ELK & DEER

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma

A loud, piercing cry cuts through the silence of a September morning, as a large bull elk bugles his challenge for the world to hear. In another part of the mountains, a white-tailed deer flashes his tail to warn of possible danger. These experiences can be among the most thrilling for you at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. For a time, though, the elk were silent and the deer scarce in this area.

The elk were gone for 80 years from the Wichita Mountains. The last native elk was killed on Rainy Mountain in 1881. And 25 years later the last Merriam elk, the type probably native to the Wichitas, was killed in Arizona's Chiricahua Mountains. When the elk were returned to the Wichita Mountains from the herd at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, they were different subspecies — Rocky Mountain Elk — smaller and more distinctively colored than their extinct predecessors. They adapted well, however, and the mountains again echo each year with the bugling of the elk.

Year after year these noble animals repeat their life cycles. In September the elk leaves the bulls he has been traveling with and seeks the long ignored cow herds. After collecting about 20 cows, or as many as he can locate and keep from other bulls, the bull spends most of his time furiously charging larger bulls who try to steal his harem. Only occasionally is he challenged by a bigger bull, a challenge that is settled by combat. With heads lowered and all the power they can muster, the big bulls ram together. Usually a couple of charges will settle the issue, and the weaker bull leaves the harem to the winner of the battle.

The 4-6 weeks of the rutting season is hard on the bull, for during that time he gets very little food or rest. At the end of the season, before the worst of the winter arrives, he must eat heartily to regain his lost weight and strength. He no longer guards his harem but joins other small bull groups, the challenges of the rutting season forgotten. An old cow will lead the large herd through the winter months.

With the approach of warm weather, the shedding of antlers in March and April, and the birth of calves in June, the herd again splits into smaller groups — this time groups composed of bulls, cows and calves, and a few solitary old bulls. And so they remain until September when the bull, with his new rack of antlers, again bugles his challenge.

Toward the end of the 19th century white-tailed deer became scarce here. During the first half of the century — because of their ability to live near man — they actually increased their numbers. But intense hunting pressure through the rest of the century seriously reduced the population. With the establishment of the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in 1905 — and state hunting regulations — white-tailed deer have again become plentiful.

Like the elk, the white-tailed deer also courts his doe once a year although he does it without bugling. During the month of November, the buck becomes a hunter, fearing nothing as he tracks a doe. The buck with his full growth of antlers easily drives away smaller rivals but meets the challenge of a larger buck with a fight. They do not meet with repeated head-on collisions, as the elk do, but charge only once, depending on the brute strength to drive the other back, each quick to take advantage of an opportunity to drive his antlers into his rival's body.

The buck loses his antlers sometime between December and February and becomes a shy, elusive creature. With the coming of spring and a new growth of antlers, he browses alone or with other bucks. In June, after the birth of the fawns, does and fawns form small loose herds, staying close enough to feel the vibrations of stamping feet or see the white flag of a tail, two methods deer use to warn each other. In November, the cycle begins anew.

The elk is a far more vulnerable animal than the deer. The elk is much larger than the deer and has larger antlers, providing hunters with more meat and a larger trophy. Elk also have two canine teeth, resembling miniature tusks, which were considered magic by the Indians and are still regarded as special trophies by hunters. Elk reproduce less rapidly than deer, and the cow must be at least 28 months old before she can breed. A white-tailed doe, on the other hand, can produce her first fawn when she is only 1 year old and commonly bears twins after the first pregnancy.

Finally, elk are grazers and are quite visible in the open grassland where they feed, while deer are browsers and are usually hidden by the brush they eat. Deer are territorial and seldom range more than 1 or 2 miles in their entire lifetime. And the brushy forest edge favored by deer expands as the forests are cut and crosstimbers invade the prairies.

Both noble animals thrive in the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge today, however. If your timing is right, you have a good chance to hear that elk bugling his challenge through the mountains or see a flashing tail along a brushy forest edge.