

## **Antlers and Elk Bugling**

Contrary to popular belief moose, elk and deer drop their antlers every year. All members of the deer family have antlers, but bighorn sheep, antelope and mountain goats have horns that stay with those animals for life.

One of the strangest questions I've ever been asked is, "At what altitude do deer turn into elk?" The correct answer of course is that they don't...but at this time of year both species are indeed going through a transition.

Antlers develop through a very complex process during which the antler is completely covered with a soft skin-like material called velvet. This velvet is highly vascularized, meaning it has a lot of blood vessels, which is the way nutrition gets from an animal's body to the antlers.

If you're in the right place over the few weeks or so you can see these animals when their antlers are in this velvet phase.

As the summer winds down the velvet on the antlers will begin to die and bucks and bulls will rub their antlers on trees and bushes. The former tender antler mass then hardens into ivory like bone.

At the same time, bull elk begin their low to high pitched bugling in order to attract a harem of cows and to let the young bulls know who's in charge. You can often see and hear this spectacle from mid-September through early October. Rocky Mountain National Park is pretty much a guarantee for bugling elk, but with a herd of more than 300 thousand statewide they can be found elsewhere.