

Oak Creek Wildlife Area

Naches, Washington

BY MIKE McAULIFFE

In the hours before feeding time, hundreds of shaggy, light-brown Rocky Mountain elk—called wapiti by the Shawnee Tribe because of their white rumps—stream down from the hills above Oak Creek Wildlife Area in Naches, Washington. Then lunch is delivered and a feeding frenzy commences.

When winter snow drives elk into the Yakima Valley from higher elevations, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) lays out a daily hay buffet. Every winter afternoon, the WDFW feeds as many as 1,000 members of the Yakima herd, descendants of elk transplanted from Yellowstone National Park in 1913, to discourage feasting on local farms, orchards and ranches. Visit Oak Creek—just three to four hours from Seattle, Spokane or Portland—for a unique winter wildlife adventure that features a memorable ride into a wild elk herd.

Arrive at the visitor's center before the 1:30 p.m. feeding to watch elk parade down from the hills. Like a family Labrador retriever with its sixth sense about meal time, the elk know when lunch is served, and like clockwork drop in to dine. Massive bulls with towering antlers—some eight-foot long from nose to tail and weighing more

than 700 pounds—follow cows and calves down the steep sage-covered hillside to join a milling elk mob that stretches across the wide plain.

The highlight of a visit is the 30-minute guided truck tour. At the visitor's center, you board a camouflaged military surplus truck that drives you into the heart of the herd. From the truck's open back you find yourself eye-to-eye with the hungry wild elk. Only a few feet away, the elk don't pay any attention to you or the truck—they're too focused on lunch. Bring a camera and snap some close-ups or selfies with the elk.

At feeding time, trucks stacked high with hay drop bales among the ravenous elk. As each bale hits the ground, the hungry animals quickly surround it, jockey for position and dig in.

There's more to Oak Creek than just elk. California bighorn sheep are fed a few miles away at Cleman Mountain every morning at 10:30 a.m.

Elk are fed throughout the winter, but January and February are the best time to visit. Call (509) 698-5106 to reserve a spot on the truck tour in advance (recommended), or arrive early to claim remaining seats. The tour is free, but you must have a Discover Pass and donations support the feeding. Find more information at wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/oak_creek. To plan an overnight stay in the Yakima Valley, check out visityakima.com. 📸

