

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR... Elk

While viewing the elk in their natural habitat, you will need to be aware of the guidelines. Approaching the elk willfully within 50 yards or any distance that disturbs or displaces the elk is illegal in the park. Violation of this regulation can result in fines and arrest. Please do not enter the fields to view or photo the elk-remain by the roadside and use binoculars, telephoto lens, or a spotting scope to view the animals.

You will notice something around the elk's neck as you view them. All of the elk introduced in 2001 wear a radio collar so the park can monitor the elk at all times. The experimental release of the elk into [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) began in February of 2001 with the importation of 25 elk from the Land Between the "Lakes National Recreation Area" along the Tennessee-Kentucky border. In 2002, the park imported another 27 animals. All elk are radio collared and will be monitored during the five-year experimental phase of the project. If the animals threaten park resources or create any conflicts with park visitors, the program will be stopped. Now, in 2010 the project has been a success and will continue until the Elk become a problem, if ever.

Elk once roamed the southern Appalachian Mountains and elsewhere in the eastern US. They were eliminated from the region by over-hunting and loss of habitat. The last elk in North Carolina was believed to have been killed in the late 1700s. In Tennessee, the last elk was killed in the mid-1800s. By 1900, the population of elk in North America dropped to the point that hunting groups and other conservation organizations became concerned the species was headed for extinction.

Elk Facts:

Diet: Grasses, Acorns, Bark, Leaves and buds from shrubs and trees

Size: Adult Males weigh an average of 600-700 pounds. Cows average 500 pounds. Adults are 7-10 feet long from nose to tail and stand 4.5-5 feet tall at the shoulder. Adult males have antlers that may reach a width of 5 feet.

Predators: Bobcats, Coyotes and Black Bears may kill young, sick or injured elk.

Offspring & Breeding: Cows usually give birth to only one calf per year. Newborns weigh about 35 pounds at birth. They can stand within minutes of birth and calf and cow usually rejoin the herd within a couple of weeks. Calves nurse for 1-7 months. Females are ready to breed in the second autumn of their lives.

Life Span: Elk can live as long as 15 years.

Senses: Elk have an acute sense of sight and smell

Elk by the seasons:

Spring: Elk will shed their antlers in March, however it is illegal to remove the antlers from the Park. After they have shed their antlers, elk immediately begin to growing new ones. In late Spring elk shed their Winter coats and start growing sleek, cooper-colored, one layer Summer coats.

Summer: Calves are typically born in early June. Male elk roll in "mud wallows" to keep cool and avoid pestering insects. By August, elk antlers are full grown and have shed their "velvet." Calves have lost their spots by Summer's end.

Fall: Fall is when the male elk make their infamous "Bugling calls" to attract cows and to challenge other bulls. Their calls may be heard upwards of a mile. Large bulls use their antlers to intimidate and spar with other males. Most encounters are non-violent and only performed as a ritual. Only occasionally do serious injuries occur when sparring. In September and early October, bulls gather and breed with up to 20 cows- the dominant ones that is.

Winter: During the colder months the elk "beef-up" their coats to a two-layer thickness. Long hairs on the outer layer repel water and the soft fuzzy inner layer keep the elk warm. Elk tend to move from the high country down into valleys to feed in the colder months as well.

Viewing the Elk:

The best times to view the elk are usually early morning and late evening, with the occasional mid-day spotting. Elk may also be seen during cloudy, overcast days as well as before and after storms. Please enjoy the elk at a distance with the appropriate gear, no matter how tempting it is to get close. If the animal stops feeding, changes directions or alters it's behavior in any way, then you are too close.

Depending on where you will be coming from, the easiest access to [Cataloochee Valley](#) is from Interstate-40/Exit #20. Once you take the exit travel approximately 0.2 miles to "Cove Creek Road" and follow signs to the Valley. At around 11 miles you will arrive on Ranger Road and begin your exploration of the Historic and wild area. Once you exit I-40, allow for approximately 45 minutes travel time to the valley via the curvy and steep Cove Creek Road (turning to gravel a little over half way).

An Elk Warning:

Please be alert of your surroundings when viewing wild animals of any sort in the Park. Elk are very large animals, some of the biggest in the park and can be dangerous if approached too closely. Pay special attention when you see a female elk with a calf. They have been known to charge people in defense of their young. Male elk or "Bulls" may perceive an onlooker for a threat to his range or domain and charge. The best way to assure you and your family's safety is to keep your distance and prepare for your trip with the proper equipment for viewing wildlife.