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COLORADO PARKS & WILDLIFE

Watching Deer & Elk



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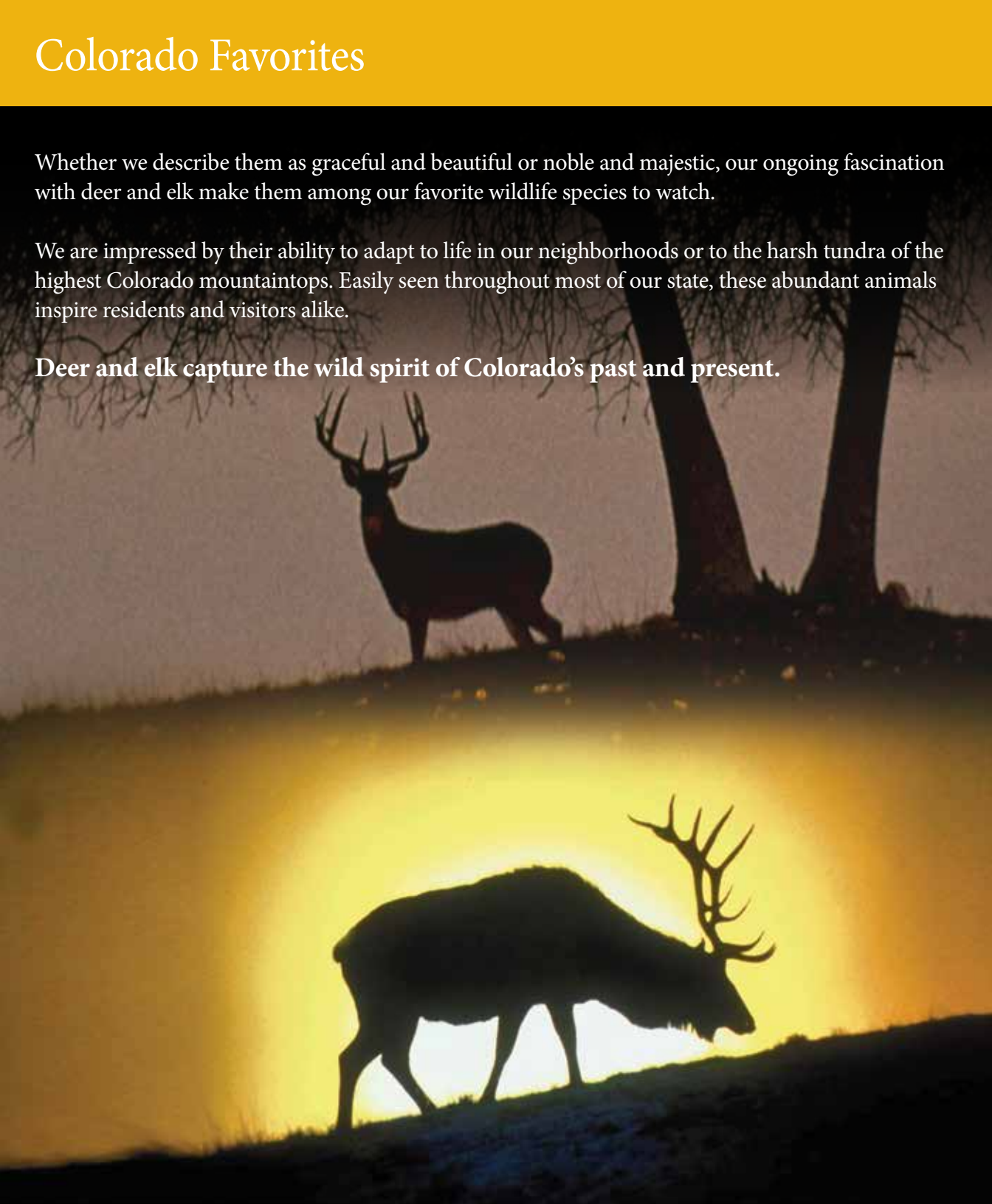
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Colorado Favorites

Whether we describe them as graceful and beautiful or noble and majestic, our ongoing fascination with deer and elk make them among our favorite wildlife species to watch.

We are impressed by their ability to adapt to life in our neighborhoods or to the harsh tundra of the highest Colorado mountaintops. Easily seen throughout most of our state, these abundant animals inspire residents and visitors alike.

