



NATURE | SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Wildlife views abundant in Jasper

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

The imposing bull elk runs to the top of the ridge, where it looks over a small herd of females grazing near the riverbank.

With a magnificent set of multi-point antlers stretching a metre above its head, the bull is clearly showing off to the gals.

It's the annual fall rut, or breeding season, and if this bull wants to retain its position as head honcho of the harem, it has to impress the cows and be prepared to fend off rivals.

But trouble is looming. It stares at a younger bull that is slowly but surely making its way toward the herd.

Suddenly, the older bull charges, running full speed down the ridge to confront the intruder. They go head to head as antlers clash and rattle, and for a few moments they become so entangled that they have quite a time pulling apart.

The battle rages until the young upstart is driven away. The old bull may not relax for long, however. A loud bugling sound echoes through the hills, a sure sign that another bull is announcing its presence and claiming its territory.

We watch this drama unfold in front of us as we sit in our truck on a Yellowhead Highway viewpoint, just outside Jasper. This is why late September-early October is our favourite time to come to Jasper National Park. While we find elk in other places,

Jasper ranks among the top spots in North America to see the rut because so much action takes place close by.

Another hot spot is Wapiti Campground, where you're likely to be awakened by early morning bugling and sometimes can watch elk walk through your campsite. It's best to keep your distance from bull elk at any time, especially during the rut when they could charge anything or anybody that gets too close.

Watching elk is only one reason to visit Jasper at this time of year. The weather is usually still pleasant, and summertime crowds are gone. The forest around Jasper has large stands of deciduous trees, making it one of the top mountain parks for fall colours.

We especially like the short drive to Patricia and Pyramid lakes where aspens lining the tranquil water turn deep gold in late September, with a backdrop of evergreens and the red-dish-tinged peak of Pyramid Mountain. Early morning is prime time.

A popular drive is the 50 kilometre route to Maligne Lake, combining exceptional scenery, a good chance of finding wildlife and trailheads leading to pleasant day hikes. A must-do walk is along Maligne Canyon, where the Maligne River has sliced

through limestone and the churning water has carved wild contours and potholes. While the canyon is more than 50 metres deep, it's as little as two metres wide in places. A series of foot bridges crosses the canyon, allowing visitors to make the walk as short or as long as they like.

Though elk steal the fall wildlife show, other critters also abound. Bighorn sheep are fairly common, and there's always the possibility of finding moose, bear, mountain goats, woodland caribou and marmot.

An almost sure-fire place to find pika is at the Medicine Lake viewpoint about halfway along the Maligne Lake road. The jumble of rocks just down the stairs at the parking lot are a favoured hangout for these mammals, which are the smallest members of the rabbit family but resemble overgrown mice.

Find them by listening for their high-pitched, piercing call.

Parks Canada's website has details on more drives, hikes and other activities. If you're camping late in the season, check the website for campgrounds at www.pc.gc.ca.

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TOP: Fall colours border Pyramid Lake and Pyramid Mountain in Jasper National Park.

CENTRE, ABOVE: A pika and hoary marmot greet visitors.

LEFT: It's breeding season, and two bull elk lock horns to claim their territory. | ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS