



MOUNT ST. HELENS
FOREST
LEARNING
CENTER

Grade Level: K-4
Duration: 20-45 minutes
Subject Areas: Science (Wildlife Habitat),
Art, Reading
Skills: Listening, Comprehension, Reading,
Drama

A Forest Story

A day in the life of an elk calf

Instruction: This story can be used as a readers theater, where students read out loud to each other, or the teacher can read it to the class. It is about an elk calf and a child interacting and sharing information about their environments. The story informs and may lead to further discussion on how animals, elk in particular, use and affect their forest habitat.

Cast: Narrator, elk calf, and a student

Start



Narrator: A young child meets a young elk in the forest. The child sneaks up on the sleeping elk.

Elk: (*yawning*) Oh! Hi there! How long have you been standing there? I must have been sleeping. Who are you anyway?

Child: Hi! Sorry if I startled you. My name's (child's name). Are you a baby elk?

Elk: Yes, I'm an elk calf!

Child: I thought cow babies were called calves? You're not a cow!

Elk: Baby elk are called calves, too. Maybe it's because mother elk are called cows.

Child: Really? I never knew that! I need to learn about elk for a school project. That's why I'm here today. I came into the forest hoping to find out some things about how elk live. I've never seen a real, live elk before!

Elk: Well, I've never talked to a human before either! I can help you learn more about elk if you'd like, and you can teach me about people.

Child: Thanks! That would be awesome! Wow, my friends will never believe this - me, talking to an elk!

Elk: Well, then let's get started!

Narrator: The elk and (child's name) start to walk into the woods.

(Elk and child pretend to start walking)

Elk: My most active times are at dawn and dusk. I like to rest during the day, especially when it's hot!

(Elk and child stop walking)

Elk: Well, how do you like my bed? I prefer a cozy spot of decomposing wood or a grassy field.

Child: Decom... what?

Elk: Decomposing. That's when something is no longer alive and it's beginning to rot. Decomposing logs are great homes for bugs and salamanders! Look closely. Do you see any?



Child: (Looking closely at the ground) Oh, yeah! But how do you sleep on that old log? It doesn't look very comfortable.

Elk: Well, I stomp on it, like this! (**Stomps**) That breaks it up and makes it softer. If I'm lucky, that decomposing log will be under some small trees or bushes so I can keep dry when it rains.

Child: That would give you a good hiding place, too!

Elk: Gee, you'd make a great elk! The next lesson will be about what elk eat because I'm really hungry. Let's go find something to eat.

Narrator: The elk calf and the child begin walking through the forest.

(Elk and Child pretend to walk)

Elk: This looks like a good spot to eat.

Child: So! What's for breakfast?

Elk: Hopefully some grass, leaves or wildflowers.



Child: I guess I'm not that hungry after all.

Elk: My favorite places to eat are in open areas, like where people have cut trees down and planted new seedlings or where fire has burned the trees up and in meadows too.



Child: What's a seedling?

Elk: A seedling is a baby tree. I have seen people planting seedlings in places where they logged.

Child: Why do you like to eat where people plant seedlings? Do you eat the baby trees?

Elk: Yes and no, I like it in the open areas because there's more sunlight, which is important for the plants that I like the best, like grasses and flowers. That way I can get more to eat. Oh, and this grass is so tender! Yummmm! Besides I don't really like trees because they are hard to chew, but the seedlings are OK, they are softer than big trees.

Child: There's something I don't understand though. You'd have plenty of food in the spring and summer, but what do you do in the winter when plants are dead and the ground freezes?

Elk: Great question! Well, elk are pretty smart. We eat dried grasses and shrubs when there's not much else to munch on. Usually, we move to lower elevations where it's warmer and there is less snow, so we can find more food.

Child: You'll be really big when you're grown up so you must need to eat a lot of grass!



Elk: Yes, by the time I'm a grown up I'll weigh about 600 pounds, or more. That's about as much as you, your mom, your dad, and your teacher put together. I'll eat about 15 pounds a day. That's about the same as eating 60 big hamburgers in one day!

Child: Listen (puts hand to ear)! What's that sound?

Elk: Hmm. Sounds like a warbler. There are lots of small birds that live here. They sing to me while I eat! There are bluebirds and finches, too! Many birds like the young, open forest.



Child: You don't spend all your time eating and sleeping do you?

Elk: Not us youngsters! We like to run around the meadows chasing each other.

Child: That sounds like tag! I play that with my friends. Do you want to play it with me? Betcha can't catch me! I'm one of the fastest kids in my whole class!

Elk: Maybe I couldn't catch you but my mom could. She runs faster than the human world record, about 20 miles an hour! **(Sniffs)** Do you smell that?

Child: **(Sniffs)** No, I don't smell anything. Why do you smell something?

Elk: Smell harder.