Deer and elk capture the wild spirit of Colorado's past and present.



Mule Deer

Odocoileus hemionus

A Deer's Life

Mule deer, the most familiar large mammal in Colorado, inspire us with their beauty and grace. They are a welcome reminder that the common is not necessarily ordinary.

The mule deer was named for its large mule-like ears that are ideal for listening. Deer males are called bucks, females are does and the young are fawns.



Deer are social animals that live in family groups.

Fawns are born in early or mid-June and twins are not uncommon. Deer mothers hide their offspring for the first few weeks, visiting only to feed them. As the fawns grow stronger, they join their mothers in small groups that feed and rest together.

During summer, bucks roam in small groups or on their own. By late October, the courtship season — or “rut” — begins. Bucks compete for the attention of does, and occasionally spar in combat to determine dominance. The breeding season ends by late January, when migrating mule deer herds reach their winter range.





Biologists estimate that Colorado is home to 400,000 deer.

However, they were not always so abundant. Early in the 20th century the sighting of a “mulie” was cause for celebration. By the 1930s, market hunting, drought, and poaching had reduced deer numbers dramatically. The recovery of the Colorado mule deer population is one of the more profound wildlife management success stories for Colorado Parks & Wildlife. Wildlife managers still face significant challenges in maintaining Colorado’s mule deer herds, including habitat loss and disease.

Mule deer prefer open habitats where forest and shrublands mingle with meadows —

where they can safely feed at the forest edge. Mule deer usually move with the seasons. Summer finds them trekking to higher elevations, following the retreating snowline as new plant sprouts are exposed. The cool breezes of the high country provide refreshing relief from biting insects. When days shorten and deep snows return to cover food and limit movement, mule deer retreat to their winter range of lower shrubby hillsides and river valleys.



Mule deer are herbivores, browsing on the juiciest plants with the richest taste and nutrition.

They feast on tender flowers, leaves and stems in spring and summer. During winter, they clip the buds and shoots of shrubs and young trees.



Mule Deer



You can enjoy watching mule deer year-round in most parts of Colorado — wherever good deer habitat is found.

The best viewing opportunities are at dawn and dusk, when these animals are most active. Here's an idea of what you can expect to see each season.

Spring

Throughout the season, mule deer are often found in crop fields.

Early in spring, deer can look a bit scruffy as they shed their thick winter coats. Bucks start showing buds of new antler growth. Their antlers grow rapidly as summer approaches.



Summer

Look in shrublands, aspen woodlands, wet meadows and at the edge of the alpine tundra.

Because deer blend in so well with their environment, slowly scan areas and look for slight movements. Does will seek privacy to bear young — be sure to keep your distance!

Both sexes sport sleek summer brown coats, and the bucks' growing antlers are covered in "velvet" — a fuzzy, blood-rich skin that supplies oxygen and nutrients. Later in the season, when the antlers are full size, the bucks scrape the velvet off on trees and other hard objects.

Fall

Preoccupied with courtship and mating, mule deer are active all day...

at the edge between forest and meadow or where the pine and aspen mix with oak brush and sage.

A group of does may be a sign that bucks are nearby — displaying their full, shiny antlers and thick, swollen necks.



