



Interior

Nature Note

Return of the Elk

There's a baby boom in the animal kingdom . . . The American elk, once threatened with extinction, is having a population explosion.

Herds of these stately members of the deer family have been so protected in recent years that now they are becoming too numerous. By their constant nibbling of grasses, tender twigs and leaves, the elk have stripped many land areas of green vegetation, causing wastelands where erosion threatens and other wildlife have difficulty finding food and shelter.

In an effort to keep elk population under control, park rangers in Yellowstone National Park trimmed out more than half of the 5,000 elk last winter. In 14 states throughout the nation, hunters are now allowed to kill about 75,000 elk each year outside game reserves and parks.

The American elk, *Cervus canadensis*, also called wapati from the name given it by the Shawnee Indians, is the second largest deer existing in the world. The moose is the largest. A full grown wapati may stand five feet four inches at the shoulder and weigh from 700 to 1,000 pounds. The antlers, one of the remarkable features of these creatures, can branch out five feet.

Within an hour after birth, the baby elk, usually born in May or June, is able to stand and even walk on somewhat wobbly legs. Its coat is light tawny-brown with white spots—effective camouflage among the flickering patches of sunlight and shadows of the woods and brush. A few days after birth the young calf is strong enough to follow the herd on its annual migration to high mountain regions.

Wapati once ranged over southern Canada and most of the United States from the East to West coast and down as far as Mexico—a farther degree than that of any other hoofed game animal on this continent. As pioneers and settlers began to populate the land, elk were killed in such numbers that they were in danger of vanishing.



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