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FEATURE

THE AMERICAN ELK

The old Shawnees called them wapiti (WAH-puh-tee) and the Sioux an unpronounceable name. But the huge deer that wandered much of the country when palefaces arrived remained known as "elk" to the settlers from Europe.

Originally the American elk (Cervus Canadensis) ranged throughout much of North America, after migrating here (probably) from Asia a little ahead of the first men. From what is now northern Canada to southern New Mexico, from Massachusetts to North Carolina to the California coast, wapiti lived in forests, mountains and plains.

They were widely hunted for meat and hides (and for "tusks!"). By 1810 the eastern herds were gone; not long after, western animals were also decimated, until only a few thousand remained in the more remote areas of the Rockies. It appeared that the American elk, like the bison, was doomed to extinction.

But like the bison, it has come back through cooperative protective measures; unlike the bison, it has again flourished as a wild creature. Protection included enforced seasons on hunting, assured ranges, and establishment of refuges.

Possibly the best known public area is the 24,000-acre National Elk Refuge administered by the Interior Department's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Here more than 15,000 elk find winter food on land specially set aside for grazing. When the snow gets deep or forage is all gone, natural feed is supplemented by hay.

The herds migrating down to the refuge come from Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks and from Teton National Forest. Personnel from the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, the National Park Service, the Forest Service, and the State game departments of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming all cooperate in field studies and in management of the herds.

In winter, visitors to the refuge can ride out on sleighs to see and photograph feeding wapiti. In summer, an "exhibition herd" of family groups can be seen in the area, which is also famed for fishing, camping, and touring. Trumpeter swans and other waterfowl use the refuge, too, flying against a background of the snow-tipped Grand Tetons.

Other winter feeding grounds for Rocky Mountain elk are maintained by State game departments of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, which license controlled hunting to keep the wapiti in balance with their range.

Elk were not always high-valley species. They once inhabited open plains before range was depleted by overgrazing and plowing. They thrive now in the summer-hot Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma. Here they remain on the refuge year-round as companions to longhorn cattle, bison, and turkey. There is a sizable population of elk on national forest land in Alaska. Small herds exist in a few eastern States, a variety called Olympic elk live in the Pacific Northwest, and a few tule elk reside in California.

Hot land or cold, the bull gathers a harem of cows on a territory he guards against challengers. September is the beginning of the mating season, at least in the northern Rockies, when the old male is bugling his authority and harrying the young bulls out of the herd. His large, pronged antlers and his feet are formidable weapons. At 700 to 1,000 pounds, an elk's no plaything--it might stand five feet at the shoulder.

By early November, mating is over, and the wapiti begin their migration to winter ranges where constant prairie winds bare slopes and ridges of snow and uncover grass beneath. On their way down, bands merge into herds. Then, as spring comes, the big herds drift back up to the high country, following the receding snowline and dropping their newborn in the high meadows along the route.

Born in late May or early June, a spotted calf weighs up to 40 pounds. By August, partially weaned, it includes grass in its diet and has begun to lose its baby spots.

Overall, the great wapiti is in pretty good shape today, at least in the high country where, wrote John Madson, "there are things that the valleys cannot give . . . such as the high notes of an elk's bugling; drifting down to a spike camp through three miles of perfect air."