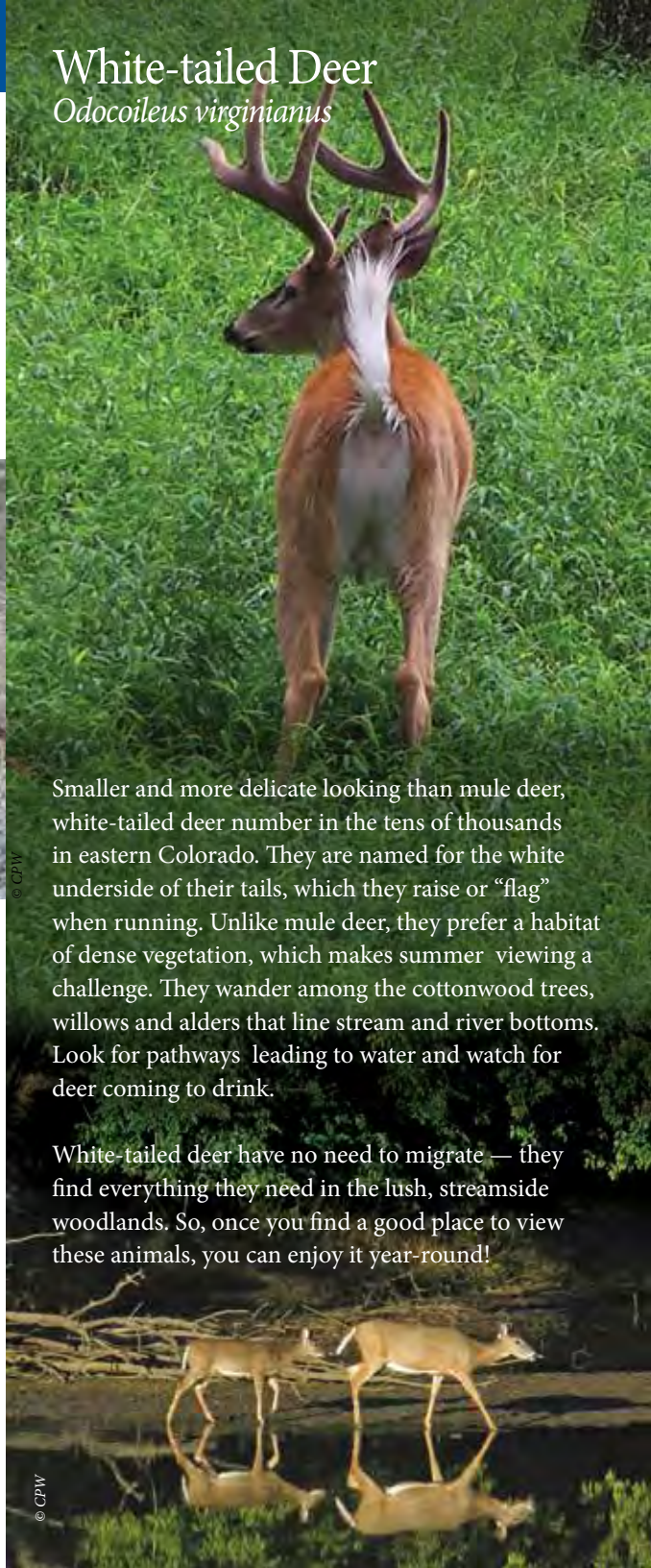
White-tailed Deer

Odocoileus virginianus

Winter

This season, stay warm and view mule deer from the car!

They'll be where the food is — shrub-filled winter range of low-elevation hillsides and river bottoms. Hoof prints in fresh snow reveal prime spots to stop and look.



Smaller and more delicate looking than mule deer, white-tailed deer number in the tens of thousands in eastern Colorado. They are named for the white underside of their tails, which they raise or “flag” when running. Unlike mule deer, they prefer a habitat of dense vegetation, which makes summer viewing a challenge. They wander among the cottonwood trees, willows and alders that line stream and river bottoms. Look for pathways leading to water and watch for deer coming to drink.

White-tailed deer have no need to migrate — they find everything they need in the lush, streamside woodlands. So, once you find a good place to view these animals, you can enjoy it year-round!



Similar but Different...

Deer and elk (and moose) are members of the deer family. They share many physical similarities: they all have brownish coats, grow antlers and live in groups. But each species has distinct habits and preferences.



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© BRUCE GILL



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Mule Deer stand about 3 feet at the shoulder. Bucks can weigh up to 300 pounds. Females are smaller.

Mule deer are typically brown in summer and grayish in winter. They have large, mule-like ears; a small whitish rump-patch and a short, narrow, rope-like tail tipped with black hair.



Antlers of mature bucks branch from the main beam, and each tine branches again.

They prefer open forests and shrublands, especially the edge where forest and meadow meet.

Mule deer are primarily browsers, eating flowers, leaves, young tree buds and shrubs.

Many migrate seasonally between summer and winter ranges.

During the rut, dominant bucks travel from group to group, and will breed with many females. Bucks compete for dominance through posturing and clashes.

The mule deer's life span is 12–15 years.

White-tailed Deer are slightly smaller than mule deer — on average about 50 pounds lighter.

White-tails can be gray or copper colored, have small, delicate features and sport long, wide tails that lift to reveal a white “flag.”



Antlers of mature white-tailed bucks have one main beam; the tines do not branch.

They prefer treed areas near the water's edge and are especially attracted to woodlands along rivers of eastern Colorado.

