


Wapiti



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I was a young lad on a fishing trip with the old man who had adopted me for all things outdoors related. We were fishing a trout stream in North Park, when I decided to explore some new country. It was rumored, by the old man, there were beaver ponds teaming with trout, just over a nearby ridge. Besides, it was an opportunity for the old man to get rid of my hyperactive carcass for a few hours.

As I crested the ridge, I saw something more fantastic than a beaver pond. Standing in the meadow, a mere 25 yards from me, was a bull elk and three cows. It was the first time I had ever seen an elk, and I vowed it to not be my last. I had never seen such a majestic creature in all my 10 years of life.

What we refer to, as an elk is also known as a wapiti. The word comes from historical roots in Canada, long before European settlers arrived. The Shawnee and Cree Indians used the name wapiti. The English used the term elk to describe the animal we know as a moose.

When the English arrived in Canada, and saw the size of a wapiti, being so much larger than European red deer, they used the term elk, assuming it was related to the moose.

At one time, there were six subspecies of elk in North America. These include the Rocky Mountain, which are the ones who live in Colorado, having the largest antlers of all species.

The Roosevelt elk live primarily in the Pacific Northwest and have the largest body size of all species. In contrast is the Tule elk, which lives in California and has the smallest body size.

Then there is the Manitoban elk that calls the Northern Great Plains home. The other two species, the Merriam's of Mexico, and the Eastern from east of the Mississippi, are now extinct.

For our discussion here, we will focus on the Rocky Mountain elk, since he shares our state with us. At full size, a bull may exceed 700 pounds, while a cow could top the scale at over 500 pounds. Standing 5 feet tall at the shoulder, you can understand the awe this young lad was in, the first time he put his eyes on one.

Only the bulls have antlers. The antlers, which may top 40 pounds, are shed each year in the spring. Antlers start out soft, and covered in velvet, but



by late summer, become solid bone.

Their hide is a copper color, becoming a light tan during the fall and winter months. They have a very light beige rear end, which is very visible from distances.

Elk are a grazing animal, generally feeding on grasses and flowering plants during the summer months. During the fall, elk become mainly browsers, feeding on sprouts and branches of shrubs and trees. A cow will consume up to 15 pounds of food a day, while a bull may top 20 pounds.

The rut is the most interesting time to be around elk, as fall is the breeding time. The bulls will gather the cows and calves into small groups, called a harem. Bulls will wallow in mud and coat themselves with urine to attract cows. I don't advise any single men to try this in an effort to attract young ladies, as it only seems to work for elk.

Bulls will go to great lengths to protect their harems from other bulls. They will rub trees, and scrape the ground with their horns to intimidate any other approaching bulls. If the approaching bull decides to fight, the encounter will be very violent and could be "to the death."

Elk communicate very well through vocalization. A bark is a warning of danger, while chirps, mews and grunts are normal herd conversation, much like me at the early morning breakfast table. The signature call is that of a "bugle." The bugle starts out as a guttural bellow, climbing to a squealing whistle, and ending in a grunt or two.

The bull, to show off his fitness to cows or to communicate a warning to any other



(Top) A large 6-by-6 point bull elk during the early fall. (Center) Bull elk bugling, usually heard during the rut. (Photos courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife) (Right) A close up picture of a pair of elk 'ivories.' (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

bull in the area uses the bugle. Sometimes the bull bugles when he is looking for a fight, similar to boys at the bus stop, wanting to show-off for the girls.

Elk and walrus are the only two animals in North America to have ivory teeth. The walrus has tusks that extend well outside of its mouth. In an elk, the ivories are similar to teeth, located in the upper jaw, one on each side of the incisors.

Scientists believe that elk originally crossed the Bering land bridge into Alaska. At the time, these ivory teeth were actually tusks, and were 6 to

8 inches long. Through evolution, they are now just teeth. These teeth have been prized by hunters for centuries and used in jewelry.

At one time, there were an estimated 10 million elk across North America. Today, that number hovers around 1 million head. We have the largest elk herd in North America, with an estimated 300,000 calling Colorado home.

I spend every fall elk hunting in Colorado. With as many years as I have chased them around, I never tire of seeing and hearing them. Just like that young boy at the beaver pond so long ago, I still



stand in awe at the great wapiti. I hope he stays in Colorado forever.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcsppi.org



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I have mentioned...

...my "klutziness" before. It is just not to be believed. Loading dishes in the dishwasher one night, moving at MACH 9 and clipped my shin on a corner of the open door. Shredded the skin, blood pouring into my shoe, and a trip to Urgent Care the next day, where stitches were almost impossible to do. Fast forward one month (poor choice of words) to cutting a corner a little too close at work one day, and hitting my shin on a box of reams of paper. Shredded skin (again), blood pouring into shoe (again) and giant Steri-strips instead of stitches. My husband mentioned shin guards for Christmas. And by the way, Urgent Care in Montrose rocks...they didn't laugh too much at the second visit!

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