



Forestry fun fact: December 2017

Rocky Mountain Elk (*Cervus elaphus nelson*)

History of elk in the Yakima River drainage

Early records indicate that elk were once native residents of the Yakima River drainage. The exact species is unknown and the date of when the last animal disappeared is questionable. It is probable that they had left before European settlement. Evidence of their existence is based upon weathered relics and reports of local Indians. Rocky mountain elk populations currently in Washington state stem from Elk transplanted from Yellowstone national park in the early 1900s.

Habitat

Elk are amazingly adaptable and can live almost in any environment forests, deserts, mountains and plains.

Diet

They eat a wide variety of plants, their typical diet consists of grasses (year round), woody plants (winter) and forbs (summer). In Wyoming, in 2004 300 elk visiting from Colorado ate ("ground lichen") which caused tissue decay and eventual death. The native elk were not affected, simply because their immune systems were already equipped to deal with this toxic lichen. This is another example of wildlife and plants evolving with each other.

Reproduction

Mating occurs during the fall rut, once the rut begins, mature bulls challenge each other vocally, emitting high-pitched Calliope-like whistles or bugles. Successful bulls breed with numerous females each year

Social Structure

Elk are social animals, living in herds for much of the year. During spring, summer, and winter, elk tend to split into cow-calf herds and bull herds.

Did you know?

"Wapiti" is the name for Rocky Mountain elk in Shawnee language and means "white rump"