Child: (Sniffs harder) I still don't smell anything. What is it?



Elk: It's trouble! Quick, I think it's a coyote. We're in danger!

Child: Yikes! What do we do now?

(Elk and Child begin walking quickly in place)

Elk: We need to get near the big elk and lie down. The color of my fur and the white spots on me will help me hide.

Child: I've learned about that before. Isn't that called camouflage?

Elk: Yup! That's when animals blend in with what's around them, their surroundings. Then they're hard for their enemies to see.

Child: Are there any other animals you're afraid of?



Elk: Oh yeah! Bear and cougar are predators of elk, too. That means that we are food for them so they'll try to kill us so they can eat us! And they are the biggest bullies! They pick on the weak elk, and us young ones, too! They chase us until we get separated from our herd. By then we're tired and it's easy for them to catch us. That's why I don't wander too far away from the herd.



Child: How does the herd protect you?

Elk: There's always a grown up elk watching for danger. They try to warn us when there's trouble. Just like you have a family, my herd is my family. I have aunts, cousins, and of course, my mom. She's called a cow.

Child: There you go again! How can an elk mother be a cow when she's an elk?

Elk: She is an elk! Grown up elk females, are called cows and males, are called bulls. The bulls stay by themselves for most of the year except in the fall when they join the rest of us. Right now there are 15 elk in our herd.

Child: Gee that's a big family! Hey, is that coyote gone yet?

Elk: Looks like it and I'm glad. I'm really thirsty. I need a drink. There's a nice shady stream through those big trees.

Child: It looks like someone cut some trees down.

Elk: What do people use trees for anyway?

Child: Well, trees are used to build homes and make furniture to sit on. Wood is also used to make paper to write on and toilet paper for.... Well, thousands of things are made from trees.

Elk: Thanks, I always wondered what happens to them.

Child: Well, I'm glad those people left some trees along this stream. You want a drink of water and I'll bet those trees will help keep the water cool and clean!

Elk: They also give me a place to hide. I guess we need both young and old trees in the forest.

(Elk bends over and pretends to drink)

Elk: Ah, there's nothing like cool, clean water. All of us animals need clean water to drink and this stream has clean water.



Child: Isn't the water in the forest always clean?

Elk: Usually but sometimes people don't care about us animals and pollute the rivers and streams. Sometimes I find garbage like pop cans, bottles and plastic bags in them.

Child: In your drinking water? Gross! I always use a garbage can or recycling bin to get rid of my trash!

Elk: Thanks. I wish every human were as thoughtful as you!

Optional Ending Point

Elk: Okay, time for another lesson. Do you see how the bark is stripped off this tree?

(The elk points)

Child: Yes.

Elk: What do you think happened to it?



Child: Hmm. That might be where lightning struck it. Or did a big bull elk rub it with his antlers to remove his velvet?

Elk: Great guesses! But what really happened is this. Last spring there was this big, old bear. She had just come out of hibernation and ...

Child: Excuse me. What is hibernation?

Elk: Hibernation is when an animal sleeps through the entire winter. Anyhow, she had just come out of hibernation and she was very hungry. There's not much food for bears in early spring, so she stripped the bark off these trees so she could eat the sweet, tasty sap just inside the bark. She picked the mid-sized trees because their bark is still thin and easy to peel. The bark on the big trees is too thick and tough and young trees don't have much sap.

Child: How long did it take that bear to strip the bark?

Elk: That bear stripped about 50 trees in just one night!

Child: Does that hurt the tree?

Elk: Some of the trees will die. Like this one with the big wound. **(Point)** But others like that one with the small wound **(point somewhere else)** are healing. You can see how a scar is forming over the wound, just like when new skin grows over a scrape on you.



Child: (Yawns) I'm getting tired. It's been a busy morning.

Elk: Well, it's almost my naptime. I need a lot of rest, about 8 hours a day.

Child: Well, I need a nap too, I guess its time for me to go home. Thanks for all the information. I learned a lot about elk and forests. I can't wait to tell my teacher and my friends about you. Do you think you could come visit us at school sometime? I'd really like that!

Elk: Thanks for the invitation but I'd rather stay right here. Tell your friends and your teacher they can come to the forest and visit me. And tell them how they can help keep the water clean. I'm really glad we met!

(The elk and child bow and say good bye)

The end

For more information read:

- 1) Wild About Elk; An Educator's Guide. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Project Wild
- 2) The Forest Elk; Bruce B. Morehead
- 3) Status of Elk in North America; S. Dwight Bunnell and RMEF
- 4) Elk in Washington; Washington Department of Wildlife (1989)
- 5) Elk in Washington Forests: Too much Success? Alan G Christensen and J. Keven Lackey and Jim Rochelle
- 6) Web site for The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation: www.rmef.org