



# Elk

## *National Wildlife Refuge System*

- The first thing you notice about an elk is its size. It is one of the largest mammals in North America.
- Overhunted in decades past, elk in North America live in the western United States from Canada through the Eastern Rockies to New Mexico, and in a small region of the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. They like open woodlands and avoid dense unbroken forests.
- They are browsers – mainly at dawn and dusk -- eating grasses, plants, leaves and bark – and a lot of it: eight to 15 pounds of food a day. Elk cows weigh about 500 pounds and stand about four feet at the shoulder and nearly seven feet from nose to tail. The males weigh 705-730 pounds and stand nearly five feet tall at the shoulder, about eight feet in length.
- Only males have antlers, which start growing in the spring and are shed each winter. While growing, the antlers are covered with a soft layer of skin called “velvet,” which is shed in the summer.
- During the fall, elk grow a thicker coat of hair, which helps to insulate them for the winter. By early summer, elk shed their heavy coats, often rubbing against trees to remove the hair.
- Adult elk usually stay in groups, or herds, of males or females for most of the year.
- During the fall mating period, called the “rut,” males attract females by bugling, a very loud call that can be heard far and wide. Dominant males can build “harems” of females. Fights between dominant males and intruders can be intense.
- Cow elk produce one -- very rarely two -- offspring. Gestation takes about eight months. Females isolate themselves from the main herd when they are ready to give birth and stay isolated until the calf is large enough to escape danger. The young nurse and are weaned in about two months.
- Elk can live more than 20 years.



*Elk/USFWS*



Scan the code to hear the elk bugling.