

Mating elk attract a crowd at Rocky Mountain National Park

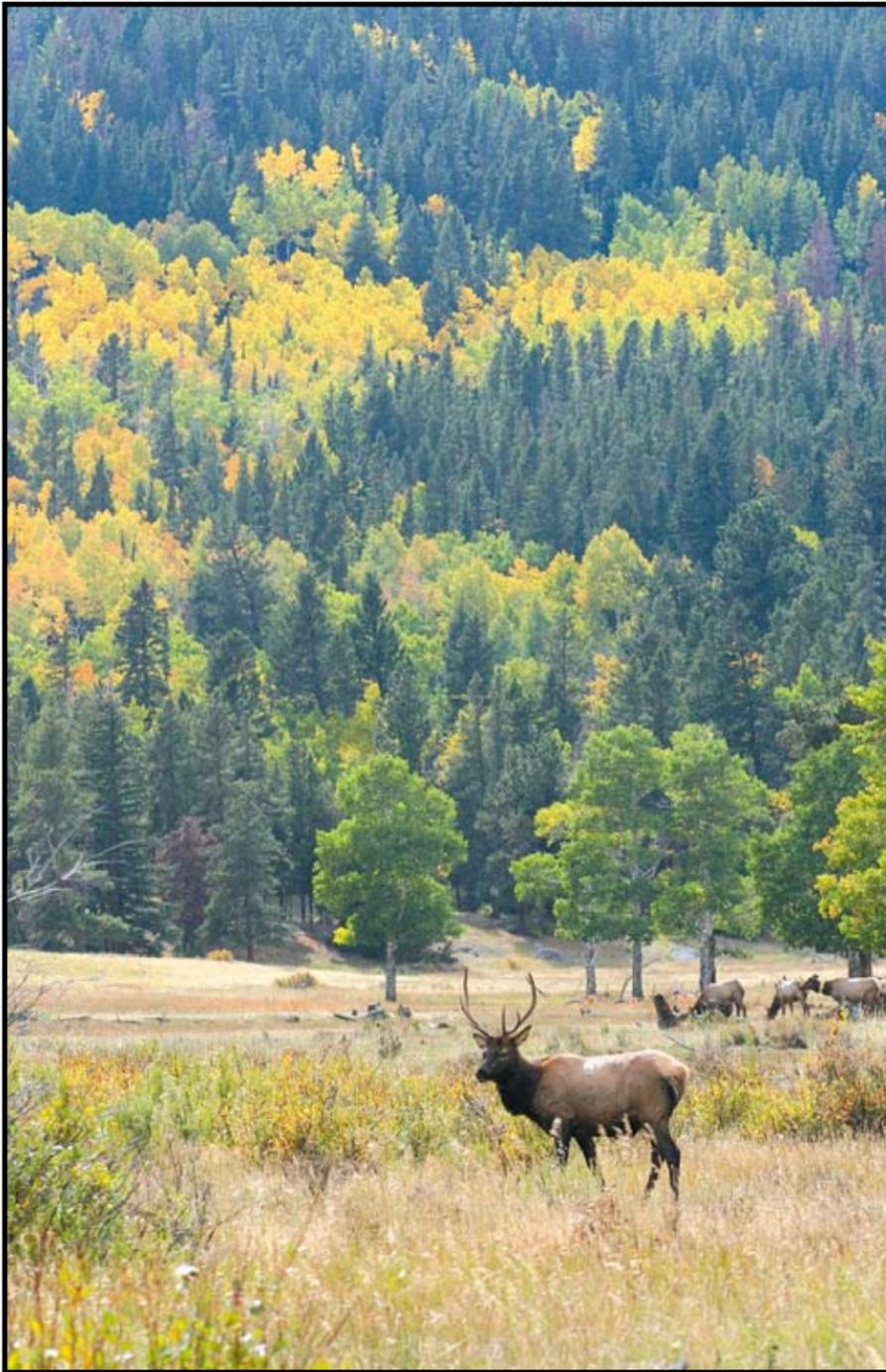


Photo by Jen Reeder

The annual elk rut attracts quite a crowd each fall at Rocky Mountain National Park.

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Like most Coloradans, I'm a big fan of wildlife encounters. I've had a black bear waddle right past my camping chair, and a bald eagle fly close overhead. I even had a chirping contest with a marmot when I was getting a little punchy in the backcountry. But recently at Rocky Mountain National Park, I witnessed my first elk rut.

