

NR6/125.13/1997/Fall

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1997 FALL COMPENDIUM OF WILDLIFE APPRECIATION



Colorado's Wildlife Company

HOOFS & HORNS

A Guide to
Viewing
Colorado's
Large
Mammals

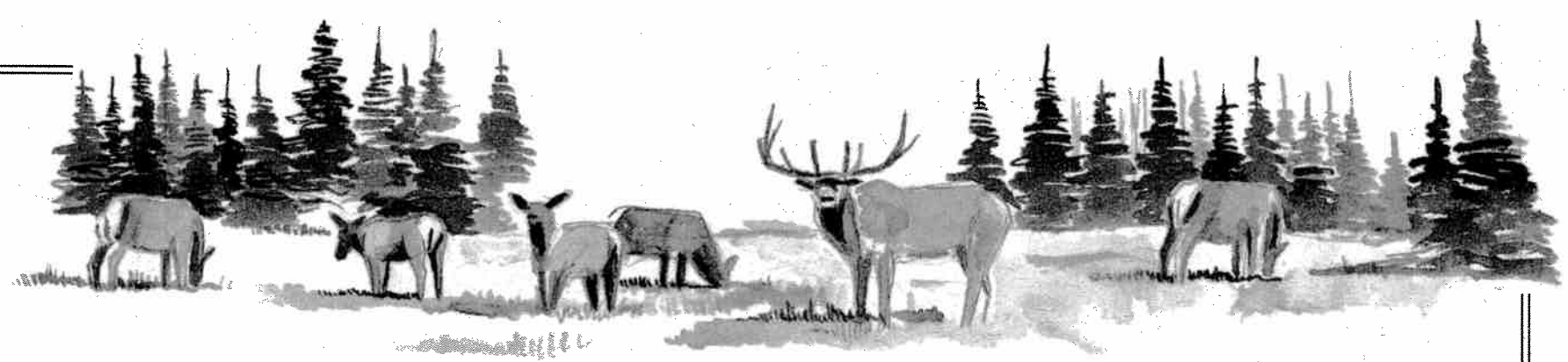
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Colorado's Magnificent Seven



By Mary Taylor Gray

Colorado is blessed. From its grassy prairies to its high mountain peaks, our state is home to an abundance of hoofed, horned and antlered wildlife. They are Colorado's Magnificent Seven—moose, elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorns, bighorn sheep and mountain goats. We may know their ways, may have glimpsed them many times, may have hunted them, but each new encounter with these great mammals leaves us feeling touched by the wild.

This abundance of large, dramatic mammals—sometimes referred to, jokingly and otherwise, as “charismatic mega-fauna”—is a special treasure shared by only a few other Western states. Of North America's free-ranging large grazing mammals, only caribou, Dall sheep and musk ox, animals of the far north and Arctic Circle, are not found in our state. Bison exist here in captive herds but are no longer a free-ranging species and wild horses are feral animals—domestic animals that have gone back to living in the wild.

Wildlife has a powerful effect on viewers.

The sight of a heavy-antlered bull moose, a gathering of elegant mule deer does, or a playful mountain goat kid bounding up a slope like a hobby horse electrifies viewers. Faces light up, conversation becomes excited, watchers gaze in awe and fascination. While hunters have long enjoyed hunting these large mammals, there is a tremendous interest in viewing them as well.

A 1995 study found 56% of Colorado residents travel one or miles from their homes specifically to watch wild

animals, excluding visits to zoos or hunting and fishing trips. Wildlife watchers spend nearly \$1.3 billion annually in Colorado on travel, lodging, food and equipment.

Most of us have probably seen deer many times, yet who doesn't pause with a sense of pleasure and wonder at the sight of large ears, doe eyes and delicate muzzle poised shyly at the edge of the trees? Deer, in fact, are the number one most popular animal Coloradans want to see, according to a survey of wildlife viewing interest. After deer (not differentiated by species), elk are the second most desirable mammal, then moose, bighorn sheep and mountain goats. Pronghorn come in fourteenth in desirability of viewing, still in the upper half of 32 categories of animals.

In a single day, a diligent traveler moving from grasslands to mountain peaks could conceivably see all seven of these large mammals, though it would take excellent luck and steady travel. While seeing all seven is a tall order in a day, viewing four or five is a good possibility, given the right route or destination. A drive up Mount Evans might easily yield a peek at mule deer, elk, bighorn sheep and goats, while a tour through North Park could well offer moose, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep and elk. One caveat to bear in mind: seeing wildlife is serendipitous. A full day spent searching for animals might also turn up none at all.

