

Seasonal Trail Closures- Wildlife FAQs

Why do these closures exist?

Recreation activity often causes a flight response in deer and elk.

During the winter: When they flee, they burn precious body fat stores that they spent the summer and fall seasons packing on. These fat reserves help them to survive the winter, when they are living in a state of near-starvation due to the limited plant availability. If they burn through their fat stores too quickly, they will starve and die before spring.

During the spring: Spring triggers deer and elk to migrate from their winter ranges to their high-elevation summer ranges using historic migration routes as they follow the receding snowline and green-up of vegetation that comes with it. This is known as “surfing the green wave,” which allows these ungulates to continually access nutritious, newly emerging plants. This helps them to recover their weight losses from the long winter, so they can calve/fawn and subsequently nurse their young. During this time, mule deer does, and elk cows seek places of seclusion to safely give birth and feed their newborns. Studies have shown that human disturbance during this time lowers the survival rates of their young.

In short, after a long winter, our local deer and elk herds are stressed, starved, and the females are pregnant. They just want to eat healthy food and be left alone to give birth to and feed their young. Human disturbance interferes with this by causing them to flee instead. Studies have found that human interruptions on their spring calving and fawning grounds have led to fewer young surviving to the fall.

Why should trail users respect these closures?

- Deer and elk see humans, and especially their dogs, as predators. This means they will change their behavior when humans and dogs are nearby.
- Frequent disturbance may even cause them to become more nocturnal (avoiding humans in time) or to abandon areas that provide high-quality habitat (avoiding humans in space).
- They will flush from areas where they are resting or feeding (feeding themselves or their young) in response to the presence of humans and dogs on the trail.
- This is especially damaging in the winter when food supplies are so limited. High-quality food is unavailable to wildlife during winter. They are living on the edge of starvation. Their only energy comes from the fat stores they gained during summer. When people recreate nearby, animals flee and burn the calories needed to survive.

- Pregnant deer and elk are especially vulnerable and stand a better chance of survival when the habitat is free of interactions with humans and pets.
- In the spring, they need to regain their fat reserves to be able to recover from winter and feed their young. Young are particularly vulnerable to malnutrition and predation during this time.

How do humans affect mule deer and elk on the White River National Forest?

- Mule deer and elk are not sensitive or endangered species on the White River NF.
- Their habitat has been reduced in the Eagle River Valley over time. Many factors have influenced this habitat reduction, including:
 - Development of infrastructure such as housing, roads, Interstate 70, commercial property, golf courses, playgrounds, parking areas, etc.
- Recreation uses have also played a role in habitat reduction or how the animals use the existing habitat:
 - Trails, roads, campgrounds, parking areas, ski areas, all put pressure on the deer and elks' use of the habitat they require to be successful.

What are some ways you can reduce your impact to wildlife?

- Don't feed, approach, or harass wildlife
- Give wildlife distance when you see them on the trail – at least 100 yards!
- If an animal changes its behavior – you're too close – back away
 - Looks at you
 - Gets up
 - Walks, flies, or runs away
- Always give the animal an escape route
- Leave young wildlife alone
- If you see sick or injured wildlife, call CPW
- Ensure your dog will not harass wildlife
 - Use a leash, E-collar, or other means to prevent your dog from chasing, harassing, or changing wildlife's behavior.
 - Think about leaving your dog at home.
- Keep your cat indoors
- Practice leave-no trace ethics (i.e., pack it in – pack it out, and leave the area better than how you found it)

Additional information:

- Specific to the Everkrisp Trail, Whiskey Creek Trail, and Eastern Hillside
 - Elk use this hillside for winter range, and it's mapped as a winter concentration area, as well as calving habitat (in the upper Whiskey Creek area). Elk can handle deeper snow than mule deer. In this winter range, they seek cover in the trees, and they'll eat dried, dead grasses, shrubs, tree bark, and twigs. In the spring they're in an aspen/meadow/riparian mix area where they have access to cover, nutrient-rich forage, and water.
- Specific to the North Trail, Buffehr Creek Trail, and Son of Middle Creek Trail (North of Vail area):
 - Many mule deer and elk follow historic migration routes as they move to areas with new green vegetation. They need this food source to increase their body condition. These areas provide the extra calories necessary for deer in poor body condition to complete their spring migration.
- The Eagle-Vail area, McCoy Park, and the Vail Back Bowls
 - These areas provide conditions that elk need to give birth and raise their young. Cow elk recovering from the winter months have high caloric demands. Elk return to the Eagle-Vail/Beaver Creek areas as well as the Vail Back Bowls annually because these areas offer the water, food (meadows) and seclusion (aspen and distance from humans) they need to successfully forage and nurse their young. These secluded areas are important to the success of the elk herds in the Eagle Valley.

Fun Facts

1. Deer and elk lack upper incisors, they have a bony plate instead that means they bite into twigs with their bottom incisors and tear off the rest. If only half a stem is neatly cut and there are curled strands of torn wood fiber, it's a deer or elk.
2. Unlike us humans, which can see in a 170–180-degree view, deer and elk can see about 300-310 degrees- they can nearly see everywhere except directly behind them.
3. Deer and elk have rectangular-shaped pupils, which enables them to see well in low light. They can see violet, blue, green, and yellow regions of light (but not red and orange).
4. They can hear in all directions and move their ears independently, enabling them to pinpoint sounds. They also can hear in very high frequencies, like dogs.
5. In some conditions, deer and elk can smell a human from ½ mile away or more!

6. When food is least abundant in winter, testosterone levels decrease in males, causing their antlers to loosen. Males tend to shake their heads from side to side to free themselves of their antlers. Usually within 24 hours the second antler drops.

Source: Stan Tekiela, 2015. Deer, Elk, and Moose.