

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK

One of our greatest treasures in Castle Pines Village is our amazing wildlife. Thanks to our close proximity to Cherokee Ranch, we are home to many animal species that are seldom seen elsewhere, especially in such abundance. The Rocky Mountain Elk is one of these unique Village visitors.

Also known as the American Elk, or “wapiti” by Native Americans, the Rocky Mountain Elk is one of the largest representatives of the deer family and one of the largest mammals in North America. Males, or bulls, can reach 1000 pounds and female cows up to 500. An adult bull averages 5ft at the shoulder with antlers of 5 points on either side. They are grayish-brown in color, with a tan rump and a darker brown shoulder-to-chest coloration.

The Rocky Mountain elk is a browser, eating mostly grasses during the day in open grasslands. As they are a herbivore, they will also eat other plants, leaves and bark, consuming 9 to 15 pounds of food a day. As night approaches, elk move toward forest edges and usually sleep under tree cover. They range in large winter herds that break down into smaller groups in summer.

In mid to late September, the elk mating season, or “rut”, begins. Due to seasonal hormonal changes, the neck and shoulders of the bull increase in size. Antlers, which are made of bone, begin to sharpen naturally and grow up to an inch a day. The weight of each antler can reach 40 pounds, the size being related to the amount of sunlight the bull receives. Sunlight increases testosterone and bulls become restless, aggressive and highly focused on cows, “antler wrestling” with each other for dominance. Through October, the high-pitched bugle call of elk bulls can be heard as they gather and protect their groups of 5 to 15 cows. The bugle sound is made by a combination of air being forced from the mouth and nostrils at the same time, creating a high-pitched whistle.

The female, or cow elk, becomes fertile at 3 years of age, and it is the cow that chooses the bull for mating. The cow almost always picks the bull that has the most antler points, as this is a sign of good health. To catch a female’s eye, the bulls will also do a number of behaviors, such as rubbing bark off trees. They will also dig a hole, fill it with urine, roll in it and then parade before the cows, hoping to impress!

The gestation period for our elk is approximately 8 months. In May or June, a pregnant cow will separate from her small summer herd to give birth to her approximately 30 pound calf. She will wean this calf after almost two months, yet keep it close to her side until the following fall. At 6 months, this calf will weigh approximately 265 pounds. It takes bull elk 4 to 5 years to become sexually mature, at which time they become an active participant in the rut.

Elk can outrun horses, being able to reach 40 mph, and jump to a height of 8 feet. Up until 1940, when the last wild Gray Wolf was killed in Colorado, wolves were key elk predators. Now in

wild Colorado, elk are hunted by mountain lions and coyote packs, that will predominantly target the young, old and disabled.

Rocky Mountain Elk first arrived in North America approximately 120,000 years ago from Asia, via the Bering Strait. Because of this early arrival, they were well established in North America when the first Native Americans arrived approximately 30,000 years ago. Elk were an integral part of Native American culture, not only as source of food, clothing and tools, but also came to represent masculinity and bravery, serving as a totem spirit. The sound of the elk bugle came to figure heavily into Native American music.

In the 15th Century, it has been estimated that over 10 million Rocky Mountain Elk filled the forests and surrounding meadows of North America. While Native American's depended heavily on elk, as did early European settlers, the elk population appeared to stay healthy until the late 19th Century. Sadly, however, by the early 20th Century, elk had been completely exterminated in many parts of the continent due to loss of habitat and excessive hunting. White settlement and the advance of the railroad in the mid-1800's was devastating. The Colorado Gold Rush of 1858 - 59 also had a massive impact. In 1910, Colorado's elk population had been reduced to 10 small herds of between 500 to 1000. Between 1903 and 1933, most elk hunting was banned in an effort to save the native population, and between 1912 and 1928, 350 elk from Wyoming were reintroduced in Colorado to boost our population.

By the late 1930's, Colorado's elk population had rebounded to the point that we were able to share elk with surrounding states. The current population of Rocky Mountain Elk in the Rockies is approximately 750,000, with 280,000 of this number living in Colorado, which is the maximum population our land is estimated to support. Cherokee Ranch currently has two herds of approximately 250 elk each that reside locally for most, if not all the year. These are the elk you may see trotting down your street, or maybe even grazing on your property!

Don't Miss the Upcoming Castle Pines Village Wildlife Committee's Elk Rut BBQ!... Cherokee Ranch, Friday, September 28, 2018, 5:30 pm, \$15 per person. Come see our local elk, tour Cherokee Castle and enjoy a delicious BBQ dinner and cash bar. This event is exclusively for Castle Pines Village residents. Reservations are required and can be made at cherokeeranch.org. Select "Events", then "September 28".