Colorado's Magnificent Seven are found in all corners of the state, some of them even in suburban areas, but the key to success in seeing specific animals lies with learning a bit about each species. It helps to know the appropriate habitats to visit in search of them, and what to look for. All the wishing in the world won't yield a moose on the eastern plains and a pronghorn will never be found grazing with bighorn sheep on a mountain slope.

To really succeed at viewing the Magnificent Seven, watchers need to cultivate an observer's eye. The key is to not just look for them but to LOOK for them. While hiking, while driving, while cycling through wildlife habitat, wildlife watchers need to be watching for things that subtly stand out from the background, movement on an otherwise still landscape, shapes that don't quite fit in, colors and

patterns that are out of place. It's no accident that wildlife are difficult to see, camouflaged against the background of their habitats, but subtle cues to their presence are still there. Success in seeing animals comes with paying attention and training the eye to notice those subtle differences. A group of large boulders that doesn't quite look exactly like boulders may be a herd of resting bighorns. Several flashes of white on a drab prairie landscape may be the rumps of fleeing pronghorns.

Watching wildlife also carries responsibilities. The sight of the summer's bighorn lambs romping on a green mountainside like youngsters in a playground touches a viewer's heart like no descrip-

tion in a book ever could. Yet it's important that viewing these animals not step over the bounds by stressing or endangering them, or violating their wildness by turning them into twinkie-eating beggars. A bighorn ewe poking her head in a car window for junk food treats has lost an element of her wildness. The best of all worlds is for watchers to enjoy their viewing experience, with a neutral response from the watched. Ideally animals should neither approach viewers nor flee at the sight of humans, but just go about calmly making a living. After all, that's really the way we want to see our Magnificent Seven—still Magnificent.

ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Watching animals in the wild is a joy, but a few hints on how to watch ethically and responsibly will keep things stress-free for both watcher and watched.

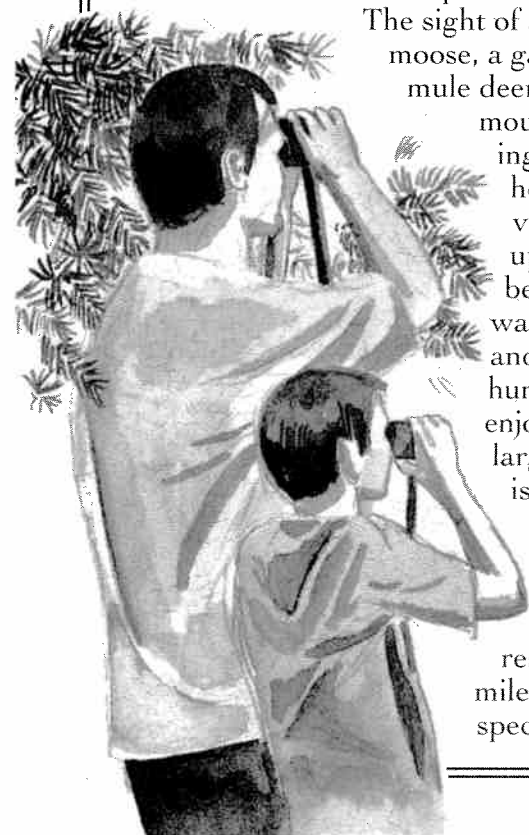
First, view animals at a distance they feel comfortable. If your approach causes an animal to change its behavior, stop feeding or flee, you have come too close. Use binoculars, spotting scopes and tele-photo lenses to get an up-close view.

Don't try to stalk or sneak up on wildlife and don't stare directly at them. These behaviors will cause animals to react as if you are a predator. Instead, stay in the open, stay quiet, move slowly and don't do anything threatening. Try keeping your eyes averted. Your car is often the best blind for wildlife watching. Many animals will not perceive it as a threat. If you get out of your car, your human form will likely frighten them off.

Leave pets at home or in the car, and never allow them to chase or harass wildlife. Never feed wildlife. Wild animals gain the nutrition they need from wild foods; what's junk food to humans is junk food to wildlife too. Feeding big game animals is also against the law and subject to ticketing and fines by the Division of Wildlife (note: this does not include feeding birds).

Wildlife that become habituated to people not only lose an element of their wildness but may injure someone in their eagerness to get food. Animals congregating unnaturally in groups may pass diseases to one another and wildlife attracted to roads and human habitation may be killed by traffic or need to be destroyed as nuisances.

