

Wildlife Observations on the Telluride Valley Floor

Let us know what you observe using the iNaturalist app, or from a computer at [iNaturalist.org](https://www.inaturalist.org)

River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*)

River otters are the largest weasel in Colorado, and are generally 30 to 40 inches in length and weigh 15 to 30 lbs. These aquatic mammals have webbed feet, a very dense under fur protected by glossy guard hairs, and powerful tails for swimming. River otters are also very social, and form large family groups of 7 to 30 individuals, usually led by the adult female. Adult males do not usually stay with the family groups except during the breeding season. Young otters remain with the females for about seven to eight months and then disperse up to 125 miles (200 km) away. River otters appear to be highly migratory, and utilize different habitats based on season and prey availability. They do not hibernate and are active year-round. Ice-free stretches of rivers are an important habitat during the winter.



Please let us know if you observe a river otter on the Valley Floor by logging it with iNaturalist. If you see one, and can't quite get a photo, please photograph the location and put a description of what you saw in the notes.

More on habitat: Optimal habitat for a river otter includes slow moving water with deep pools, abundant riparian vegetation and plentiful fish. Deep pools are especially important to river otters because they provide habitat for slow moving fish and crayfish, both of which are an important food source for otters. Deep pools also provide habitat under the ice for otters during the winter. There is also a close association between river otters and beavers. Beavers create pools with their dams, which in turn provides habitat for river otters. River otters are constantly on the move and never stay in one place for more than a few days, regardless of the habitat or fish population.

Spotting Tips: Keep an eye out, you may see an otter at any time. However, if you're going out in search of otters, your best bet will be around dawn and dusk.

Rocky Mountain Elk (*Cervus elaphus nelsoni*)

Elk stand about 4–5 feet tall at the shoulder and mature bulls may exceed 1,000 pounds. Cows can reach 500 pounds. Elk are brown with lightcolored rump-patches. Unlike deer, elk have a mane of dark brown hair around the neck. Antlers of mature bulls are multibranched and the main beam is dark brown with ivory-colored tips.



They prefer wet meadows near forest cover. Elk are primarily grazers, feeding on grasses and flowering plants, willow buds and shoots. They supplement their winter diets with aspen bark and twigs. They migrate seasonally between higher and lower elevations. Mature bulls have elaborate courtship displays battling and bugling to compete for dominance and the attention of elk cows. Bulls collect a “harem” of 3–30 cows that will breed with them. Antlers are the fastest growing bone in the world! They are shed and re-grown yearly. An elk’s top two canine teeth are called ivories and are believed to be remnants of saber-like tusks that

ancestral species of elk once used in combat. Now, bulls just battle with the massive antlers.

The elk’s life span is 14–26 years. Several hundred years ago, elk were widely distributed in North America. As waves of settlers migrated west, they killed large numbers of elk and converted habitat to cropland, towns and cities. By 1900, elk were gone from the East and scarce everywhere else. Only a few hundred elk remained in Colorado. Sportsmen’s groups and others rallied to bring elk back to the state. In 1914, a year before Rocky Mountain National Park was established, 49 elk were captured in Yellowstone National Park and released into the mountains around Estes Park. Today, Colorado boasts the largest elk population — 260,000 animals — of any state or province in North America.



Please do a quick count of the elk you see when you are on the valley floor and take a photo for iNaturalist. Be sure to count adults and calves and report the numbers in the comments. It’s helpful to count in groups of 3-5 or so to get a better estimate. Count two or three times and take the average if you can.

Spotting Tips: Keep an eye out, you may see an elk at any time. However, if you’re going out in search of elk, your best bet will be around dawn and dusk.