver Meadows.

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

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, Moraine Park, and Upper Beaver Meadows. Travel is restricted to roadways and designated trails.

■ Observe and photograph from a distance that is comfortable to the elk. If the elk move away or if their attention is diverted, you are too close.

■ Do not use artificial lights or calls to view or attract wildlife.