

The Wapiti of Jackson Hole – 1939

Narrator: In the northwest corner of Wyoming, in the region of Jackson Hole, is the largest remaining herd of a magnificent American game animal: the wapiti, commonly known as elk. This is the story of their life.

The deep snows of winter are melting away and the delicate flowers of spring are brought forth in the warm sunshine. The birds, after winter sojourn in the south land, are back once more and nesting begins. In this part of the Rocky Mountains the Trumpeter Swan, though its tribe is dwindling in numbers and threatened with possible extinction, bravely returns each year. Dwindling numbers do not diminish its lifelong devotion to its mate.

After a long winter of snow and scanty feed, the elk once more are back in the aspen thickets, in the freedom of the awakening wilderness with the promise of tender new forage. They too have responded to nature's law and this little calf lies hiding from possible danger. Awkward he is, and wobbly, but he is a fulfillment of mother love. Bright-eyed, but still he may wonder [at] the grouse [in the] aspen [overhead], which may in turn wonder at the tawny spotted creature down below.

Strutting and hooting, the blue grouse is making his display to win his lady fair. From the willow thicket comes a throbbing sound, the drumming of the rough grouse. On his favorite drumming log, he too displays his charms.

As the elk calves grow and gain in strength and the vegetation flourishes in the pleasant month of June, the elk gather in neighborly herds and drift to the highlands, the open, partly wooded parklands of the Rockies. The hardships and hunger of the winter months are forgotten. The calves, while still nourished by their mother's milk, soon learn to graze like their elders. As the lazy summer days pass by the herds enjoy nature's bounty of sweet green forage and sunny skies. Here in seclusion the bulls grow their new antlers, which at this season are covered with a soft protective skin that we call the velvet.

All of the wood folk are making the best of the pleasant season. The golden-eyed duck cares for her little ones. The solitary moose, largest of the deer family, shares the summer pastures with the elk, feeding on willows and sedges, enjoying the pools of cool water and the protecting shade of the forest. Nature's gardens thrive and blossom. The delicate columbine among the trees, as well as the myriad plants of the meadows and the leaves of shrubs, are eagerly sought for food by the elk. In the meadows also they find the grasses, symbol of plenty and of well-being for the elk.

As the summer progresses, the elk gather in large herds. The calves are growing and they are losing the white spots of their baby coats. It is the month of August. A few cold nights, a heavy frost, and a firm hand of autumn begins to paint the landscape. September, this is the mating time of the deer tribe. The elk young and old have lost their summer coats. The bull elk have rubbed the velvet from their antlers and seek the cows. The elk are polygamous and each bull gathers as many cows as he can keep from rival bulls.

The lordly moose also seeks his mates. More solitary than the elk, the bull moose does not gather a herd but finds his mates individually.

The old bull elk, master of his harem, is suspicious of all possible rivals, even the youngsters in the herd. These young bulls have been driven from the band and formed a bachelor company of their own. This

two-year-old would like a heard of his own but he dare not challenge the strength of the master. Even these two-year-olds, both cast out from the band, are jealous of each other. The great herd master in the ardor of his love-making will thrash the bushes with his antlers and mimic battle and wallow in the mud and water of a swampy spot like this. Listen – the mountains are ringing with the music of bugling elk. So in the brisk air of autumn, the mating of the elk takes place.

Now winter is at hand. From the upland the elk can see the Teton Range, below which they must go when snow piles up in the mountains. As the snow covers their summer meadows they travel downward to the wintering grounds where it is not so deep. In the days of the Indian, the elk found much food in the mountain valleys. Today, with the rancher and his cattle, food is scarce for them. But man, with all his conflict with the wilderness, is beginning to care for its wildlife. The Congress of the United States has set aside part of this area in Jackson Hole for an elk refuge where hay is raised exclusively for these wild creatures. The hay stacks you see here are for the elk in time of stress. The elk refuge, which is administered by the Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture, helps to carry through the winter the herds that are forced by heavy snow to seek the valleys.

By daily feeding, their fear of man is replaced by trust and by confidence in their benefactors. In spite of all we can do, however, winter is the time of struggle and of hardship for the elk. Disease takes its toll. Some elk become infested with scabies. Many succumb to calf diphtheria. This cow elk is down to rise no more. Sharp seeds and coarse feed has caused sores in the mouth such as these. It is pathetic to see an elk sick and helpless. When approached by man it will crouch in the attitude of hiding, just as it did as a newborn spotted calf in the [...] time long ago.

But spring will come again. The hearty survivors eagerly seek the new grass in the soggy fields. The bull has shed his great antlers. The new ones quickly start to grow – velvet buds which will unfold the new structure in the coming season. Upward go the elk once more, leaving the valley lands behind them. Shedding their winter coats, the elk go northward following the retreating snow banks to the highlands. Again the season of promise is here. The wilderness of the Rockies beckons once more and with renewed spirit the elk trail back to their mountain meadows, their summer home. As the seasons come and go may we always find bright-eyed fawns looking out upon a wilderness home. And may the mighty bulls nurture their strength in the mountains of Jackson Hole.