

Bellows and Brawls

A bellow is a loud noise. A brawl is a fight. Male elk—bulls—do both each autumn. Cooling temperatures and shortening days signal the start of the elk mating season—the rut. Elk move from the high mountains to the grassy meadows in the valleys below.

Each bull tries to gather a harem, a group of female elk, to breed with. To attract females, the bull has to look sharp. He has been growing antlers all spring and summer under a protective soft covering called velvet. To remove the velvet from his fully grown antlers, the bull rubs them on trees and shrubs and even on the ground. The bull's newly polished antlers may weigh as much as 40 pounds!

When the rut begins, the bulls begin to bugle. Elk bugles sound like loud squealing whistles and grunts. Bugling attracts female elk—cows. The bugle can tell the cow a lot about the bull. Usually the larger, stronger

bulls have louder bugles. If the bull can catch the attention of the cow with his bugle, he can then show off his antlers and body.

Bugles also announce the bull's presence to other males; and can be used to accept a challenge to fight. Before they actually battle, rival bulls will size each other up. Usually, the smaller bull leaves right then and there!

If the bulls are about equal in size, they signal their readiness to fight. They bugle and thrash the ground with their antlers. They strut, circle, and begin their battle. The bulls lock antlers and shove each other with all their might! They are not trying to stab each other with their antlers or fight to the death, although sometimes those things do happen. Rather, the strongest "pusher" wins the right to keep the harem, and the loser walks away.

