

Western Parks

Wapiti Self-guiding Trail

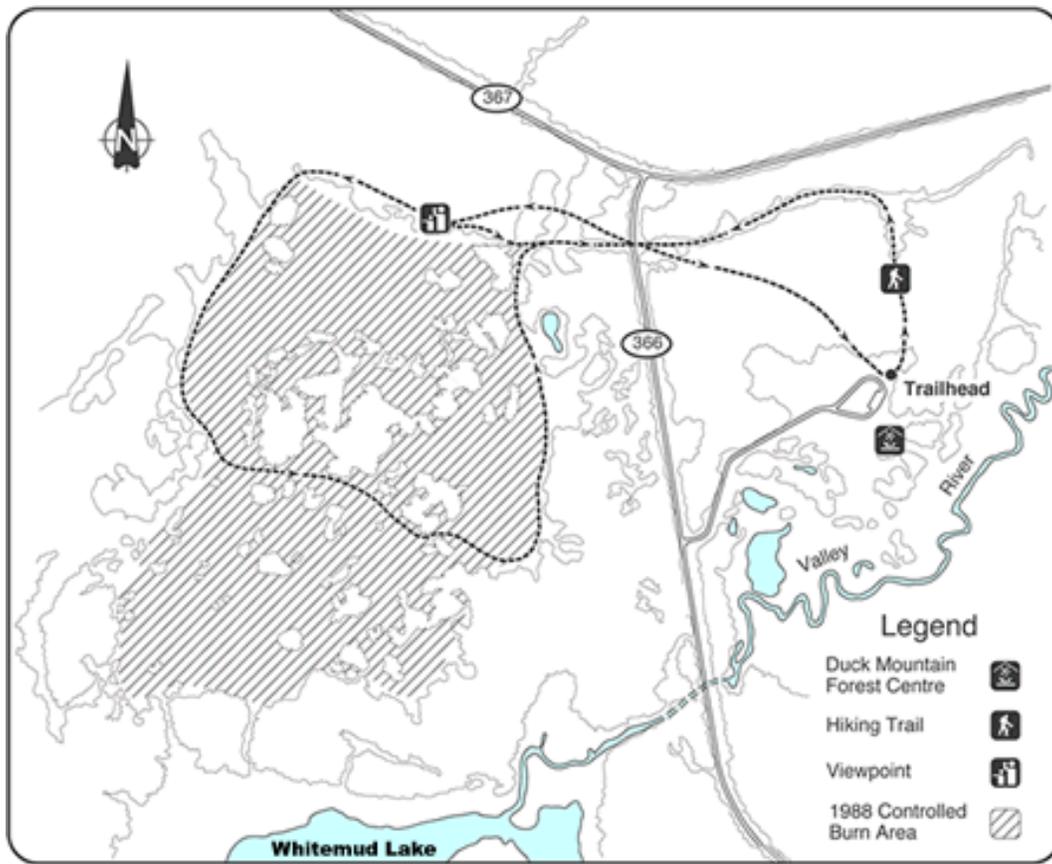


Text by Glen Suggett

Trail Notes

The first part of the Wapiti Trail, from the parking lot at the Duck Mountain Forest Centre to the viewpoint is a 2.3 km return hike. A little over half way along the trail you have to cross PR 366. Be sure to watch for oncoming traffic and cross only when it is safe to do so. If you would like to explore the elk's feeding ground, you can follow the optional trail loop. This will add about another 2.2 km to your hike. There are no restroom facilities, nor drinking water along the trails.

The optional trail loop follows an old fireguard. This area was logged many years ago and then replanted with spruce seedlings. Prior to planting, the ground was "scarified" by a bulldozer, creating the deep furrows in which the seedlings were planted. The replanting efforts proved unsuccessful, but wildlife biologists noticed that the area had become an important feeding area for elk, as well as deer and moose. In an effort to maintain and enhance this area's value for wildlife, a controlled burn was undertaken in 1988.