White-tailed deer eat a variety of flowering plants and grasses. No detailed studies have been made on the diet of these deer in Colorado, but studies in the East have shown that browse provides only 3–17 percent of their diet.

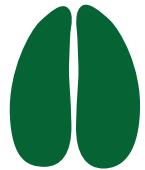
They do not usually migrate seasonally.

Courtship and breeding is similar to mule deer, though sometimes described as more aggressive.

The white-tailed deer's life span is 12–15 years.

Elk stand about 4–5 feet tall at the shoulder and mature bulls may exceed 1,000 pounds. Cows can reach 500 pounds.

Elk are brown with light-colored rump-patches. Unlike deer, elk have a mane of dark brown hair around the neck.



Antlers of mature bulls are multi-branched and the main beam is dark brown with ivory-colored tips.

They prefer wet meadows near forest cover.

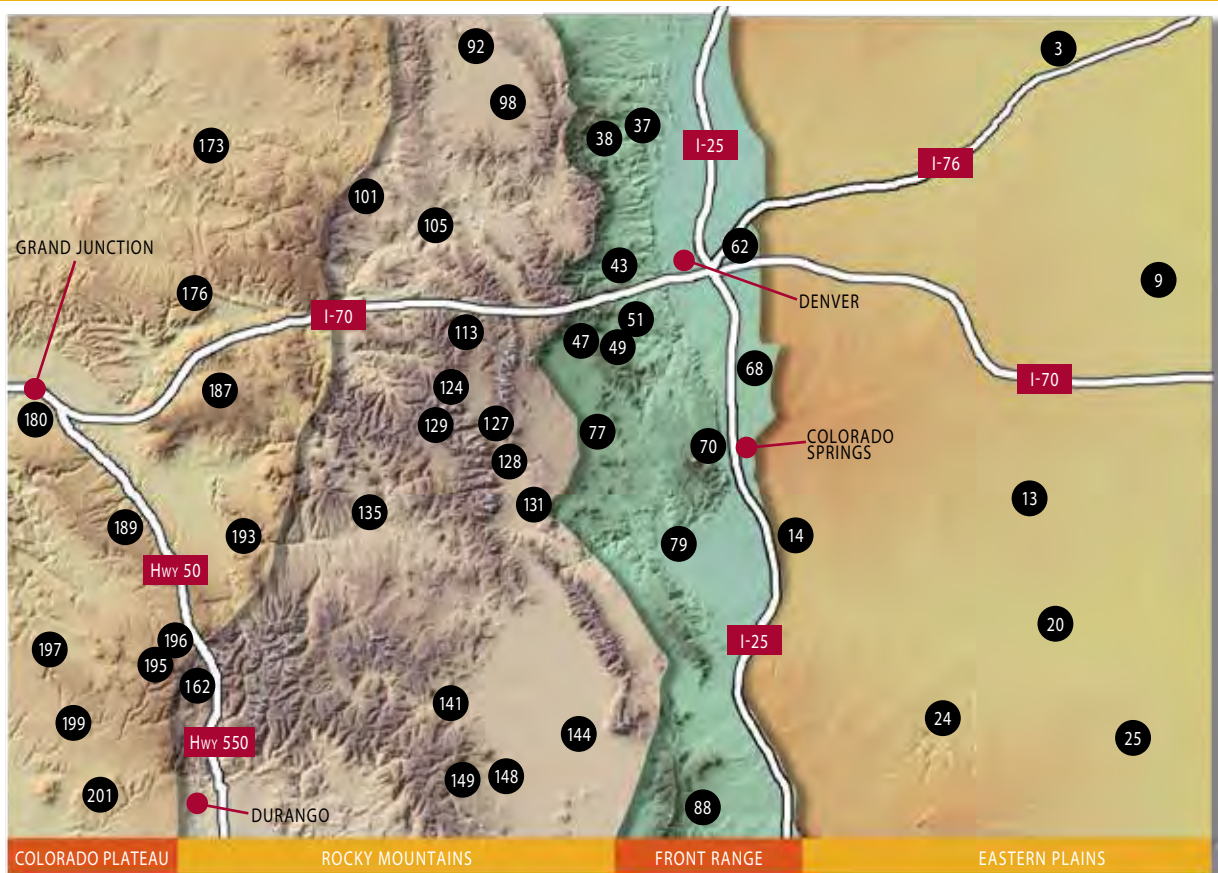
Elk are primarily grazers, feeding on grasses and flowering plants, willow buds and shoots. They supplement their winter diets with aspen bark and twigs.

