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## Wild Call

A dirt road wound up the steep mountainside, through dense evergreen forest. Aspen trees stretched lighter green leaves toward the clear sky. Dark granite bluffs thrust jaggedly above the forest. Far up the mountainside, the travelers stopped, climbed down from their wagon, looked at the mountain day, and listened to the sounds of the mountain, to the sounds of the forest all around.

The mother stood with the father and their two children beside the road. Birds flew from tree to tree. A jay scolded them for invading its quiet forest. Then loud, melodious, wild calls echoed up and down the heavily forested canyons and ridges of the mountainous country. Rick, the son, asked, "Why do they do that?" He seemed a little frightened.

The mother answered. "It's mating season. Those are the mating calls of the bulls."

"What are they saying?"

"Well, of course, they don't have a language like we do, so it isn't as if they are speaking sentences back and forth like we do to each other."

Rick was pleased to hear his mother's voice gain a note of excitement as she explained. He knew if he could get her started on a lecture about nature, one of her favorite topics, she would overrule his father's nervous objection, "Are you sure dear, that the children are old enough to hear the totally unexpurgated story?"

"Nonsense, Richard. They've seen kittens born. They know more than you think they know. Stop fidgeting about getting on with the journey. In all these years, you should have learned, once you marry, you're no longer subject to your parents. You mustn't let your fear of their reaction if we're late dull you to the opportunities here for education for your own family, where your first responsibility is."

He said, "Yes dear. I know. Well, I'll just get..." he turned and started to get the picnic basket, but she said, "Don't always worry about food. It isn't lunch time yet. Education is not only

for the young. There is much here you could learn, too. Remember, my doctor's dissertation was on mating calls and rituals among wild beasts, with particular emphasis on the bulls we hear on the mountain above us right now."

"I know. I just thought with it almost lunchtime, and since it seems like we'll be here a while, and with the chil..."

She turned to her son and daughter. "No, the calls are not in words, but they do express complex ideas to others of their species. Probably the most important idea is that every species must reproduce, and, for this species, this is the season to begin the process of reproduction.

"The message to others of their species is two-part. To other bulls, it says something like, 'I am a powerful bull. If you invade my territory or try to steal females from my harem, I will make a great deal of trouble for you.'"

"Do they fight?"

"Sometimes they do. Sometimes a younger bull will know from the power of the older bull's voice that there isn't any hope. He'll realize he might as well go somewhere else.

"Sometimes, the challenging bull will come close, and both bulls will shake trees, or they might attack logs and paw in the dirt to try to scare each other, to try to show each other how powerful they are. Sometimes they do fight, but usually, as soon as one realizes the other is stronger, he'll quit, and the stronger one will let him go. But sometimes they do fight to the death, especially when there isn't any new territory for the younger bulls to move into, when the herd has gotten too large."

"And when the herd gets too large, the way Mother says it is this year, that's one good reason for having a hunting season," interjected Laurie, who hoped to hunt this year for the first time, over Rick's protest.

Rick thought it wasn't fair that girls got to go hunting, but boys usually weren't allowed. He turned from Laurie to his mother. "Then the bulls are the leaders of the herd."

"No. The leader of the herd is usually an older female, past bearing age. Sometimes, several older females share leadership. They keep the herd together in large enough numbers to discourage most predators. They find the best places for good food for the herd and show the rest of the herd where they should go. They intervene if members of the herd begin to squabble amongst themselves. There is a good deal of very

structured social order to the herds, something that hadn't been realized in scholarly circles until we began to study them.

"Most of the year, the bulls don't stay with the herd. Late summer or early fall, the bulls, who have stayed together in small groups separate from the main herd, rejoin the herd. The older males drive the younger but mature males out of the herd, and the younger males live alone or in small groups, close to the herd, but at a safe distance from the dominant males.

"Only for about three weeks, in mating season, do they become fiercely competitive and round up harems. Two bulls who fought each other fiercely will be close, peaceful companions again, apart from the herd, once mating season is over.

"Oh. My word. Now, everyone, look where I'm pointing, at that outcropping of granite above that spire of a dead tamarack. This is indeed a rare opportunity. See, there's a bull, just back in the shadows of the trees. Oh, we might get to see..."

On the bluff, Wojen stepped out into the full sunlight. Below him, scattered amongst the forest of young trees and granite boulders, his harem was making a midday meal.

Wojen was hungry too, but he wouldn't eat for quite a while yet. There was too much to do. Too much to watch.

He knew there were two young bulls down by the creek, hanging around close, but he wasn't too worried about them. One charge at them, and they gave up and ran. The irritating thing was, they kept coming back, as if he emanated some sign of weakness that might make him vulnerable.

And too much of the harem was susceptible. He spent so much of his time running off young bulls and fighting with older bulls, he hadn't been able to spend much time with the harem. You couldn't expect the females not to run away with some attractive harem-raider if you didn't give them young yourself.

He decided to work up an extra strong stay-away-from-my-harem warning and see if he could convince some of these young bulls to give him some room.

He emerged from the deep shade of boulders and trees into direct sunlight. He saw the tourists and their vehicle far down the ridge, but they weren't important in his environment as long as it wasn't hunting season, and as long as they stayed some distance away from him and his harem, so he went about his business.

He bellowed a long, savage-sounding call, that boomed out over canyons, valleys, and ridges, and after the call, he grunted deep, belly-ripping grunts that echoed through the mountains as evidence of his size and strength. Then he ran to the very edge of the bluff and beat on a resonant log with the long hardwood club he carried during mating season. The power of his blows echoed far beyond the territory he claimed as his own.

The tourists were stunned. The mother whispered, "To actually see it happen. How very rare."

Laurie couldn't help thinking, "Oh, if only I had my bow with me and it was hunting season. That is an absolute, record-setting bull."

Rick, as if reading her mind, said, "You can't hunt them during mating season. You could at least try to see it as something beyond a trophy for your wall."

The four of them stood quietly for a long time and watched the bull standing, one foot on the log, club rested on the ground, surveying the side of the mountain. Sometimes the tourists caught glimpses of the females and the young of the herd moving around in the forest below the big bull.

The bull turned away from the log, rested his club on his shoulder, and walked from the bluff back into the trees and the huge granite boulders.

They couldn't see him anymore. Still, they stood quietly, looking up the steep side of the forested mountain, where rock bluffs thrust up above the evergreen trees, for a long time. Then the mother said, "It's time to go."

They all climbed into the wagon. The mother took the reins between the halves of her hoof and said, "Hup."

The beasts strained into their harnesses. They leaned so far forward to get the wagon started, they pulled at the ground with their fingertips.