

# Fact Sheet

## Elk (*Cervus elaphus*)

### Description

Elk are tawny-colored with a dark brown head, mane and limbs. A distinct light, yellowish-brown rump patch and short tail distinguishes their hind quarters. Bull elk, especially older mature animals, are buckskin in color, and are distinctly lighter than cows. Between summer and winter their colors vary from a reddish to a greyish tawny. Calves are born with a tawny color, and they have many spots to help them blend into their surroundings.

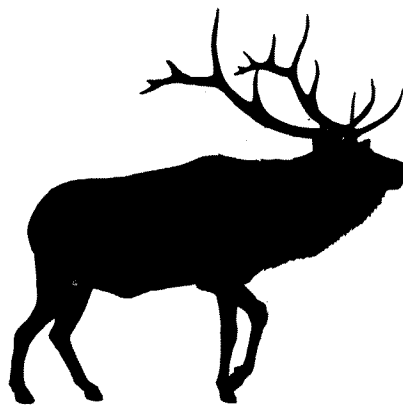
Sometimes referred to as wapiti, elk are the second largest member of the deer family. Adult bulls can reach a weight of 400 kilograms (around 900 pounds), but usually range in weight between 275 to 350 kilograms. Cows are about three quarters as large as bulls. Body length of an adult elk is between two to three metres. Their height at shoulder level ranges between 1.4 to 1.7 metres.

Tracks of elk are 'half-mooned' in shape, similar to domestic cattle, but are not as large and squarish. Elk often follow established trails, but the trails often end as the animals move off their trails to feed or rest.

Only the bulls have large antlers that they shed each year around March and April, and regrow to full size by August. In summer 'velvet' full of blood vessels covers the antlers, allowing the antlers to grow. In late summer the velvet covering dries and the bulls rub it off. As a result, the bull elk has a set of majestic ivory-like antlers that are later polished brown by rubbing trees and brush.

### Reproduction

During the breeding season between late August to early October, older bull elk collect cows in groups of eight to 10. These older bulls keep the younger bulls from joining the group, but the younger bulls try to steal cows from older bulls. At this time bulls frequently mark their territories by calling (bugling) and leaving their scent. After breeding, elk often split up in separate groups of cow-calf and bulls for the winter, sometimes in different areas. Cows usually breed in their second year of life. Yearling bulls are capable of breeding, but older bulls rarely let



- also called wapiti
- second largest member of deer family
- lives in forested areas
- browse and grass diet
- bull collects harems of cows in breeding season
- breeding seasons late August to early October

them do so. Pregnancy lasts between 249 to 263 days; then a single calf (twins are rare) is born between May 15 and June 15. Cows leave their winter groups in ones, twos or small bands to calve. When calves are born, they weigh 12 to 18 kilograms. They nurse on milk, but within two weeks begin eating green vegetation. Elk reach full size in about four years, entering their prime years that last until about eight years of age.

### Habitat

Once common to the prairies, but pushed into the forest by agriculture, elk have adapted well to forest habitat. They also thrive in several areas in Saskatchewan where 'islands' of forest habitat are surrounded by farmland. Elk

prefer mixed-wood and aspen cover combined with open areas such as cutovers, burned areas from forest fires, meadows, dry channels, river levees and often very rugged terrain. Since the 1960s elk have flourished in much of the provincial forest in an ideal combination of young and older forest cover types, created by logging and forest fires. Elk have also adapted well to the forest fringe where they often range into the farmlands to feed.

### Survival and Adaptation Strategies

Elk frequently communicate through calls to keep track of each other, mark territory during the rut and announce distress. The distress signal is a short, high-pitched bark. It significantly differs from the mewing of routine communication or the hoarse bugling of a mature bull during breeding season.

Herding behavior in elk has helped their survival success, particularly in winter. Wary herd leaders keep a sharp eye for predators such as wolves. Keen senses allow the elk to detect danger, and a swift, lanky body enables a quick escape.

Herding also packs down deep snow which makes it easier to forage for food and to travel. Elk are adaptive feeders and eat grass and forbs, as well as woody vegetation. When deep snow arrives the taller, woody



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vegetation becomes more important. During severe winter conditions, elk reduce their movements and concentrate on remaining in good feeding areas and dense forest cover where they can stay warm.

Winter coats of hair are thick and well-insulated, while summer coats are shorter and less dense to allow elk to keep cool. In summer, elk stay at ponds, rivers, beaver dams and lake shores. They use softwood bogs in particular, to keep cool and escape insects in summer. Elk cows often use farmland bluffs, river islands, lake peninsulas and secluded areas to calve.

### **Ecological Relationships**

Elk commonly share their preferred range with deer and moose; all favor some young vegetation in their forest habitats. Elk numbers have increased significantly since the 1960s and 70s through a combination of mild winters and effective forest harvesting plans which have left the right amount of cut and uncut forest for elk. The cutovers provide lots of food. The surrounding uncut forest provides protection for these animals.

Large numbers of predators such as wolves and bears can prevent elk numbers from increasing despite good, available habitat. Coyotes may pose some threat to elk calves.

### **Current Status and Range**

In North America, elk are common in the mid-western and western regions of Canada and the United States, including British Columbia and the prairie provinces. A 1993 estimate of overall population numbers stands at around 8,000 animals in Saskatchewan. Annual harvest levels, estimated from the 1992 hunting season, are over 1,200 elk.

Saskatchewan wildlife biologists have moved elk to less crowded areas in various elk transplant programs. Elk are taken usually from national parks or agricultural areas and

returned to historical ranges or prime, understocked forest habitats opened up from logging or forest fire.

The largest concentration of the province's elk population is in the Porcupine Forest near Hudson Bay. Through elk transplant programs, central Commercial Forest populations are being significantly increased. Elk numbers have increased in the past decade, and they are managed at population levels that take into account the potential damage elk herds can do to farmers' crops.

### **Relationship to Humans**

Since early historical records, elk are considered to be one of the most majestic of large wild ungulates. Early Indians on the prairies extensively used the 'wapiti' for food, clothing and many other purposes.

More recently, elk remain in very high demand by hunters, because of the excellent meat and challenging pursuit that elk offer. As these animals prefer to live in the forest-agriculture fringe areas, they are sometimes unwelcome dinner guests at haystacks and in agricultural crops.

Within the last decade domestic elk ranching has been established as an agricultural industry. Presently, elk are raised extensively to supply partially developed antlers which are used in the Asian pharmaceutical trade. Elk are also raised as breeding stock for other elk ranchers. Domestic elk meat sales form a much smaller part of the ranching industry at the present time.

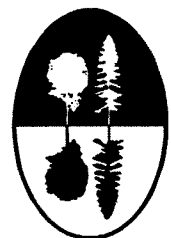
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**Printed August 1993**