

The Elk of Jackson's Hole, Wyoming



Their History, Home and Habits
By S. N. Leek, Jackson, Wyoming

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BY S. N. LEEK, JACKSON, WYOMING

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Years ago the untrammled elk wandered at will over the unrestricted range. The conditions were perfect for their growth and maturity. Noble sires, the finest of their race, mingled with females that were always slick and fat, watchful and alert. This gave to the young, spirit and strength, and the species was growing bigger and stronger. Then for years they had to flee before the steady advance of the settler, till upon the highest portion of the continental divide, hemmed in on all sides, they have made their last stand. Here upon the mountain heights man has reserved for them a home, and leaves them undisturbed, but as the fierce blizzard whirls the snow in blinding fury about the peaks and high plateaus of their summer home, they must descend to the valley, and with suppliancè bent, plead for mercy and food from the transgressors upon their old winter home. This they humbly do and with heads bowed low, with dull and listless eye, and with pride and spirit gone, they eat the proffered food from the hand of man.

In the Spring, the elk migrate toward their summer home high in the mountains, closely following up the lower snow line. The males shed their antlers the latter part of March and early April, the new ones beginning to grow almost immediately. While their immense antlers are growing, they require lots of alkali salt, which they acquire from the different licks. The males travel on ahead, the cows following more slowly. They are weak from the hard winter and scanty food supply, but now eat ravenously of the growing grass. Their old gray winter coats fall off, and they appear in new light red suits. They, too, have acquired a longing for salt, and visit the licks almost nightly.

The calves are born in the latter part of May and in early June—little spotted fellows, at first weak and helpless, but, at the age of a week, able to out-distance nearly any pursuit. Then the cows again unite in bunches and travel higher up on their summer range; and here, during the night as the herds feed back and forth, their plaintive cries may be heard, the cows and calves calling to each other. The little calves gather into bunches, and play games like young lambs. During August, the calves' spots disappear, and the cows' red suits turn gray.

In the meantime, no large males are seen with the herds. They seek seclusion near the snow-covered mountain summits. Their horns grow round and soft, are covered with hair or velvet, and feel warm, there being veins and circulating fluids beneath the outer tough skin. At the proper place, each prong comes out, the main branch growing on up, until the requisite size and number of points, according to age and condition are there. The horns are full-grown early in August, then the circulating fluid is shut off, they dry out and harden, and the velvet peels off. Then the elk polish and stain them brown, by rubbing them in the brush and polish the points white by digging them in the ground.

About September first, the male's red coat has given way for a light cream suit, trimmed with dark brown on the flanks and beneath. His slim neck has grown more thick, and is covered with long, dark brown hair. His eyes and bearing denote courage and beauty, his every movement, grace and strength; and he stands with every sense alert, every muscle tense, longing for his mate—a noble animal, worthy of any hunter's skill. And who, having stood on the point in the early morning's clear, frosty air, and heard his bugle challenge re-echo through the hills, can ever forget it?

And thus he hunts the herd; and now the fierce fight occurs where the ground is torn up, and their great horns are slivered and broken, for Nature has decreed that the strongest, most noble sire shall be given full sway.

On the higher ranges, snowstorms are due about October first. These start the elk down, and, as they descend, they fall in with other herds. As the snow grows deeper, the herds go lower, and become larger, all bound for their winter range.

In years past, the elk's migration to winter feed was only limited by food supply and natural conditions. They went low enough to get beyond the deeper snow, yet not so far as to leave the shelter of hills and timber. But now the settlers' stock farms and wire fences have more and more encroached on that winter feed ground, till nothing remains for them, but the small valley of Jackson's Hole. This causes them to be congested there, a circumstance which leads to the belief that there are a great many elk, when, in reality, they have decreased at an alarming rate. The settlers in the valley are in sympathy with the elk, in past years reserving the open range in the foot-hills for their winter use, and even feeding a portion of their meagre hay supply to the starving animals. However, the last several years, the national and state governments have taken pity on this noble animal. The grazing of increasing numbers of stock upon their winter range has been restricted, and hay has been purchased, and the elk fed. And they, worthy animals, show their appreciation by being as independent as possible, remaining out upon the open range until severe storms and snow-covered feed compel them to seek the feed yards. At the first sign of spring, long before the feeding of domestic stock has ceased, they go back to the range, not emaciated and half starved as in years gone by, but in condition to bring forth and nourish offspring with the spirit, courage and strength to enable them to withstand the elements, during their first winter on earth.



CAUGHT ON THE TRAIL



YOUNG CALF ELK



ELK HUNTING



A PRIZE HEAD



ON THE ROAD TO LOWER VALLEY



IN THE FOOT HILLS



JUST ARRIVED IN THE LOWER VALLEY



THREE PAIRS-KINGS UP



CONTENTMENT



SUNSET



LEEK'S RANCH



FEEDING ELK

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