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Estes Park Area Elk Rut draws plentiful human attention

Estimates are that a full tenth of Colorado's total elk population live in the Estes Park area (3,500), it's no wonder why these massive animals are a major attraction for visitors to Rocky Mountain National Park and Estes Park. Each year thousands of people come to enjoy viewing elk and listening to the bulls bugle in the late summer and early fall.

To some, the mating period, known as "the rut" is as synonymous with autumn in the mountains as is the changing color of aspen leaves. It's a season marked by the sounds of the elk, as well as the sights. Most predominant of the sounds beginning in September is known as bugling – a bellow that escalates to a squealing whistle that ends with a grunt. That's how the bull advertises his fitness to cows, and warning to other bulls to stay away.

The mating season generally occurs between September, when a bull's antlers are fully grown and almost ready for the displays and battles to come, and late October. During the rut, a dominant bull gathers cows in a harem, to which he claims all breeding rights. He will not give up that right without a fight. The work of gathering is reduced by the existence of herds of cows. It is sometimes made easier by the existence of the harems of other bulls. Besides fighting a harem bull and taking away all of his cows, a bull is not above sneaking cows away from another bull. Bulls are opportunistic; if a cow can be gotten, she will be.

The gathering in of a harem is not the end of a bull's herding effort. He must constantly work to keep his cows together. Cows of a harem must be herded in order to keep them together, otherwise they will readily stray. Bulls are quite aggressive in keeping their cows together and moving them to where they want. They commonly move their cows by threat and push/shove. A bull will cut off a wandering cow just as a cowboy on horseback would cut off a steer by quickly quartering around the straying animal and bringing it back to the herd. A bull will use his antlers, which are quite sharp, to prod a wandering cow and direct her back to the herd. Sometimes a bull will gore a cow that's not behaving correctly. A bull must keep his cows together if mating is going to be efficient. However, it should be recognized that a cow stays in the harem by her own volition. If she chose, she could bolt from the herd and associate with another bull.

The biggest bulls are animals in prime physical condition and may be six to eight years old. Younger bulls may try to butt in – they are physically able to breed by their second summer -- but they seldom get a chance to mate. When the rut begins, bulls begin to bugle. The sounds they make are among the more haunting and beautiful in nature, as memorable as the howls of wolves and the calls of loons.

A cow listens to the bugle for clues about the bull's size. A bugle, like a human voice, varies with the individual, but the older, larger bulls usually bugle more loudly than their young rivals. Their bugles advertise their presence and fitness to both females and other males. They also bugle to announce or accept a challenge from another male.

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The rut takes a lot of energy. During the summer, bulls spend their time feeding in preparation for the energy needs of the rut and winter. Summer feeding is especially important since bulls eat little during the rut which lasts 4-6 weeks. A mature bull may lose 20% of his body weight during the rut. After the rut, a bull, even if he eats to replenish his energy reserves, may be so depleted he cannot survive the upcoming winter.

The wapiti, or elk, is the largest of Colorado's native deer (7 to 9 feet long, with a 4- to 6-inch tail, and weighing 450 – 900 pounds). Commonly called "elk" in this country, wapiti is a preferred name because elsewhere in the world "elk" refers to the animal we call moose.

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