Watching wildlife in autumn, during hunting season, takes some extra precautions. You don't have to abandon wildlife viewing but be aware there are other recreational users in the outdoors. Deer and elk hunting rifle seasons are approximately mid-October through mid-November. Greatest concentrations of hunters are on weekends and during the first few opening days of each season. Wear blaze orange instead of the usual wildlife watcher's earth tones, stay on trails, leave pets at home and consider leaving an area if you hear the discharge of firearms nearby. You may want to choose an area closed to hunting, such as a national park and many state and local parks, where you still have good opportunities to view the Magnificent Seven in their full autumn glory. Finally, be aware, be alert and respect the rights of others and there will be little danger in the woods of autumn.



The Animals of Autumn

Autumn heralds a dynamic phase in the life histories of Colorado's Magnificent Seven—the fall rut or breeding season. Wildlife watchers have wonderful opportunities to observe a variety of interesting behaviors as each species enacts its rituals of mating, from territorial displays and formation of harems to battles between males. Preoccupied with mating, the males become less wary and may be more readily observed.

Some of the animals profiled below are found in every corner of our state, while others live only in specific ecosystems or particular geographic areas. When seeking wildlife, remember to watch for movement and look for shapes, colors and patterns that seem out of place.

Mountain Goat

Inaccessible mountain slopes are the home of the suction-hoofed goats, whose spongy hoofs help them grip rock surfaces on steep slopes. Mountain goats truly dwell on high in Colorado, inhabiting alpine and upper subalpine ecosystems. They rarely leave the rocky slopes above timberline, usually venturing into trees at timberline only for shelter in extreme conditions. Goats were introduced into Colorado as game animals beginning in the late 1940s. They are now well-established on Mount Evans, parts of the San Juan Mountains, and the Gore and Collegiate ranges.

Goat mating season is late October into early November. Billies gather around nannies and compete among themselves. They stare threateningly at competitors, lower their heads to display their horns and rush or swipe at each other. Competing billies spar not by butting heads like sheep but by thrusting with their slender, pointed horns. The males also mark vegetation by hooking it with their horns and rubbing it with scent from glands on their heads.

Bighorn Sheep

The bighorn ram, with its massive headgear of curling horns, so well represents the wild heritage of Colorado it is the state mammal as well as the symbol of the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Bighorns are animals of the high mountains, ranging at or above

Elk

The bugle of the bull elk rings like the voice of wildness in the Colorado high country. The muscular form of the bull elk, with his stately rack of antlers, is a grand sight. Elk inhabit open mountain forests and forest edges, mountain meadows, willow bottoms, mountain parks and alpine tundra. They migrate from high altitude habitats to lower elevations in winter. Elk are found in the western two-thirds of the state, from the foothills of the Front Range west.

During much of the year, male elk gather in bachelor herds while the cows with their calves group together in nursery herds. During the rut, which peaks in late September and early October, the animals come together in groups sometimes numbering hundreds in open valleys and mountain parks. The bulls sound deep, bugle-like calls that rise shrilly in pitch. The agitated bulls gather cows into harems, challenge other males and occasionally spar antler-to-antler.

