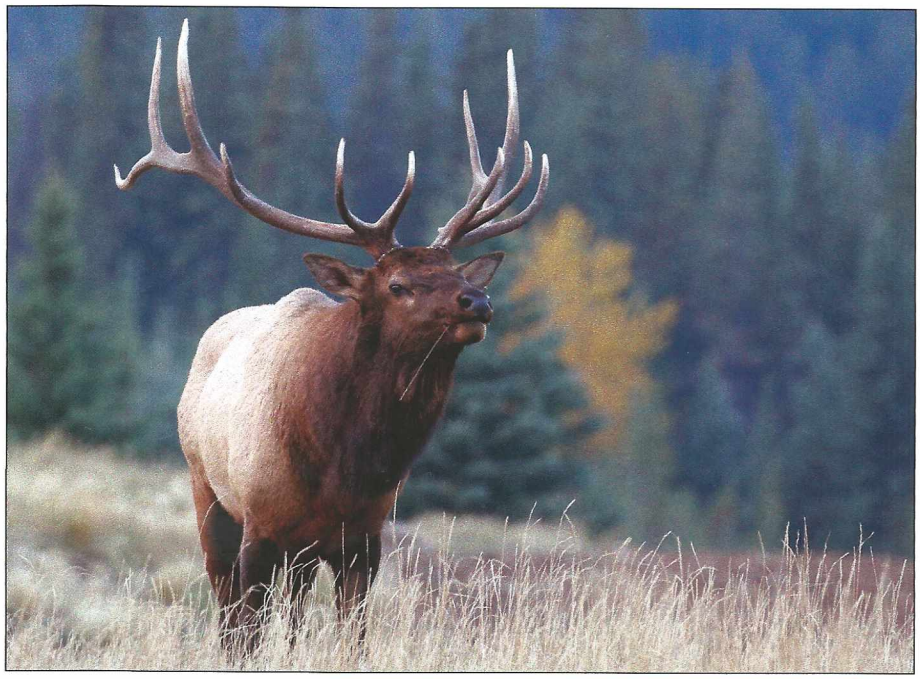
RON SPOMER

THE ELK HUNTING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Craig, Colorado, welcomes hunters with open arms.



Elk are the stars of the show in Craig, where they exist in plentiful numbers in the surrounding countryside.

CRAIG COLORADO ELK HUNTING CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Craig takes its official motto seriously.

Hunters of a certain age can remember a time when villages, towns, and cities didn't just welcome hunters; they invited them, celebrated them, and helped them.

There are a few towns that still do this. One that comes to mind is Craig, Colorado. You'll find no politically correct reticence in acknowledging hunting in Craig. Not only do they have a section entitled *Hunting* on the city website, they specify it in the title of their visitor center: the Moffat County Visitor Center and Sportsman Information Center. They even post a logo: Elk Hunting Capital of the World.

That isn't just unusual; it's incredible. Most Chambers of Commerce will direct your attention to shopping malls, museums, musical festivals, county fairs, balloon races, giant balls of twine, restaurants, fishing waters, farmers' markets, and even petrified dinosaur poop, but hunting? They'd rather admit their motels have bed bugs and their park squirrels carry bubonic plague!

This friendly Colorado town in Moffat County actually markets and caters to hunters and competes for them. The city's website provides information on myriad hunting-related topics from where to sight in a rifle (Bears Ears Sportsman Club and Cedar Mountain rifle range) to where to find game meat processors and taxidermists. The Moffat County Visitor Center even sells hunting licenses. They offer to help you replace a lost Colorado Hunter Education Card and buy an over-the-counter elk tag or leftover big-game tag. They sell hunting maps, BLM maps, and U.S. Forest Service Maps.

And you'll need maps, because Moffat County in the far northwest corner of Colorado includes 4,751 square miles of sage-steppe grasslands, hills, buttes, canyons, and mountains. Some 1.7 million acres of public land here are open to hunting. Runoff trickles through streams and creeks to the Little Snake, Yampa, and Green Rivers. There are dry sand basins, naked clay buttes, eroded mesas, and even piles of dead dinosaurs at Dinosaur National Monument. (Talk about big game. You should have been here last epoch!)

As the Colorado Plateau ascends to 10,865-foot Black Mountain, vegetation changes from dry grasses, bitterbrush, and sage to juniper and pinyon pines, ponderosa pines, expansive aspen stands, and Douglas firs. This vegetative mix provides perfect habitat for pronghorns, mule deer, black bears, Shiras moose, mountain lions, turkeys, sage grouse, and, most notably, elk. Lots of elk, and big elk.

It's no secret that some of Colorado's best trophy bull units are in Moffat County west of Craig: Game Management Units 1, 2, and 201. Drawing a tag for these is about as easy as winning the lottery. But the other GMUs in the county (211, 3, 301, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, and 13) offer much better drawing odds and a lot of elk. Some of these units are even open to over-the-counter tags. It's even possible to hunt elk, mule deer, and pronghorns on the same dates in the same general area.

As the seasons progress, snow pushes elk down onto hay, wheat, and alfalfa fields in the valley, where they aren't always welcomed by ranchers. Hunters do well here, especially on cow elk. Some of the biggest elk migrations in the world occur here. It isn't unusual to see herds of 200 or more elk swarming off lowland crop fields at dawn. From a distance they look like a swarm of bees or flock of starlings swooping across the landscape. Depredation becomes a real problem. Many ranchers welcome hunters. The Visitor Center provides information on not just guides and outfitters, but private land trespass and self-guided hunts. The Center brags that its call center is staffed "with live human beings who actually hunt." And they are "bending sideways to get you your elk."

With hunter support like this, Craig is obviously no Boulder. And neither is it Denver. Only about 14,000 citizens live in all of Moffat County, slightly more than 9,000 of them in Craig. Nearly all are integrated as part of a hard-working community dependent on natural resources: water and soil, livestock and crops, native plants and animals, fossil fuels. Residents know, appreciate, husband, and harvest the natural wealth on which they depend. Part of that harvest includes the dollars visiting hunters spend. And we can spend them at a dozen hotels, motels, and inns, plus several cabins, campgrounds, and dude ranches. Dining options include everything from cook-it-yourself supermarket food to fast food and pizzerias to Italian, Chinese, Mexican, and American-style restaurants. DIY hunters can rough it on BLM and U.S. Forest Service lands, including parts of the Routt and White River National Forests.

Nice mule deer are also a draw for hunters in northwest Colorado.

During the elk and deer seasons, hunters roll into town to have the fruits of their successful hunts processed and packaged.

Befitting its wild setting, Craig is off the beaten path. From the north, take Exit 187 off I-80 in Wyoming and drive desolate state highway 789 south 50 miles to Baggs. At the Colorado state line this turns into Colorado State Highway 13, which runs south another 40 miles to Craig. From the south, catch Highway 13 off I-70 at Rifle and wind 90 miles north through Meeker to Craig. Denver is a twisting, climbing 210 miles away; Salt Lake City, 341 highway miles out. The Highway 40 route through Vernal, Utah, is delightfully scenic, but not as fast as the I-80 route.

It's also possible to fly into the Yampa Valley Regional Airport, which has commercial airline connections through Denver International. Or catch a direct flight to this small airport from some thirteen other major airports across the country. Why so many flights to a town of fewer than 10,000 people? Steamboat Springs, with its ski resorts, lies just forty miles east of Craig. Alas, most hunting seasons have ended before skiing begins. A ski-and-hunt combo trip might not be an option, but, after packing out an elk, the bubbling hot springs for which the town was christened might be a most welcome option.