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Estes Park Offers Diverse Opportunities for Wildlife Watching

Estes Park, CO — With elevations ranging from 7,000 feet to more than 14,000 feet, the Estes Park area comprises a diversity of ecosystems offering outstanding opportunities for wildlife viewing. Matching the habitat with a particular species is key to finding that species.

There are four general types of habitat: alpine tundra, subalpine forest, montane forest and wetlands.

Alpine tundra is the area above tree line and is home to marmot, ground squirrels, pika, coyote, elk and big horn sheep. **Subalpine tundra** extends from the twisted, windblown pine at tree line through the dense, moist fir and spruce forests to the lodgepole pine and aspen at lower elevations. Residents include chipmunks, ground squirrels, pine marten, porcupine, bobcat, black bear and elk. **Montane forest** fills most of the area around Estes Park, Roosevelt National Forest and lower elevations of Rocky Mountain National Park. It is characterized by open ponderosa stands on dry south-facing slopes, Douglas fir on moist northern slopes and scattered aspen groves. This is the favorite habitat of Abert's squirrel, coyote, mountain lion, mule deer, elk, fox and big horn sheep. **Wetlands** are found from the plains to the alpine tundra where marshes and willow thickets spring up in water-forming habitat for beaver, deer, coyote, bobcat, raccoon, muskrat, porcupine, fox, black bear and weasel.

Wild animals that are rarely seen are not necessarily few in number. Bobcats, mountain lions and porcupines are well established in the Estes Park area but not easily spotted.

The ultimate wildlife watching experience is viewing animals' behavior without disturbing their normal activities. Following a few simple guidelines will increase your chances of a "good look."

Try to blend with the landscape by wearing subdued, natural colors, walking softly and quietly without trying to sneak. It helps if you're as free of added scent as possible.

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Stay on the sidelines, using binoculars or telephoto lenses to avoid crowding your subject. Move slowly, act uninterested, avoid staring. Animals can detect tension and, if you try to sneak up on them, they'll interpret your behavior as that of a predator and run. Please do not feed the wildlife. Feeding produces a dependence on unnatural foods not healthy for survival in the wild. What's more, it's illegal.

Fall, winter and spring are the best seasons for wildlife watching. Elk observed at a distance on the tundra in summer are frequent visitors in town during the winter. In the fall, elk and bighorn sheep ruts produce spectacular sights and sounds. In spring, deer & elk sport new sets of velvet-covered antlers.

Wildlife Watching Tips: Your car serves as a good "blind" for watching wildlife, protecting you and the animals from one another. Pull all the way off the road, turn off the motor and the lights. Keep young children and pets quiet and inside the car. Don't trespass on private property and, when in the national park or national forest, observe posted signs.

Photo Tips: Use a telephoto lens and tripod. Respect the safety and welfare of your subject, aiming for photos of calm, dignified, unstressed animals. Morning and afternoon light are best, with the sun at your back. If you don't have a telephoto lens, show the animal in its natural surroundings rather than trying to move in too close. You could lose the shot altogether by spooking the subject.

Binocular Tips: First find the subject with the unaided eye and, bringing the eyepieces just under your eyes, sight the subject over the tips of the eyepieces. Slowly bring the binoculars to your eyes and focus.

By following the guidelines provided, you're likely to be rewarded by animals accepting you into their world. It's a special feeling you'll never forget.

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