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Wild Evergreen: Evergreen Elk Rut – Love is in the Air! – Evergreen Audubon

6-8 minutes



Bull elk bugling. Photo taken September 2010, Rocky Mountain National Park, by Marilyn Rhodes.

The peak of elk rut in Colorado generally lasts from mid-September to mid-October, although it is often possible to hear elk bugling into November. The scene of tens to hundreds of elk in one location, flanked by spectacular mountain scenery and fall colors, is hard for most folks to resist. The sounds of bull elk bugling add to the spectacle.

Elk Bugles





Bull elk letting her rip! Photo taken September 2010, Rocky Mountain National Park, by Marilyn Rhodes.

Research conducted in Rocky Mountain National Park by Dr. Jennifer Clarke and her students from University of Northern Colorado (UNC) suggests that elk bugles contain wide ranges of information.

Some bugles simply communicate that the bull is in the area with his harem. Others communicate to the cows that they are straying too far from the bull or otherwise displeasing him. Still others communicate to other bulls that they are too close to his harem, and that he is willing and able to defend his cows.

In contrast, both types of aggressive calls have lower pitched components in some parts of the call. Elk calls with grunts seem to occur less frequently (about 16% of the time) than calls without grunts. So far researchers have not determined what function the grunts play.

Research by Dr. Joel Berger of the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Bronx Zoo suggests that elk bugle more often and for longer periods of time and that elk form larger aggregations in Rocky Mountain National Park than in parks such as Yellowstone where they have predators such as wolves and grizzly bears.

Elk Bugling

During the September-October mating season, bull elk stage their own passion play. The characteristic rutting call of bulls can be heard from just before dusk to dawn.



Bull getting frisky with cow at Rocky Mountain National Park, September 2013. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

It's easy to get a good look at elk during the rut. To get the most out of elk viewing, it helps to understand a bit about their behavior.

During the summer, elk roam the high mountains in separate groups of males and females. Come fall, they descend to lower elevations to mate, gathering in large herds in meadows. And then the show starts. It's not unlike teens at a high school dance.

Bull with cow at Rocky Mountain National Park, September 2013. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

A bull elk's goal during this time is to gather a group of females (a harem) for mating—but it's easier said than done. Collecting and defending a harem is a full-time job, leaving bulls with barely enough time to eat. To prove their strength, bull elk bugle, making a loud sound that resembles a scream and ends with a series of

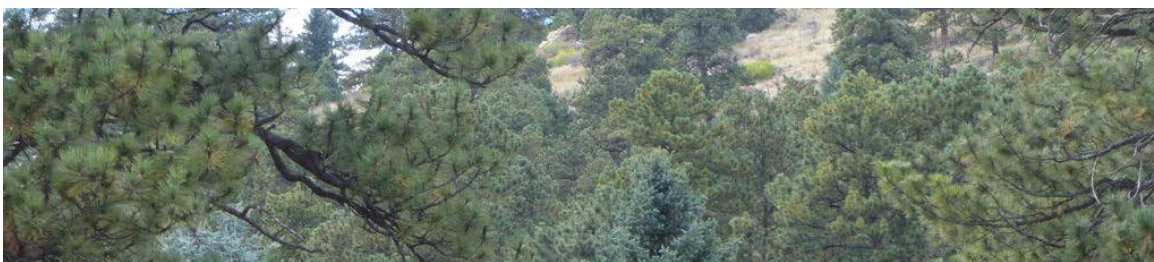
grunts. You'll know it when you hear it echoing across the meadows, lingering in the crisp autumn air.

Bugling attracts females and wards off other males. A bull with a harem aims to keep challengers at bay at all costs. To add to the intimidation effect, bulls strut about, displaying their necks and antlers, and stomping their feet to demonstrate their strength and dominance. Sometimes they even take it a step further and spar with other males—locking antlers and pushing against each other. Try to stick around long enough to see this action; it's quite a sight.



Bull with harem, Evergreen High School soccer field, September 2015. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

In the last few years, some elk have moved into town and onto the golf course for their rut. The typical bugle of the bull elk is a surprising, distinctive sound that begins deep and resonant, and becomes a high pitched squeal before ending in a succession of grunts.





Cows and calves grazing on a green at the Evergreen Golf Course, September 2015. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.



Get this tree limb off my rack! In front of a home on the backside of the Evergreen Golf Course, September 2015. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.



Elk herd, Evergreen Golf Course, September 2016. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.



Bull bugling, Evergreen Golf Course, September 2016. Photo by

Marilyn Rhodes.

Herding Behavior

You may be fortunate enough to see a bull elk rounding up his “harem” in one of our local meadows, or in town on our golf courses and lawns.



Bull with harem, Evergreen Golf Course, September 2015. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

Bulls have various levels of experience in herding. Some are “studs” and others are wannabes. The stud is the bull that is clearly in command. There may be other competitors nearby, but they can’t compete with the mature bull’s display of antlers and his bellowing bugle. This swashbuckler gathers and cloisters his cows with apparent ease.



Young bulls sparring. Evergreen Golf Course, September 2015.
Photo by Marilyn Rhodes. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

Often other bulls stand on the sidelines, watching with obvious frustration. Even those who have managed to corner a cow or two watch helplessly as their prospects evade them and run toward a growing assembly of cows, yearlings and calves which have gathered near another bull. You may also notice a bull with broken antlers or half a rack — the result of competitive battles between bulls.

Wildlife Watching Etiquette

Elk gather in open meadows and are easily visible when left undisturbed. Please remember that wildlife are the natives in this area and that we are the visitors!



Observers watching elk at a safe distance, Evergreen Golf Course, September 2016. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes.

Wildlife are very keen on “personal space.” In other words, they’re happier if you keep your distance. Stay on the road, out of the meadows. Bring your binoculars or telephoto lens to get a close up view of these majestic creatures.

As soon as you park, turn off your car lights and engine. Shut car doors quietly and speak softly. Don't use headlights or flashlights to illuminate or entice wildlife. Enjoy your not-too-close encounter with our native elk!

If your presence causes the elk to move away, then you are too close. Within most national parks, you may be cited for harassment of wildlife if your actions affect the behavior of an animal in any way.

These observers were too close to this bull. He was stressed and charged one of the observers before fleeing to another location.



Too close for comfort! Photo taken by Marilyn Rhodes, Evergreen Lake House lot entrance, September 2016.





Bull elk charging golfers at Evergreen Golf Course. Photo by Marilyn Rhodes, September 2010.



Evergreen Golf Course sprinklers cool the action! Photo taken September 2010 by Marilyn Rhodes.