Moose

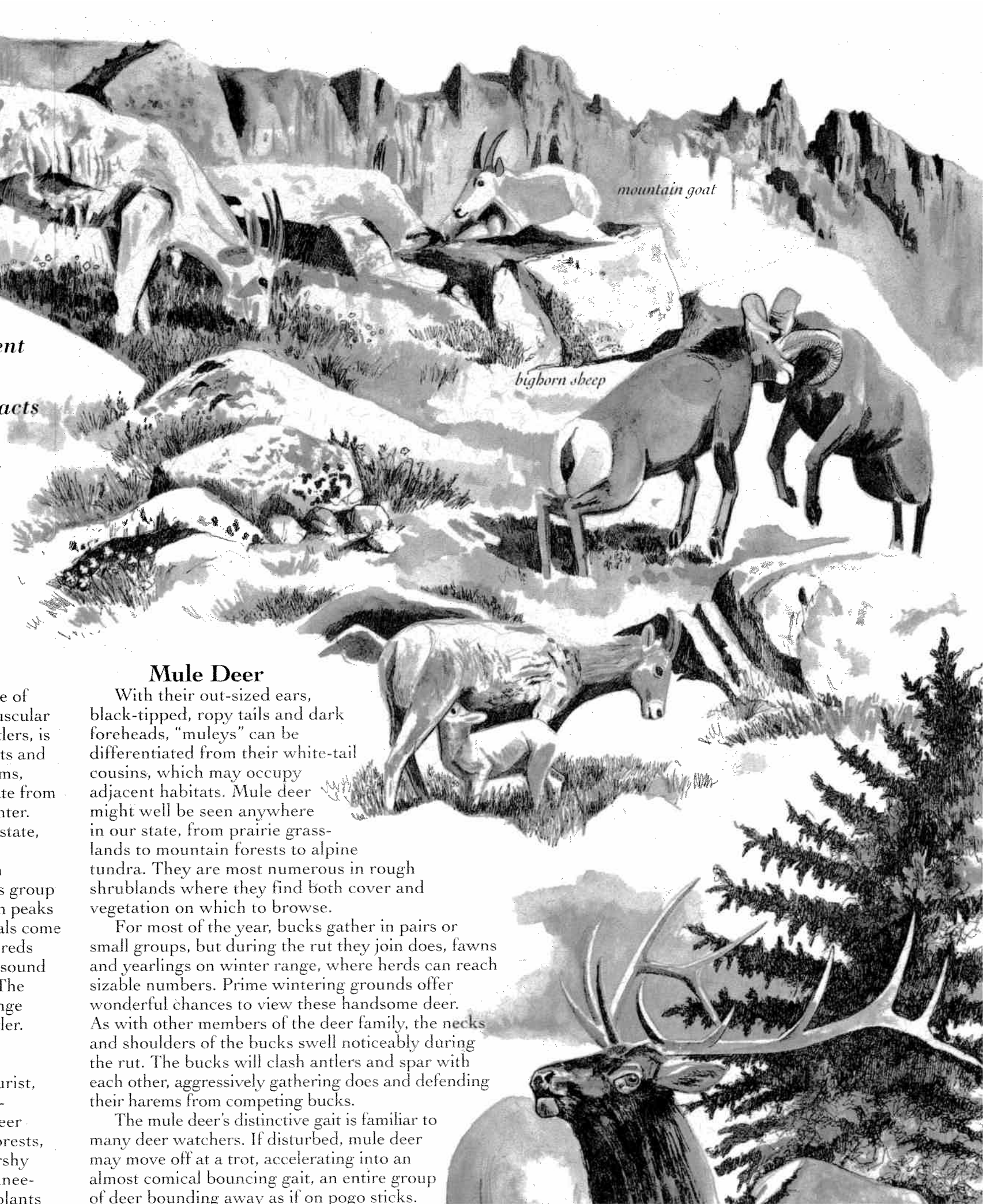
Looking a bit like the creation of a caricaturist, the bulbous-nosed, hump-shouldered, lumber-antlered moose is the largest member of the deer family. Moose live at the edges of mountain forests, always near water. They are often seen in marshy meadows and willow bogs where they stand knee-deep in water, the dripping strands of marsh plants

Mule Deer

With their out-sized ears, black-tipped, rosy tails and dark foreheads, "muleys" can be differentiated from their white-tail cousins, which may occupy adjacent habitats. Mule deer might well be seen anywhere in our state, from prairie grasslands to mountain forests to alpine tundra. They are most numerous in rough shrublands where they find both cover and vegetation on which to browse.

For most of the year, bucks gather in pairs or small groups, but during the rut they join does, fawns and yearlings on winter range, where herds can reach sizable numbers. Prime wintering grounds offer wonderful chances to view these handsome deer. As with other members of the deer family, the necks and shoulders of the bucks swell noticeably during the rut. The bucks will clash antlers and spar with each other, aggressively gathering does and defending their harems from competing bucks.

The mule deer's distinctive gait is familiar to many deer watchers. If disturbed, mule deer may move off at a trot, accelerating into an almost comical bouncing gait, an entire group of deer bounding away as if on pogo sticks.



animals of the high mountains, ranging at or above timberline on steep grassy slopes and in mountain meadows. In winter they descend to lower elevation mountain parks and valleys.

In keeping with its wild image, the bighorn's behavior during the mid-November to December rut is perhaps the most dramatic of any species. Rams follow ewes, guarding them from other males. Competing rams may jostle, slash, butt and kick at each other. Finally two challengers charge at each other with heads lowered—literally “battering rams”—colliding horn to horn with a powerful crash. The combatants then pause and conspicuously display their horns.

