

# MOUNTAINS

## Safety first as elk herd enters 20th rut season



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

It's that time of year again. The elk are rutting in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

From September to early November, the fall breeding season, hormones kick in and elk go into overdrive. Bulls' antlers reach maturity, and their ethereal bugling calls can be heard resounding through fields and forests within the park and beyond its boundary.

The bull elk's call inspires awe not only for its otherworldly splendor, but because it is still a relatively "new" sound in these environs. Though once as many as ten million elk ranged from coast to coast in North America, the European settlers who arrived in the 1700s brought what author David Brill calls a "combination of landscape fragmentation and unsustainable hunting customs" and, as a result, elk were extirpated from this landscape for a century and a half.

"David Brill's article, 'A Graceful Giant Makes a Successful Return' in the new fall issue of Smokies Life magazine is one of the more thorough and accurate articles I've come across for the elk program and serves as a good record of the associated major events," says Joe Yarkovich, an NPS wildlife biologist who is working to help elk make a successful comeback in the Smokies.

Reintroduced 20 years ago, the elk herd now totals roughly 200 animals, with about half using park lands, but not even Yarkovich knows their exact number. Visible throughout the year in Cataloochee Valley, near the Oconaluftee Visitor Center, and on Balsam Mountain, elk are crepuscular, which means they are most active at dawn and dusk. During the heat of the day, they may all but disappear into the cool cover of vegetation.

Brill's riveting 14-page cover-story in Smokies Life, the biannual magazine published by Great Smoky Mountains Association, traces the complex research and environmental assessment done prior to elk being brought to the Smokies from Land Between the Lakes



Absent from the Smoky Mountain landscape for 150 years, elk staged a return in 2001 with help from park biologists and resource managers. PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

in Western Kentucky and Canada's Elk Island National Park, and provides a broad overview of the ongoing wildlife science that is giving this still-fragile herd a chance to survive long into the future.

Monitoring the park's elk population began immediately after their release in 2001 and is ongoing to assess the herd's health and to document any significant impacts to the park's ecosystems. Brill covers this detailed monitoring science as well as early and current threats to the elk, which now include vehicle collisions as the animals naturally expand out of the park into its gateway communities and adjacent lands, often crossing highways to find new territory.

Yarkovich and a team of scientists use radio-transmitting collars to monitor and protect the elk. As Brill explains in his story, "the collars — which feature very-high-frequency (VHF) transmit-

ters powered by batteries that can last eight years or longer — are not used to precisely track the movement of the animals but rather to monitor elk survival and reproduction. An elk whose signal remains stationary for a prolonged period could indicate that the animal has died from black bear predation, a collision with an automobile — both take a considerable toll on the park's elk population — or of natural causes."

Pregnant elk often leave the herd and seek sheltered locations in the forest to give birth alone. Collared females' transmitters allow park staff to locate the newly emerged calves and outfit them with radio collars. Most calves are born between May and June, having been conceived in September or October, which brings us back to the fall rut.

"This is a very stressful time for all of the elk, and their behavior changes dramatically at this time of year," says Yar-

kovich. "Mature males (bulls) can exceed 1,000 pounds, and they have very high testosterone levels right now as they compete for dominance. They may charge or challenge anything they see as a threat, including humans and even vehicles. Females are still protective of their calves and are further stressed by the males' activity."

Yarkovich says the most important thing you can do is keep your distance. "Willfully approaching elk within 50 yards, or any distance that changes their behavior, is against park regulations and puts you and the elk at risk," he says.

Below are more NPS tips for safely observing elk in Great Smoky Mountains National Park:

- Bring binoculars or a spotting scope to observe elk from a distance.
  - Slow down. Elk get hit by cars on park roads every year resulting in vehicle damage and the loss of an animal. Elk frequently cross the roads around Oconaluftee, Cataloochee, Balsam Mountain, and Blue Ridge Parkway. Obey speed limits and stay alert.
  - Pull off the roadway to allow other vehicles to pass and stay close to your car. If an elk approaches, retreat to your vehicle.
  - Keep dogs on a leash or, better yet, leave them in your car.
  - Never attempt to feed elk or other park wildlife, and properly dispose of garbage and food waste.
  - If an elk charges you, do not turn your back. Instead, take cover behind a large object like a vehicle or tree. In the unlikely event that the elk does make contact, protect your head and neck.
- For more information on viewing elk and to watch a short safety video, visit [nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/elk.htm](https://nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/elk.htm). To purchase the fall 2021 issue of Smokies Life with the elk cover story, go to [smokiesinformation.org](https://smokiesinformation.org).
- Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Her book "A Search for Safe Passage" features an elk who guides the other animal characters to a landbridge over a busy highway. Learn more at [SmokiesInformation.org](https://smokiesinformation.org) and reach the author at [frances@gsassoc.org](mailto:frances@gsassoc.org).

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