

# Elk FACTS



- Scientific Name: Cervus Elaphus. Elk are part of the deer family, which includes moose, caribou, mule deer and white-tailed deer.
- The 52 elk released in the Cataloochee Valley of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park are the Subspecies Manitoban translocated from "Land Between the Lakes" in 2001 and from Elk Island National Park, Alberta, Canada in 2002.
- Newborn calves weigh 35 pounds. Adult female elk, called cows, weigh on the average around 500 pounds. Male elk are called bulls and weigh on the average about 700 pounds. However, some bulls have weighed nearly 1000 pounds.
- Bull elk grow and shed a new set of antlers every year. New growth begins soon after the existing antlers drop off and will grow as much as one inch per day. The new growth is covered in fuzzy skin called "velvet". The antlers harden by late summer and the velvet is peeled away by rubbing on tree limbs. By September, antlers are solid bone and can weigh as much as 40 pounds on a mature bull.
- Cow elk give birth to one calf every year, with twins being very rare. Calves are born spotted and scentless.
- The mating call of bulls is called a bugle and can be heard during the breeding season, called the rut, which runs primarily from September through October.
- The best time to see elk is early morning and late afternoon. Always view elk from a distance using binoculars or a spotting scope to view up-close. If the elk becomes alert or nervous and begins to move away – you are too close!

## Seasonal

### CALVING SEASON: LATE SPRING

Most of the calves in Cataloochee and WNC are born in late May thru June. The cows hide their calves in the high grass. For safety and to avoid disturbing the calves, visitors should stay out of the fields. Cows can be aggressive in protecting their young. By late June, visitors can often see the calves up and moving with the herd.

### GROWING SEASON: SUMMER

The herd can often be seen grazing in the fields. Bulls are "in velvet," rapidly growing new antlers. The calves are growing quickly and will gain as much as 140 pounds by winter.

### THE RUT: FALL

The mating season for elk is called the rut, which occurs from mid-September through the end of October. Large bulls bugle and fight for domination and the right to breed with the cows. This can be a dangerous time for visitors as the bulls can be aggressive with unpredictable behavior. For your protection, please remain on the roadway and near your vehicle during the rut.

### WINTER IN CATALOOCHEE

Winter is a quiet time in the valley. The elk herd retreats to the woods and may not be seen in the fields for weeks. The road becomes treacherous with snow. The road will often be closed when snow is on the peaks around Jonathan Valley.



