

Viktor's Words of Wisdom on Ungulates

by Penny Randell

Good day to all you readers out there in our splendid mountain community. This is Viktor and, being an elk, I just happen to know a few facts about hoofed stock. I thought I would stretch it a bit and put a nail in a falsehood or two with some official, scientific language. Recently I realized that some believe an ungulate and a ruminant are one in the same. Actually, an ungulate is a hoofed mammal and a ruminant is one that regurgitates a fair amount of food, called a bolus, and rechews it. Yes, we elk practice such dietary habits, which keeps us peaceful and most of all, well-nourished.

Taking it a step further, there are two groups of ungulates: Artiodactyl, which means cloven-hoofed, or even number of toes, and Perissodactyl, or odd-toed mammals. Examples of each, beginning with the former would be cows, sheep, pigs, and camels. The second group is represented by such mammals as horses, rhinoceros, and tapirs. In fact, the closest ancestral relative to a horse is the rhino. Today, because of extinction, there are only 17 species in three families left that have an odd number of toes.

While we're at it, how about a few facts about us elk? We are in the same family with the deer, called Cervidae. We might be in the same family, but those pesky little deer are such competitors. But, on the other hand, we are the biggest member in the Cervidae family. We are also one of the largest terrestrial mammals in all the world. It came as a shock to discover that we were once distributed throughout most of the northern hemisphere, such as North America, Europe, Asia, and even northern Africa. Extensive hunting and habitat destruction have limited us to where we live today.

Another misconception is the likeness between the horn and an antler. Horns are implanted within the forehead forever. Mammals with such never grow new ones. On the other hand, antlers are shed every year. Another thing to remember is the energy it takes to grow new ones. Too, antlers, which also grow out of the forehead begin wrapped in a furry material, called velvet. At certain times of the year you may see us scraping our heads against a tree or some other obstacle, because when it's time for the velvet to slough off it itches. The velvet is made of phosphorous and calcium. And by the way, those antlers sometimes weigh 20 pounds each. How would you like to have 40 pounds of bone sitting on top of your head?

And speaking of antlers, the reindeer also sheds its antlers every year. As with other such species, both male and female have these head ornaments that, once shed, bears food for smaller animals. A reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) is a large deer who is typically found in the Arctic tundra and northern boreal forests. The word rein is of Scandinavian origin and has nothing to do with a leather strap used to lead animals (for you equestrians out there). Subspecies native to North America and Greenland are usually called caribou. Today this animal is considered domesticated and was introduced to Alaska years ago. They are considered a beast of burden, a source for milk, meat, and leather.

Many believe the African Okapi to be the “star of the ungulate show.” True, this beautiful, mysterious beast, often called the African Unicorn, is one of the oldest mammals to roam the earth. In contrast, the okapi has only been known to the Western world since the 20th Century. It is the only member of the deer family with thick and longer white hair on its legs and rump, therefore, easy to recognize. But, to see this shy one in the wild takes a lot of patience and time, for they are dedicated to the art of hiding. Babies are well-hidden and left by themselves for a period of two months. This is a practice to keep the young ones safe. When a mother removes herself from her offspring she removes her scent as well. These babies only come out when the mother calls them using infrasonic sound, which other animals, including humans, cannot hear.

The Okapi Conservation Project (OCP), in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), has been protecting this animal since before the country was called DRC. It was 1987 when its presence was first recorded in what was then called Zaire. A Contract of Collaboration was formed with the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de le Nature (ICCN), with the agreement to provide the protection of the animal and his habitat through general wildlife protection, community assistance, and conservation education. Five years later in 1992 the OCP along with the ICCN worked with the government of Zaire and many NGOs to develop the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. This World Heritage Site is located in Ituri in Northeast Congo. With 14,000 square kilometers of land this is the world’s largest population of okapi, forest elephants, and chimpanzees.

Although the list of ungulates appears to be endless, countless species are no longer with us. Even the East African Oryx (*Oryx besisa*) is an endangered species and under protection. He, too, is easy to recognize with extremely long, straight, and ringed horns. Amazingly, this critter has the ability to raise its body temperature in effort to eliminate perspiration that gives off his scent. That’s particularly important, as these critters live in the semi-desert or steppes. They gather in small herds from 5 to 40. Lone males are part of the same species, but they increase their chances for propagating by remaining on their own.

The facts and basic information concerning us ungulates is intensive. When considering such animals, one should remember the number of species lost from this planet forever. I worry about all of us elk. Will we make another 100 years, or will we, too, be lost from human overpopulation and destruction of our habitat? It’s a tough assignment, but one that should be recognized and analyzed. After all, where would our mountain community be without involvement of animals? Hopefully this will shed light on what we are dealing with and the impact of loss. Think about it and stay tuned, for I am not planning on a vacation, and I’m here to keep you abreast of any news regarding our homeland and we who live here.