

Viktor on Mother's Day

by Penny Randell

Good day to all of you in our mountain community. Viktor the elk here again, but this time the subject is about those who are the most precious above all. Mothers! You humans will soon be celebrating Mother's Day and I know you have quite the time showering all those mummies with love and affection, and presents, too. I'll be honoring my mom again this year, and shall find the most tender of fodder for her to munch upon. After all, she is the pinnacle for all my crowning achievements, like staying alive, for example. Remembering that my mom skipped a year of pregnancy once she had me, I have become much savvier in the forest, and am envied by the other bulls for my overall perceptions and development.

We elk, or Wapiti...a name given to us by the American Shawnee Indians, have excellent mothers who guard us almost 24/7. I say almost, for she must forage and replenish her tummies so that she can make milk for us wee ones. Elk babies are born without scent, so if the mother caches us in a thicket and saunters off to eat, there will be no scent and no predator will be able to find us kids. Should something go wrong and attention is dire, we babies can squeal and mama comes running. However, she must stay keenly aware of the bear, the mountain lion, the wolf, and the hunter.

Mentioning the hunter brings forth a snippet of news. We, unlike our cousin the moose, live and travel in herds where conversation is rampant. It's been told that a recent study just north of here in Wyoming revealed that female elk were more cognizant and warier of possible hunters in their areas than ever before. Yippee! Now, that made me happy. You see, those lovely females get along pretty well, especially when you compare them to us boys. Oh sure, they sometimes curl their upper lip, moan, nibble, and then rear their aggressive heads, but it's all just girl talk. The fact is, if allowed to live, most all the females will become mothers and the group will most likely thrive.

I overheard a hiker once questioning if females have antlers. Actually, that's a great question. Rare as it is, older females can develop ovarian cysts that give rise to higher levels of androgen, which can produce pedicles atop the head. Growing up together and over time the two sexes often take on each other's characteristics, and attributes. Evolution has seen to this. Some females have actually grown spikes, but these remain in velvet. Except for antlers, we all greatly resemble each other, for our necks are equally thick and we both have a mane. Sometimes during the rut the females can get irritable and that's not good. But, taking stock of some of those bulls, who can blame them?

But then again, females can be particularly aggressive when it comes to their young. They do live in harems during the rut, but still watch carefully over the young. There is always one dominant bull who rounds up this harem, and for the most part, they are careful when it comes to us spikes and the girls. Once again, the original definition of a spike is a young male that has both antlers with no branches originating more than four inches above where they attach to the skull. Recently,

it has been written that a spike is about a year and a half and can have just one antler that doesn't branch. Most mature bulls end up with six points on both sides. The best antlers come at age nine and a half up to age twelve and a half.

Considering the mating season, I think one should realize cows are receptive to mating for less than 24 hours. The girl won't be willing to mate again until she's in her second estrus, 20 days later. Actually, cows come into estrus at least four times per season, but most of them get pregnant during their first and second cycles. Gestation is 240 to 262 days. Also, the harems disband after the rut. Even though cows and bulls greatly resemble each other, a cow usually weighs 500 pounds, and males weigh 700. And one little fact that I take to heart is that baby bull elk are friskier than females. After all, babies are born in late May through early June when Spring is ripe.

One last thing: Birthing is achieved only when the cow lies down, with the actual event taking only about 30 minutes. We are born with our front feet out first, and our head tucked tightly between those two legs. We all weigh about 33 to 35 pounds at this point. Once we are delivered the mom cleans us up and gets ready to show us off to the herd. Twins are rare and triplets even more rare.

So, these are a few motherly facts for you to consider. Think about such when you see us babies. Try to distinguish a spike from a female when possible. Most of all, stay away from the babies, for the moms have outrageous tempers when it comes to offspring. A good mom will always put her offspring first, just as it is with you humans. So, with that I offer you my best wishes. All you moms out there take care and let the sky burst with happiness...all because of you!