The desert bighorn, a subspecies, inhabits rocky, steep-walled canyons in the southwestern part of the state.

deep in water, the dripping strands of marsh plants and aquatic vegetation trailing from their jaws. Moose were only occasional visitors to Colorado until introduced to North Park in the 1970s by the Division of Wildlife. There is now a significant population in that part of the state. Recent releases northwest of Creede, near the headwaters of the Rio Grande River, have successfully established a second moose population.

Moose aren't as social as other deer thus are usually seen alone or at most a cow with her calf. During breeding season from mid-September to early November, the bulls become quite belligerent, thrashing shrubs with their antlers, bellowing and moaning, and challenging and fighting other males. At this time be cautious wandering among willows and marshy mountain areas to avoid coming face-to-face with an agitated bull moose.

Pronghorn

“Born To Run” is an apt tagline for the pronghorn. Able to accelerate to speeds over 60 miles per hour, pronghorns can turn on a dime and are equipped with oversized windpipes that gulp in air like a turbo-charger. These wary speedsters have acute telescopic vision making any close approach to them very difficult. The flashing white rumps of fleeing pronghorns are often the only glimpse careless viewers have of these skittish animals. Pronghorns are best observed with binoculars (in fact they pretty much require it), using a vehicle as a blind.

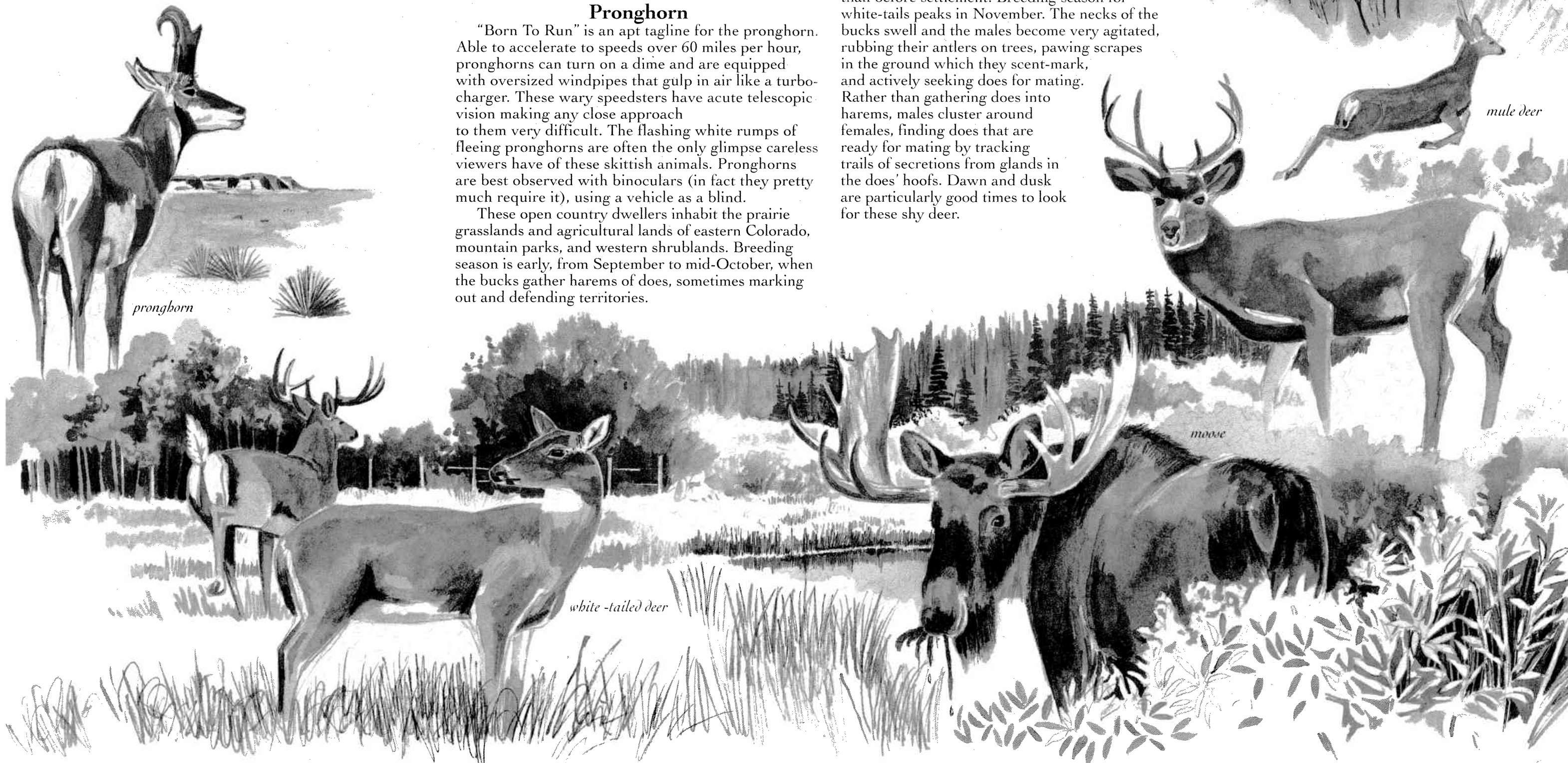
These open country dwellers inhabit the prairie grasslands and agricultural lands of eastern Colorado, mountain parks, and western shrublands. Breeding season is early, from September to mid-October, when the bucks gather harems of does, sometimes marking out and defending territories.

