



The elk is a large, powerful animal with an adult weight averaging over 400 pounds (180 kg). Pelage (hair coat) is light to dark reddish brown on the body, a darker brown on the neck and legs, and creamy on the large rump patch. Males bear large, impressive antlers with six or more tines branching from two heavy central beams.

Elk graze on grasses and forbs, and browse on shrubs, tree seedlings, and saplings. Diet is variable, depending on the availability and nutritive content of forages. Elk dietary preferences often overlap those of domestic and other wild ungulates. Where both grasses and shrubs are available, elk may favor grasses. When snow reaches sufficient depth to cover grasses and shrubs, elk are forced to rely on conifer seedlings and saplings, and bark and twigs of deciduous trees, such as aspen. Wind-fallen branches and attached arboreal lichens are an important energy source in winter.



The breeding season (rut) begins in late summer, when dominant males (bulls) herd "harems" of cows together for breeding. Cow elk may breed as yearlings, but many breed first as 2-year-olds. A single calf is born about 250 days following conception. Scents (pheromones and hormones) are used to express dominance, breeding readiness and as a priming source to help synchronize breeding readiness between the sexes. Bull elk use scents as short-range communication by self-impregnating, putting scent on themselves and by leaving scent on rubs and in wallows. Scent left on rubs from Apocrine glands on skin near the antlers

and in the velvet itself may tell other bulls in the area that a dominant bull is using the area, and which bull it is. Most of the scents associated with bull elk are the scents left on the bull after it scrapes or wallows. Scrapes are often formed when the bull arises from its bed. Wallows are formed when a bull makes a scrape in a wet area, often in a marsh, pond, spring, or creek bottom. While making a scrape or wallow the bull's stomach may flutter up and down (palpitation), and the bull may urinate on its legs, belly and neck. It also urinates on the ground. Some experts claim there is a gland or glands just in front of the penal shaft, where the bull frequently urinates on itself. This area is called the "rut spot" and if there are glands there they may serve the same purpose as the tarsal glands of white-tailed deer, whereby the animal uses the scent from this area as a recognition scent. After the bull has created a rub or wallow it may lie down and roll on the ground, getting urine-laced water or mud on its body, neck, head and antlers. This often leaves the body of the elk darker than normal.

