

Colorado elk fun facts



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The elk is synonymous with Colorado. You cannot have one without the other. Ask any flat land hunter, that has spent most of their hunting life chasing whitetail deer in the thick woods or cornfields, and the answer is usually an elk.

I was on a dream hunt in Canada, looking for a moose. In conversation with the guides in camp, they were all jealous that I lived in Colorado. They unanimously agreed that elk was their dream hunt. For them, the moose was old hat, something for them to fill the freezer with. Rather than the usual column about elk, I decided to try and find out some things that most folks, including seasoned elk hunters, don't know.

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, and it simply means white rump. 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



A herd of Colorado elk to remind us of another reason we live here. (Photo/USFWS)

the moose. I have hunted red deer several times, and their similarity to elk is amazing, including their behavior during the rut.

At one time, there were 6 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, named after old Teddy, the Tule, who live in California, and the Manitoban of the Great Plains.

The other 2 species, the Merriam's of Mexico, and the Eastern from east of the Mississippi, are now extinct. It is a sad thing that so many of the species have become extinct before we ever had a chance to see them.

Elk have ivories, very hard teeth in their upper jaw, 1 on each side. These ivory teeth have been used in jewelry for centuries, but they did not always have them. Scientist believe that those ivories

used to be tusks, used for fighting off predators and to engage rivals during the rut.

As the years passed, elk antlers evolved into large headgear we know of today, and the canine fangs receded into the head. Elk still maintains some ancient behavior associated with those fangs, like curling their lip to sneer and reveal the teeth. Species similar to elk, like the Chinese water deer, still have sharp fangs.

Elk antlers are almost like a solar panel, as they have been going green long before it became a fad. The more sunlight elk soak up in those antlers, the more testosterone they produce, which leads to some very impressive antler growth. A fully mature rack can weigh upwards of 40 pounds. Scientist study elk antlers, as they grow as much as an inch a day. Medical science hopes to use their incredible growth rate in the fight against cancer.

Don't believe that size doesn't matter. Researchers have observed impressive numbers when the cows are checking out the bulls. When a cow has a choice between a bull with 8 antler points, and a bull with 10 antler points, the cow consistently chooses the 10. Now you know at least the cows can count to 10.

Female deer are not the only female that can grow antlers. The same phenomenon happens with elk, although rarely. Hormonal imbalances cause female elk to develop antlers, although there is some doubt about their ability to reproduce.

Elk bugle, making the most iconic sound in the mountains. It's loud and can carry for miles. During the rut, that bull bugle is one of the greatest sounds in all of nature. The sound is too high to be produced by an elk's voice box. Research says

that there are 2 forces at work when you hear that bugle. If you watch a bugling bull closely, you'll see that he is moving both his lips and his nostrils. In other words, he's roaring and whistling at the same time.

Besides the verbal communications, elk have other methods. It has recently been discovered that elk anklebones make a unique cracking and popping sound when they walk. Researchers believe elk use this sound to signal their presence to other elk, especially when sneaking up from behind.

Bull elk often use a very strange mating technique when they are trying to attract the cows. The bull digs a hole in the ground and spend some time filling the hole with his urine. Once the hole reaches the required depth of urine, the bull jumps in and takes a bath in it. The scent apparently is a favorite

amongst the ladies, but men, I wouldn't try this at home if it is marital bliss you seek.

Speaking of scent, elk have an uncanny ability to pick up yours. With wind current travelling in their favor, elk have been known to detect your scent from well over 600 yards away. If they catch your scent, they will run, and run they do. At top speed, an elk can top 40 mph, and can make a vertical jump over 8 feet. Not bad for an animal that tops 700 pounds if he is not counting his calories.

Speaking about calories, elk can be omnivorous, having an occasional taste for meat. Not saying that elk are going to turn into man eaters, but they are opportunity feeders. If an elk stumbles upon a bird nest containing nestlings, he may snack on the contents for a quick protein boost.

The elk populations are doing well overall, with numbers around 1 million counting all 4 species, and 280,000 in Colorado. On average, 250,000 hunters take to the woods each year in our fair state, and around 1 hunter in 6 is successful. Long live wapiti.

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Multiple elk poached, abandoned in Las Animas County; reward offered for information

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

LAS ANIMAS, Colo - Colorado Parks and Wildlife seeks the public's help to identify those responsible for illegally poaching and abandoning carcasses of four large bull elk on four separate ranches in Las Animas County. The elk were illegally shot Sept. 13, 26 and 27 near the communities of Stonewall and Picketwire.

Of the four bull elk illegally poached, one was shot and abandoned whole; one was wounded and had to be put down; another was shot with the backstraps removed; the fourth had its head removed with no meat taken.

"These were senseless and disgraceful acts which demonstrates a complete disregard for Colorado wildlife," said Jim Hawkins, CPW Assistant Chief of Law Enforcement and Operation

Game Thief Coordinator.

Investigators would like to speak with anyone who may have information about these crimes. Information may be provided anonymously through Operation Game Thief at 1-877-265-6648 or by email to game.thief@state.co.us. A \$1,000 reward is being offered for tips that lead to a citation or an arrest. Anyone willing to testify about information they provided which led to the filing of charges would be eligible for a preference point or hunting license.

Poaching is a serious, costly crime which harms legitimate sportspersons, wildlife viewers, small business owners and taxpayers. If convicted, a person charged with poaching violations could face heavy fines and suspension of hunting and fishing licenses.



Colorado Parks and Wildlife seeks the public's help to identify those responsible for illegally poaching and abandoning four large bull elk (similar to the one pictured here) on four different ranches in Las Animas County. The elk were illegally shot Sept. 13, 26 and 27 on separate ranches near the communities of Stonewall and Picketwire. (Courtesy photo/CPW)

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