of deer bounding away as it on pogo sticks.

White-Tailed Deer

Shy and secretive, white-tailed deer are often glimpsed briefly in a riverine cottonwood grove, poised like sleek phantoms before drifting away among the trees, broad tails tossed up and flashing like white alarm flags.

White-tails roam the wooded river bottoms and adjacent farmers' fields of the eastern half of the state, particularly along the Platte, Arkansas and Republican river drainages. There are isolated populations in other areas of the state. With the increase in wooded areas in eastern Colorado, white-tails are more widespread and abundant than before settlement. Breeding season for white-tails peaks in November. The necks of the bucks swell and the males become very agitated, rubbing their antlers on trees, pawing scrapes in the ground which they scent-mark, and actively seeking does for mating. Rather than gathering does into harems, males cluster around females, finding does that are ready for mating by tracking trails of secretions from glands in the does' hoofs. Dawn and dusk are particularly good times to look for these shy deer.



DOW WORKING FOR WILDLIFE

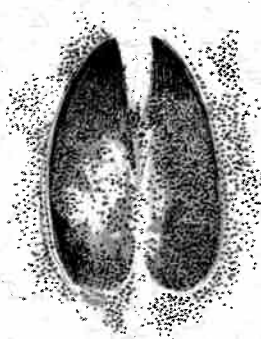
Watchable Wildlife On Mt. Evans

Wildlife watchers have long been drawn to Mount Evans, west of Denver, traveling the Mount Evans Highway as it winds from subalpine forest, across alpine tundra to just below the peak's 14,264 foot summit. This highest paved road in North America, which is a Scenic and Historic Byway, offers unrivaled scenery and exceptional opportunities to view the wildlife of Colorado's high alpine. Now the Colorado Division of Wildlife, in cooperation with the US Forest Service (USFS) and several other partners, is making wildlife watching on Mount Evans better than ever.

On summer weekends, DOW volunteer naturalists now greet visitors at Summit Lake, pointing out hard-to-see animals, setting up spotting scopes for up-close views of wildlife, and answering lots and lots of questions. "Helping someone see a mountain goat or bighorn sheep for the first time is incredibly rewarding," says Karen Hardesty, DOW Northeast Region Watchable Wildlife coordinator.

DOW hopes to educate visitors about wildlife and help them have an enjoyable and successful viewing experience. "Once visitors see some of these animals they ask lots of questions and begin to notice more and more wildlife," Hardesty explains.

Educating visitors on the negatives of feeding wildlife is a major focus, for the health of the



animals, the preservation of their "wildness" and the safety of watchers. Snack foods are unhealthy for wildlife and animals congregated unnaturally may transmit disease to other animals and be at risk of injury from traffic. Seeing bighorn sheep begging at a car is not a very satisfactory wildlife viewing experience for many visitors, adds Hardesty, and there is a potential safety risk when humans come too close to wild animals.

Improvements to enhance wildlife viewing on the mountain were made possible by the DOW, USFS and Great Outdoors Colorado. These include coin-operated spotting scopes at the Mount Evans summit as well as viewing platforms and interpretive signs within the ruins of the summit's Crest House, interpretive signs at Summit Lake and an interpretive kiosk planned near the Echo Lake campground. An audio cassette of an auto tour of the mountain, a Junior Ranger book for children, and a trip guidebook—"A Day On Mount Evans"—are available at the USFS Visitor Center in Idaho Springs.

Beginning in the summer of 1997, the USFS implemented a \$6 per car fee for visiting the Mount Evans Highway. Fees are used to pay for resource protection as well as to improve visitor experiences. For more information about visiting Mount Evans call the USFS at 303-567-2901 or Karen Hardesty at 303-291-7291.

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