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The Sights and Sounds of Autumn in the Estes Valley

Estes Park, CO — Nature's last fling in the mountains begins with cooler nights and the gradual changing of colors from higher to lower elevations. In the fall, the weather is at its very best and most reliable. There's time for one last trip into the mountains before the snow flies. Your appetites change; hot food regains its appeal; long pants and an extra sweater feel good again. The air is brisk and refreshing. Your step quickens. Perhaps you're ready for a more challenging mountain hike — all the way to Emerald Lake from Bear Lake, or the much easier walk to Alberta Falls, Fern or Cub Lake.

If you choose to stay in the village of Estes Park, there are more activities than you can do in a day, including opportunities to see the glories of autumn from horseback. September is a month of festivals, with the annual ***Longs Peak Scottish-Irish Highland Festival*** (Sept. 10-13, 2009), the Estes Park Film Festival (Sept. 17-20, 2009), the ***Fine Arts & Crafts Show*** (Sept. 19-20, 2009), ***Autumn Gold — a Festival of Brats and Bands*** (Sept. 26-27, 2009), and closing the month is Estes Park's popular ***Elk Fest*** (Oct. 3-4, 2009).

Our Autumn is Pure Gold

It's hard to believe that it's already time to watch for the aspen's annual transformation to pure gold, a sight that makes you catch your breath with wonder year after year. Everywhere you turn there are splashes of color. Some of the best viewing is south of town on Colorado Highway 7, along the Peak-to-Peak Highway. Along Little Valley Road into National Forest Service land (off Fish Creek Road which intersects U.S. Highway 36 just east of Estes Park), there are magnificent stands of aspen waiting for the viewing. In Rocky Mountain National Park, extraordinary stands of aspen can be found at Hidden Valley, Bear Lake and Wild Basin.

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In Rocky Mountain National Park, at elevations from 9,000 to 11,000 feet, color comes in the early part of September and moves steadily down to 8,000 feet by mid-month. Depending on the weather, full color in the Estes Valley may not be reached until late in September or, under ideal conditions, early October. Ideal conditions mean sufficient moisture, sunny days and cool nights to produce the choicest selection of colors.

Fall display can last as long as four weeks when there's no early snow or high wind. Patches of identical color indicate a clone of trees, a group growing from the same root system. These genetically identical trees will be the same shade of yellow, gold or red and will change color and drop their leaves at the same time.

Stay Alert for Wildlife

One sign of the change of seasons unique to the mountains is the elk bugling. Bugling is the name given to the call of the bull elk as part of the mating ritual. As September approaches, elk (called "wapiti" by the Native Americans who first settled this region) descend from the high country to lower elevations and, within the herds (technically, "gangs" of elk) the larger antlered bulls, weighing up to 1,100 pounds and standing five feet at the shoulders, move nervously among the bands of smaller females.

While competition is high among the bulls for the right to breed with the harems of cows, there is little fighting since this can cause injury and deplete energy. Instead, mature bulls 8 to 9 years old stand the best chance of mating. They compete for cows by displaying their antlers, necks and bodies and by bugling, or calling.

Bugling is characterized by 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," since the root of the word is in the Latin word for roar. The eerie sound of the bugle challenges rival males and the strength or range of the call most often matches the size and maturity of the bull.

Younger bulls may be seen "rehearsing" their skills for the time when they're mature enough to present a real challenge to the older bulls. They look for all the world like schoolboys responding to a dare and it can be comical watching them as they approach a harem of cows, coming only close enough to satisfy their envious compatriots who stand at a greater, and safer, distance.

The most popular viewing areas in the Estes Valley are the golf courses and around the Stanley Hotel. In the National Park, the best opportunities to see and hear this powerful natural show are in Moraine Park, Upper Beaver Meadows and Horseshoe Park

The best viewing times are at dawn and from late afternoon until dusk. Each evening in the park, from early September until late October, Park Rangers, naturalists and volunteers (called the Bugle Corps) conduct talks and provide information on elk natural history. Park roads can be congested at times and visitors should be prepared for delays.

The National Park Service offers the following "Ethics of Wildlife Watching:" Watch or view wildlife from a distance, turn off car lights and close doors quietly, observe all area closure signs for your own protection as well as that of the animals, keep conversations to a minimum, drive slowly and be alert for animals crossing the road, never feed the animals, and, finally, use no wildlife calls or spotlights.

Responsible wildlife watching means putting the needs of the animals before our own desires to view them.

For general information about activities in Estes Park, call 800-44-ESTES; for information about activities in Rocky Mountain National Park, call 970-586-1206.

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