They migrate seasonally between higher and lower elevations.

Mature bulls have elaborate courtship displays battling and bugling to compete for dominance and the attention of elk cows. Bulls collect a “harem” of 3–30 cows that will breed with them.

The elk's life span is 14–26 years.

Deer and Elk Viewing Sites



Watch for mule deer throughout the state. Elk can be seen at higher elevations and white-tailed deer are found on the Eastern Plains. The following sites were selected from the *Colorado Wildlife Viewing Guide*, and the numbers correspond to sites in the book. Location descriptions are general, and you may need additional information.

W – White-tailed Deer M – Mule Deer E – Elk

COLORADO PLATEAU

- 173 ME** Yampa River Corridor
- 176 ME** Roan Plateau
- 180 M** Colorado National Monument
- 187 ME** Vega State Park
- 189 M** Escalante State Wildlife Area*
- 193 ME** Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park
- 195 ME** Ridgway State Park
- 196 ME** Billy Creek State Wildlife Area*
- 197 ME** Disappointment Valley
- 199 ME** Dolores River Canyon
- 201 M** Mesa Verde National Park

ROCKY MOUNTAINS

- 92 E** Sentinal Mountain
- 98 MW** Arapaho National Wildlife Refuge
- 101 ME** Flat Tops Scenic Byway
- 105 ME** Trough Road
- 113 E** Dowd Junction Elk Viewing Area
- 124 M** Weston Pass
- 127 ME** Independence Pass
- 128 ME** Twin Lakes Reservoir
- 131 M** Cottonwood Lake
- 135 ME** Cumberland Pass
- 141 ME** Natural Arch Watchable Wildlife Rte
- 144 ME** San Luis Lakes State Park and Wildlife Area*
- 148 ME** Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge
- 149 ME** La Jara and Hot Creek State Wildlife Areas*
- 162 ME** San Juan Skyway

FRONT RANGE

- 37 ME** Estes Valley
- 38 ME** Rocky Mountain National Park
- 43 ME** Golden Gate Canyon State Park
- 47 ME** Guanella Pass
- 49 ME** Mount Evans Highway
- 51 ME** Elk Meadow Park
- 62 MW** Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge
- 68 MW** Castlewood Canyon State Park
- 70 ME** Garden of the Gods
- 77 ME** South Park Reservoirs
- 79 ME** Beaver Creek State Wildlife Area*
- 88 ME** Bosque del Oso State Wildlife Area*

EASTERN PLAINS

- 3 W** Tamarack Ranch State Wildlife Area*
- 9 MW** Bonny Lake State Park/South Republican State Wildlife Area*
- 13 MW** Kinney State Wildlife Area*
- 14 MW** Fountain Creek Regional Park
- 20 MW** John Martin Reservoir State Park and State Wildlife Area*
- 24 MW** Picket Wire Canyonlands
- 25 MW** Two Buttes State Wildlife Area*

* *Habitat Stamp required*
(includes Colorado search and rescue fee)



To purchase a Habitat Stamp:

- cpw.state.co.us • 800-244-5613
- Colorado Parks & Wildlife Service Centers
- Most sporting goods stores

Order the *Colorado Wildlife Viewing Guide* — which features over 200 places to see Colorado wildlife. Visit the CPW online store at cpw.state.co.us/wildlifestore. You can buy a copy online for \$14.95 or send a check/money order to Colorado Parks & Wildlife, 6060 Broadway, Denver, CO 80216.

Rocky Mountain Elk

Cervus elaphus nelsoni

An Elk's Life

Long a symbol of the Rocky Mountain West, elk captivate viewers. These majestic animals draw crowds from around the world.

Elk males are called bulls, females are cows and the young are calves. Bulls display large impressive antlers that can weigh up to 40 pounds. Antlers are the fastest growing bone in the world! They are shed and re-grown yearly.

An elk's top two canine teeth are called ivories and are believed to be remnants of saber-like tusks that ancestral species of elk once used in combat. Now, bulls just battle with the massive antlers.



You'll recognize an elk when you see one!

You'll probably see more than one! They live together in relatively large groups. About the size of a small horse, elk are brown with a light-tan rump-patch.

