

Don't Harass the Mama Elk!

Last week, as the first golden light of the morning spewed through the west windows of our house, I saw an unusual scene; a cow elk all by herself coming down the driveway. I watched, looking for other elk to come out of the trees, but she was alone. She was moving in and out of the trees, and finally came up the power line easement toward our house. She looked around, and then started into the woods as if she were looking for something.

A week later when my husband, Mike was walking up the peak he heard the soft mewing of a baby elk. It was then we realized why she was alone. She was getting ready to calve and had left the herd to find a safe place to drop her calf.

When elk are calving, their maternal instincts become very sharp and no two legged or four legged predators had better get in the way of a cow elk and her newborn calf. One spring, a few years ago, I was a recipient of this attention while I was in the field marking trees for transplanting. The field was located near the Evergreen transfer station on Hwy. 73. Mike had dropped me off and then parked on the highway to listen to the ball game while I marked trees.

As I walked down the hill, I heard the soft mewing sound characteristic of newborns. Under a large ponderosa, in a bed of pine needles lay the spotted calf, no bigger than a large dog. I felt an immediate presence in back of me. I whirled around and there was a large cow pawing the ground ready to charge. I high tailed it for the nearest tree and attempted to put my body against the trunk out of the way of the charging beast. She stopped short, looking at me her head down under the branches of the tree not five feet from my head.

I darted to the next tree further up the hill and away from her baby but she was right on my tail and again we put the tree trunk between us. This time I decided to talk to her; hoping to assure her that I as a mother understood her plight. I told her that I appreciated her concern but since I was a mother too I would never hurt her baby and was happy to leave and let her go back to mothering. I could see the sweat droplets glistening on her brown nose as she stuck her head under the branches trying to size me up.

We spent the next hour playing cat and mouse among the trees. Finally I got close enough to Hwy. 73 that I ran to a brush pile near the road and hailed a passing car. They stopped when they saw my plight, the elk ready to charge the brush pile, they honked and this diverted her while I ran across the road.

She wasn't to be diverted of her prey; even the thought of her baby alone under the tree did not stop her. She was on a hunt now the sport of pursuing the intruder took over her maternal common sense. She went across the road after me.

Fortunately, it was half time and my hero, my husband, saw my plight, tooted the horn and drove between the elk and me. I jumped in and we drove away, the elk still pawing the ground, ready to charge the car.

After a beer and burger at the Brook Forest Inn, we laughed about the incident but were intensely aware that though we had been around many elk over the years as they roamed close in our yards and fields, we needed to remember that these are wild animals and when threatened will react out of instinct. But looking back, I still wondered why she didn't listen as mother to mother.

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