Trail map

Introduction

Wapiti, or elk as they are better known, were once found from one end of the great plains of North America to the other. "Wapiti" is a Shawnee word meaning "white rump."

When explorer and fur trader Alexander Henry, the Younger, travelled down the Red River in the fall of 1800, he recorded in his journal that "large herds were seen at every turn of the river and the bulls were bugling all through the woods." Ernest Thompson Seton estimated that there were once as many as 10 million elk in North America, but they were all but eliminated with the advance of settlement. They survived when bison could not, by existing in remote, isolated habitats where few people chose to settle. Duck Mountain and Riding Mountain were the only areas where the prairie subspecies of elk, *Cervus elaphus manitobensis*, survived the onslaught of settlement. This subspecies of elk is darker in colour than its mountain dwelling counterparts.

Today, elk are seen in only a few places in Manitoba and their distinctive bugling call is no longer heard in the Red River Valley outside of the Assiniboine Park Zoo. On frosty September mornings, Duck Mountain's woods and meadows still resonate with the spine-tingling sound of a bygone era.

So you want to see elk in the wild...

There could be as many as 1,200 elk in the Duck Mountain area, but seeing just one of them could prove to be a challenge as elk are wary of humans. If you are going to see or photograph elk here, you will have to know a few things about their habitat and way of life. What do they eat and where do they find it? Where do they seek shelter? Where do they drink water and where do they fulfil their mineral requirements? When are they most active and readily seen? How can I see them without being detected? Answer these questions and you will have an excellent chance of seeing elk in Duck Mountain Provincial Park.

Food and shelter

Elk are much like bison or cattle, grazing on prairie grasses and forbs. They will eat a wide variety of grasses, such as big and little bluestem, brome grass, wheat grass, june grass and sedges. They also select forbs, such as aster, columbine, dandelion, fireweed, fleabane, goldenrod, marsh marigold, paintbrush, ragweed, strawberry, vetches and clover. In winter elk will paw and crater through the snow for these foods. When their preferred foods are buried beneath more than 70 cm of snow, elk will browse young trees and shrubs. The twigs of aspen, balsam poplar, willows, red-osier dogwood, mountain maple, wolf willow and chokecherry comprise much of their winter diet-that is, when they don't find a farmer's hay bales. Elk seem to prefer alfalfa in winter and are fairly bold, often sneaking into farmyards under the cover of darkness to raid the cattle feed.

Elk routinely begin feeding before dawn and then bed down in early morning to chew their cud. They feed again around sunset, bedding down around midnight to again chew their cud and rest. In winter, they may spend more time searching for food and are often active throughout the day when the weather is mild. In cold or stormy weather, they bed down in heavy woods or other sheltered areas to conserve energy. Shelter is an important element of winter habitat. Duck Mountain's rolling terrain and spruce thickets provide both protection from the elements and concealment from predators.

Water and minerals

Elk need fresh water, but they will eat snow in winter when lakes and creeks are frozen. Water is found in abundance on Duck Mountain and elk are seldom far from a ready supply. Mineral licks, often associated with springs feeding various creeks, are less common and elk tend to seek out these special areas in spring and early summer. Bulls require minerals to grow their antlers, while cows frequent the licks to replenish their mineral reserves taxed by bearing and nurturing their offspring.



Elk bull with antlers in velvet

Courtesy of Bill Watkins

Antler growth, with very few exceptions, is found only on bulls. Antlers are shed towards the end of each winter, with a new set starting its growth almost immediately. Bulls which are 1 1/2 years old will grow spikes, followed by a modest set of antlers when they are 2 1/2. From 3 1/2 to seven or eight years of age, the bulls come into their prime, growing some of the most magnificent antlers to be seen. These antlers are a reflection of the health and vigour of the animal, straining the body's resources. Any interruption in food or minerals, or even a minor illness, will be reflected in the antler growth, as will any accident occurring to the "green" antler during the velvet stage.

Ernest Thompson Seton described the elk's antler growth in his classic work *Lives of Game Animals*:

At first the place of each antler is a broad raw spot. A few days later, it shows a thick rounded pad of blood-gorged skin. This swells rapidly and, in a fortnight, the great bulbous, fuzzy young antler-beginning has shot up to a height of several inches. At exactly the right time and place, and in just the right direction, a bump comes forth to be the foundation of the brow tine. In a few days, the bez-tine is projected by the invisible architect. In a month, the structure is nearly a foot high, and all enveloped in a turgid mass of feverish, throbbing blood-vessels-the scaffolding and workmen of this wonderful structure. Night and day, the work is pushed with astounding speed, and in four months this "skyscraper" is finished. A marvel indeed; an edifice that according to ordinary rules, should have taken a life time, and yet it has been rushed through in a single summer.

When the breeding season arrives in early September, antler growth is complete and they are ready for display and combat. Cows can quickly judge the suitability of a bull by the size of his antlers.

Life cycle

Elk are one of the largest members of the deer family, second in size only to moose. A bull elk may weigh from 260 kg to 500 kg, while an adult cow may vary from 190 kg to 270 kg.

They are very vocal, communicating with each other regularly. Calves bleat, while cows squeal in return, and bark in alarm. The bulls have a loud resonate bugle, which has to be heard to be appreciated. It has been described as sounding something like this: "a-a-a-ai-e-eeeeeee-ough! e-uh! e-uh!". Bulls tend to bugle most often during the rut, or breeding season, which normally occurs from early September until the end of October. Bulls bugle to announce their presence, intimidate rival bulls and attract cow elk during the rut.



Elk cow with calf
Courtesy of Bill Watkins

Elk tend to move about in herds, most often led not by a bull, but by a wary, experienced cow. She knows the best grazing areas at the time of year, the best escape routes, and is always the most alert to danger. Cows and calves spend the summer months together, in herds of 12 to 25 animals. Bulls spend the summer in smaller bachelor bands. In autumn, the cows and calves are split up into harems tended by a dominant bull. In winter, elk join up into large herds, sometimes numbering up to a hundred, comprised of all ages and sexes. They stay together until mid-winter when the bulls split off into bachelor groups. Cows stay together until dispersing in the spring to bear their young.

Elk watching tips

The area through which you will travel along the Wapiti Trail is typical of Duck Mountain's elk habitat. Chances of seeing an elk here are better than some areas because of the clearing towards the end of the trail. The shrubs, grasses and forbs provide food, while the surrounding forest provides thermal cover and escape cover.

If you are going to see elk here, you will have to fool the herd cow and all of the other watchful eyes, ears and noses. If they see you first, they will be gone in a flash. The best times to see elk are at first light and at dusk when they are actively feeding. Getting to a good vantage point before dawn will increase the likelihood of seeing them, but this won't work if they can hear you coming. Their hearing is excellent, and any talking or noise as you brush against trees or shrubs will alert them to danger. You also have to make sure that they can't smell you either. If there is a steady wind against your back, you are unlikely to see anything in front of you, unless you can get a clear view for a long distance.

A tactic used by elk hunters during the rut can also be used by those hunting with a camera. Commercially available elk calls can be used to challenge a bull and draw him into view. Calling tends to be most successful from early September until the end of October. At any other time of the year, a bugle call would not be effective.

After an unsuccessful day of hunting, hunters often bemoan the fact that tracks make pretty thin soup. A wildlife watcher may also have to settle for tracks and scats if the conditions aren't perfect for seeing elk. If you can learn to recognize elk tracks and their droppings, they can lead you to the herd. (If you try tracking elk, make sure you bring along an aerial photo, topographical map and compass). With a little experience and an intimate knowledge of the surrounding landscape, you can unlock the mystery of the phantom elk.

For all their wariness, elk are creatures of habit and tend to use the same areas, depending on the time of day and the time of year. They vary from their safe routine only when a threat arises, and even then their escape routes and destinations are predictable. With some time and perseverance, you will be rewarded with the sight of a majestic bull elk or a handsome cow and calf. Good luck!



Bull elk and cows *Courtesy of Bill Watkins*