An elk by any other name... some in the western United States prefer to call elk wapiti, a Shawnee name that means "white rump."



Another wildlife management success story!

Several hundred years ago, elk were widely distributed in North America. As waves of settlers migrated west, they killed large numbers of elk and converted habitat to cropland, towns and cities. By 1900, elk were gone from the East and scarce everywhere else. Only a few hundred elk remained in Colorado. Sportsmen's groups and others rallied to bring elk back to the state. In 1914, a year before Rocky Mountain National Park was established, 49 elk were captured in Yellowstone National Park and released into the mountains around Estes Park. Today, Colorado boasts the largest elk population — 260,000 animals — of any state or province in North America.



Sometimes it's said that "good elk habitat is good wildlife habitat."

The grass and forb-rich meadows, the willow — covered streams, wetlands and sheltering forests are desired by many species. If elk become too numerous in an area, the habitat supporting both the elk and other wildlife species can be damaged or destroyed — reducing the variety of species and number of animals that can live there.

In addition, many local residents become frustrated when elk wander onto their lush lawns and gardens. The problems are complex. Wildlife managers, local governments and citizens must work together to explore solutions to these challenges.



Rocky Mountain Elk



Elk viewing in Colorado's high country is an experience you won't soon forget.

The best viewing opportunities are at dawn and dusk, when these animals are most active. Here's an idea of what you can expect to see each season.

- **Look.** Elk leave clues of their presence: tracks, scat, trails, daybeds, teeth and antler marks.
- **Smell.** Elk trails and resting areas can be identified by a telltale “barnyard” scent — a mix of musk and urine.
- **Listen.** Elk are very social, and communicate with a variety of vocalizations throughout the seasons. (Listen as cows bark to warn one another of danger or mew to keep track of one another. Distressed calves bleat for their mothers.)

Elk migrate with the seasons. Here's where to look at different times of the year.



Spring

Small herds of elk move to higher ground as new grass emerges.

Females will isolate themselves in preparation for calving in late May and early June. Watch for bulls sporting growing antlers covered in velvet.



Summer

Elk graze at high elevations — in wet mountain meadows and even alpine tundra.

Bulls can be seen in bachelor groups or alone.

Cows, calves and yearlings travel in loose herds. Often, calves can be seen in nursery groups under the care of one or two “babysitting” cows.



Fall

The “bugle” of the bull elk during mating season is among the most haunting sounds in nature.

The call begins as an eerie squeal, gradually rising in pitch and volume before dropping to a series of low-toned, guttural grunts. Bulls begin to bugle just before dusk during the rut to advertise their presence and fitness to cows and potential rivals. Bulls joust with their large antlers to establish dominance — the dominant bull claims the harem, and the chance to mate.

You can watch this impressive display from late-August through early fall. There are elk-viewing festivals and tours that can help you find places to see elk at this time of year.



© KEN ARCHER

Winter

Elk gather in large groups in mountain valleys that offer natural hay meadows lined with willow and alder.

When deep snow covers the valley floor, look for elk on the south-facing slopes of adjacent hillsides.

In late February and March, bulls shed their antlers. Some antlers are gnawed on by rodents for their calcium.



- **Time your outing for dawn and dusk** when wildlife are most active.
- Find a likely spot for animal activity; **sit quietly and wait** for wildlife to emerge.
- **Keep your distance**, both for your safety and theirs, when watching deer and elk. Even animals that are accustomed to human presence can easily become stressed. If an animal changes its behavior, stops eating or seems nervous at your presence, it's time to move away.
- **Avoid sudden movement or loud noises.** Minimizing your disturbance will lead to more successful viewing.
- During the rut in the fall, deer and elk can become dangerously aggressive. Bucks and bulls may attack without provocation, so **give them plenty of space.**
- **Never approach a calf or a fawn** even if they appear to be alone. The mother is usually nearby and will defend her young.
- For a close-up view, **use binoculars or spotting scopes**, and use a telephoto lens on your camera.
- In Colorado, **feeding deer and elk is against the law.** Feeding human foods to wildlife can be harmful to them, cause them to alter their natural behavior and become tolerant of humans. It can also be dangerous for people.
- **Safely pull off the road** and use your car as a viewing blind.
- **Leave pets at home.** Dogs and deer/elk don't mix.