Each fall, the park's elk engage in a unique mating ritual that involves high-pitched bugling by the bucks in an attempt to get the

females, as one ranger delicately put it, to "accept" them.

My husband Bryan pulled into the park around dusk on Friday, just hoping to make it to our campsite in time to pitch our tent before dark. But we were soon delayed by a huge line of cars slowly winding past an elk viewing area. Bryan rolled down his window, and we heard the strange sound, sort of like an urgent, on-land whale call.

"Let's pull over!" I suggested, and we joined the line of cars hastily parked on the side of the road.

It was a festive tail-gate party, with people in chairs and in the beds of pick-up trucks enjoying a beverage and laughing at the particularly loud bugles. Several rangers with those glowing air-traffic control lights were trying to avert accidents while commenting on the high level of activity – herds of cows were running across a meadow while the bucks chased after them.

"Maybe there's a coyote out there," one suggested.

As we headed to the Moraine Park campground, I said to Bryan, "I'm glad I heard a bugle before we were sleeping, because if I heard that in the night, I'd think a woman was being murdered and we'd have to go try to rescue her."

In the wee hours of the next morning, we heard that sound, which seemed to come from the RV next to us. Of course, it was generated by an elk, and it woke up the entire campground. Excited voices and loud murmurs filled the air for a bit, and then the lovely silence that followed allowed us to sleep in – a tad too late.

We'd hoped to get an early start on a 6.3-mile hike to Lawn Lake, but it was nearly noon as we fought the hordes of elk traffic to get to the trailhead. As we started our ascent, we could hear the elk bugling below us. "That's how we'll know we're getting close on the return," Bryan said.

Sure enough, as we scrambled down the trail hours later in a rush yet again to beat the setting sun, we were finally greeted by the strangled cry of an amorous elk. Then we got a glimpse through the trees of a long line of car headlights. The rut had caused a traffic jam!

The picnic tables at the trailhead were crowded with families, including children who insisted on trying to imitate the bugling of the elk (this is not a soothing sound). We were tickled to find our car surrounded by cows, and as we slowly pulled away, a 14-point buck started approaching the ladies. Out came my camera, along with the rows of people lining the road on either side of us.

"It's like Brad and Angelina

are in town," Bryan quipped as flashbulbs popped in our eyes.

We heard the elk bugle through the night, and the next morning, several bucks were resting in the trees near our campsite. I pulled a gorillas-in-the-midst move and stalked them with my zoom lens. A flirty cow entered the grove, and suddenly none of the elk were interested in the strange human grinning at them from a nearby rock. It was amazing to feel alone with the majestic beasts.

We rejoined the masses for one last photo shoot on the banks of the Fall River before heading to Estes Park for lunch. We decided that in keeping with the theme of the weekend, we'd eat at the Wapiti Bar and Grill, since Wapiti is the Shawnee Indian name for elk. The walls were covered with paintings of elk, and I was feeling warm and fuzzy until we opened the menu.

"So, what do you think – the filet of wapiti or the elk burger?" Bryan asked.

I opted for the veggie burger instead.

The elk rut should continue through mid-October. For more information about Rocky Mountain National Park, visit www.nps.gov/romo.

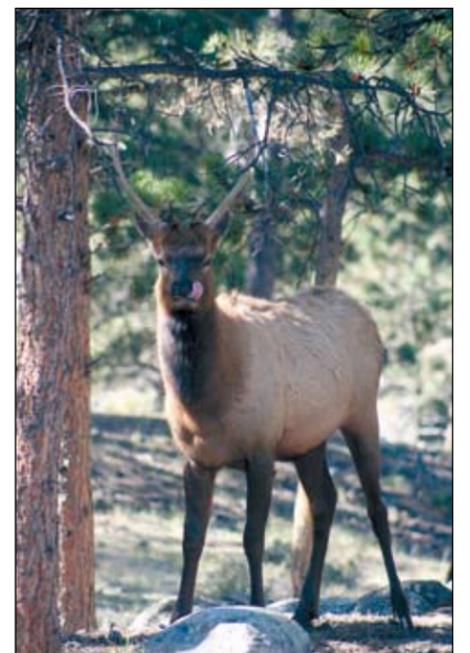


Photo by Jen Reeder

A young buck licks his chops during the annual fall rut at Rocky Mountain National Park Sept. 28.



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Elk enjoy the rut on the banks of the Fall River on Sept. 28