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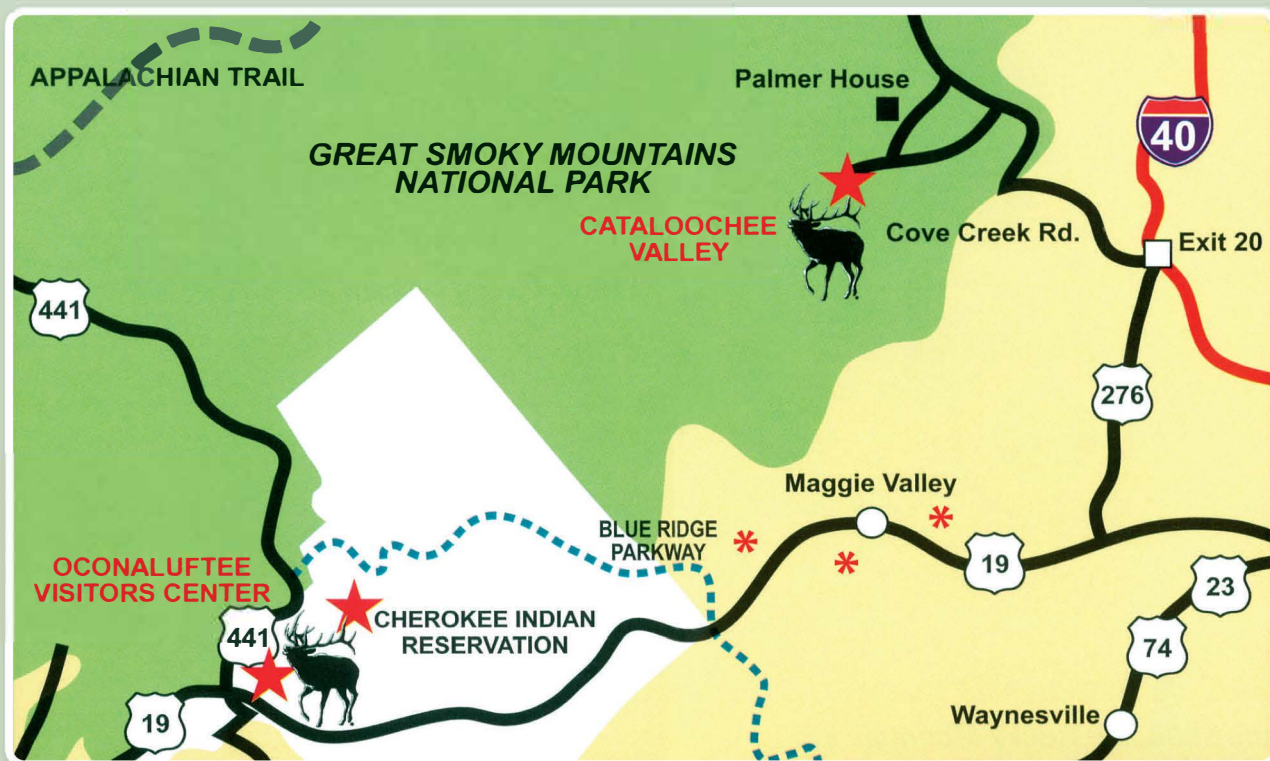
Friends of the Smokies and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
provided information contained in this brochure.

# Elk

IN THE  
NC Smokies



**E**lk were once abundant throughout the United States, but by the mid-1800's, overhunting and habitat loss wiped out eastern elk herds. In 2001, after a five-year study, the GSM National Park Service, the GSM Chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and other partners joined together to restore wild elk to the Smoky Mountains in Cataloochee Valley. The initial 52 elk that were released have grown to a herd of more than 150.



\* – FREQUENT ELK SIGHTINGS

## Safety

When elk are present, federal regulations require that you do not approach an elk within 150 feet or any distance that disturbs the animal(s). Failure to do so can result in fines and/or arrest.

## Viewing the Elk

Most elk are located in the Cataloochee Valley area in the southeastern section of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Elk have migrated out of the park and can frequently be seen in Maggie Valley (the “Elk Capital of North Carolina”), the Oconaluftee and Ravensford

areas and the lands of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians near Cherokee, NC.

## What to Expect

Cataloochee is a remote area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Once you leave US 276, there is no gas, food, or other commercial services available to you. In the valley there are some historic structures and exhibits, trailheads leading to over 800 miles of trails, camping, and the opportunity to see wildlife including the reintroduced elk herd. The herd is strong and growing. The best time to view the elk is approximately two hours before sunset.

## Directions

The easiest way to reach Cataloochee Valley is to take 276 North (Jonathan Creek Road) off Highway 19 in Maggie Valley. Go about 6 miles and turn left onto Cove Creek Road, the last left turn before coming to I-40 intersection. Travel on Cove Creek Road into Cataloochee Valley (see below).

**From I-40:** Take exit 20 towards Maggie Valley. After ¼ mile, turn right on Cove Creek Road. Go about 13 miles to the Cataloochee Valley. The road turns into a narrow dirt road and intersects a paved road. Follow directional signs for “Cataloochee Camp Ground.”

*\*Cove Creek Road is a steep, ten-mile, narrow, curving mountain road. There is a three-mile unpaved section leading up and over Cove Creek Gap, and then winding down the other side of the mountain. Early settlers built this road by hand in the 1800s and called it Cataloochee Turnpike. This graveled section remains as a vital reminder of Cataloochee’s history and a tribute to its builders. When you again reach pavement, turn left and enjoy your easy descent into the valley.*

