

The Ubiquitous Elk

By Penny Randell

Just yesterday one of my elk mates came ever so close to colliding with a motorist and I was on hand to see it. Due to this dreadful and constant threat, it was deemed necessary for the herd to get together and come up with an agenda that might be of benefit to us all.

My name is Viktor and I was chosen to extend our deliberated opinion because of my keen attraction to humans and my ardent belief that communal living can enhance our every day existence. Although most separate from their moms at one year of age, I have been afforded the opportunity to exist comfortably and safely within a large grouping of cows and yearlings for almost two years. As a result, I have accrued a great deal of knowledge from my mom and siblings. Too, I am always on hand to hear the rumblings of the dominant bulls that usually graze and rest at the meadow.

Chiefly, I'm happy to report that here in Evergreen most elk are well fed and particularly at ease. Because of this, my herd has become increasingly widespread, and as a result we are thriving. Gratefully, so much available land can foster individual freedom, as well as much less need for rigorous mating come September. Cows, including my mom, can skip a year before mating again, allowing a few of us yearlings, or spikes as I am called, extra time to mature more effectively.

As a starter, to understand why we bother to come down to town in the first place it would be advantageous to understand our requirements and fears. We are herbivores and of course our main staple is grass. However, grass is considered high fiber and during the summer we stray from such in favor of shrubs and sweet tasting flowers that can be found in your yards. As a youngster I digest lush, tall, herbaceous vegetation much easier than meadow grass, so coming to town is too alluring to pass up.

Besides this, energy is a huge factor and the law of least effort demands unchallenged accessibility of diet. Actually, my dad and the other bulls have a lower metabolic rate, but older babies and all the teens have an accelerated rate and eat like there's no tomorrow. After all, approximately 86% of our day is spent foraging and the fewer steps for us the better. In addition, predators are of little concern here in town, therefore we are encouraged to disperse and establish our own little private landscape of goodies. And, we thank you.

As with you, our history has been recorded and most of us are quite knowledgeable about our pathway of evolution. We originated in Siberia thousands of years ago and evolved from an Old World Red Deer. Please, no deer jokes! Somehow my ancestors bred for size and savvy in attempts to flourish and finally gain dominance over those pesky little deer. After all, just because we started as a slight ungulate does not mean we were forced to remain so. Stories passed down through the centuries reveal a "better to be dead than red" code of survival. Indeed, by the turn of the century we ruled and were living high here in

Colorado, enjoying the natural mineral licks found in Elk Meadow and adjacent grasslands as far as the eye could see.

But, that all changed with the discovery of gold and seemingly within a few months we were practically face to face with hordes of humans. The effects created by this onslaught of people wasn't pretty. As late as 1910 our species was threatened by extinction, for no game laws existed at the time. Besides the market hunters that exploited us for meat, vanity stalkers killed us for our teeth, called "ivories." That term applies to our two protruding canine teeth that scientists believe to be a remnant of once saber-like tusks.

Eventually closed seasons in hunting elk were established from 1913 to 1929. Nevertheless, things really got sticky for a while until a few conscientious pioneers took pity on us and transplanted a vast system of refugees by train from Wyoming to Idaho Springs in effort to save our kind.

It was during this time that many of my ancestors migrated to Upper Bear Creek, which slowly increased our numbers. Although embarrassing, we opportunistic elk decimated almost all summer crops in the area by 1930. Because of this and other significant factors, the town shifted practically over night from a ranching and farming community to subdivisions.

After that we became habituated to human life and were not so troubled when efforts were made to scare us back into the forest. This was a good thing, at least for elk, for the greater accessibility of resources aided in development of healthier tissues. Elongation of skulls meant specialized dentition that tackled greater fat deposits to aid during lean winter months. Eventually a stronger immune system equaled less parasites and larger and more sophisticated antlers for the bulls. In the end all these factors facilitated greater overall vigor and stronger babies. Once again, the opportunity for many roaming cows to delay the hardship of pregnancy strengthened the herd even further.

It stands as my greatest desire for humans to grasp exactly what an elk is and what could provoke us into harming you. As already said, we are herbivores and therefore, not at all interested in the acquisition of meat. For the most part, despite our insatiable curiosity, we aim to avoid all close encounters with you. However, should an unexpected, face-to-face encounter take place our initial reaction would be extreme fright and confusion. We could possibly butt with our head, or strike with our hooves.

Always remember, should you accidentally or purposely corner us, panic might dictate our response and a defensive mechanism might come into play. But, remembering that the price of energy is dear, you can rest assured that our intent is to forage and not battle. As a matter of fact, threat behavior within the herd is rare and passive competitive interaction, such as eating faster, is our rule.

In addition, it should be recognized that our eyes are located more on the sides of our skull, which renders us more efficient in tracking predators, usually from behind. This

further explains aggression. Our tendency to walk directly into traffic is no doubt irritating, but again, our focal design lends us toward wandering without reason.

For the benefit of all, may I suggest that motorists and pedestrians be particularly alert during dawn and dusk. This is our favorite time to forage and standing still in such limited light means we are harder to see. Our dark coat, designed especially for thermoregulation, doesn't seem to work so well in traffic. Oh, and as for standing motionless in the middle of the street, well, due to not having any depth perception we simply get muddled sometimes and need to take a break. For this we apologize.

About the babies: offspring are born without personal scent to avoid being detected by a bear, or wolf. After birth it is common for our mothers to relocate us to a more secluded and guarded area. Next, once we are safely hidden she can be found devouring all traces of the birthing experience, in effort to remove the evidence. The moms, or cows, are especially thorough and will even ingest earth and vegetation that is soaked by the placenta and accompanying membranes. I have even witnessed some mothers licking up a baby's urine and feces around the area where the babe is hidden.

During mating season, or the rut, it is common for males, called bulls, to paw out large ditches in the dirt, urinate into them and create a mud pit they can wallow in. I suppose these practices seem a bit on the rough side for you humans, but this is how we have survived and became the second largest mammal in North America.

By the way, one of six sub-species, Evergreen elk are considered to be Rocky Mountain elk and are known for having the largest of antlers. We are the noisiest of ungulates and enjoy communicating through a high-pitched bugle, or roar. In fact, just like canines, we identify one another by these utterances.

On that note, when meandering through neighborhoods, forest or open fields, it would behoove all you folks to talk, sing, or generally make an effort to be heard. It is common for us to get stuck here in town and our adaptation to hiding pre-disposes us to unnecessary and dangerous surprises. It should be remembered that it's not uncommon for a cow to give birth in your yards and if this happens, there's not much you can do about it except to avoid both baby and mom.

My herd will be overjoyed to know that I have disclosed this information to you. Let it be known that we all long for peace, safety and a sustained life. As for staying in our own "backyard," well, I reckon that isn't going to happen. We like you and definitely benefit from most of our associations. Because of your patience and appreciation for our beauty, we will continue to thrive and hopefully become the most successful group of elk in all of Colorado.

In closing then, this is Viktor the two-year-old elk bidding farewell for now and we'll catch you somewhere around the lake or the highway in the meantime.