# FIELD JUDGING

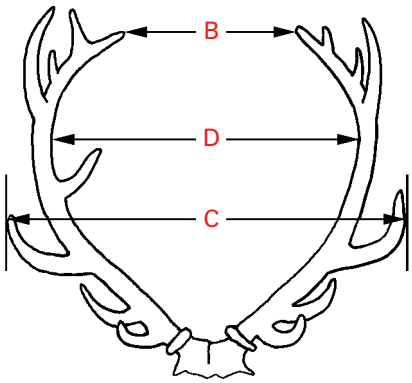
## It's not as hard as it sounds!

ELK
THE
FOURTH IN
A SERIES

By Marc Stevens

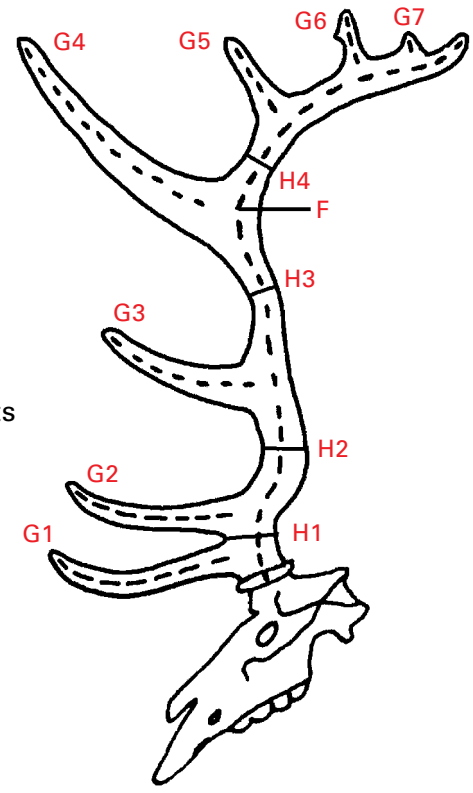
A bull elk is one of North America's most majestic creatures, and a really big bull elk is the best of the best, one of the most regal, most dramatic, and most impressive creatures in the entire world. There is a big difference between a nice, normal, respectable, good bull and a monster that will make the records book. It isn't hard to tell the difference, but the first decision you need to make is whether or not you care.

Although it's possible for a huge bull to turn up almost anywhere these big deer are found, there aren't large numbers of really big bulls anywhere. In a lot of elk country any bull at all is truly a fine trophy, and any six-point bull is a great trophy. As with all trophy hunting, you can't shoot a big one unless you're willing to turn down lesser animals. This may not be the best course of action for all elk hunters in all areas, especially not for those who like to eat elk meat. Let's start with the clear understanding that there aren't enough big bulls to go around, and it isn't always sensible to spend a lot of time counting antler points, let alone computing Boone and Crockett scores. However, sometimes there is time, and in some times and places there are lots of elk, enough that you really can size them up and try to find the bull of a lifetime. Will you know him if you see him?




### UNDERSTANDING AN ELK FRAME

B – Tip to Tip Spread
C – Greatest Spread
D – Inside Spread of Main Beam
E – Lengths of Abnormal Points
F – Length of Main Beam
G – Lengths of Normal Points
H – Circumferences




### COUNTING POINTS

Relatively few elk hunters go afield with a certain records book score in mind, but lots of elk hunters go in search of a "six-point bull." This isn't a bad plan, provided you understand that a six-point bull isn't necessarily a monster, nor even fully mature, and that there are huge 5x5s wandering around that dwarf many 6x6s. That said, six points per side (including

Relatively few elk hunters go afield with a certain records book score in mind, but lots of elk hunters go in search of a "six-point bull." This isn't a bad plan, provided you understand that a six-point bull isn't necessarily a monster...

# FIELD JUDGING

the main beam tip) is the normal configuration for most American elk. Some bulls never grow the sixth point, and some grow a seventh and (rarely) even more, but most mature bull elk are 6x6s. It is normal for an elk's first antlers to be spikes. It is just as normal for a spike to go straight to a 5-point rack as a 2-1/2-year-old, and then to a small six-point rack as a 3-1/2-year-old.

Often the process is slower and, rarely, it can be faster. But a 3-1/2, 4-1/2, or even 5-1/2-year-old bull is a long way from full maturity, regardless of how many points he is carrying. It depends on the country,


With the head thrown back, perhaps to bugle, look for main beams that appear to reach as far back as the haunches.

but a bull elk's best set of antlers will probably come in his 10th, 11th, or even 12th year. There's a lot of growing to do between his first six-point rack and his best rack, so there are six-pointers and then there are six-pointers.

However, simply identifying, in an instant, a six-point bull is not difficult. Elk antlers grow with a main beam that goes up and slightly back, usually curving rearward toward the tip of the main beam. Points tend to grow forward and slightly outward from the main beam. In the normal configuration there are two brow tines that project forward, a third point that projects from the side of the antler, and fourth and subsequent points tht grow from the top of the main beam. The fourth point is normally the longest and most dominant point. Variously called the dagger point or the sword point, this is usually the single most distinctive feature of an elk rack, and you'll pick it up in an almost instantaneous glance.

If the main beam tip goes straight back from the dagger point you're almost certainly looking at a five-point antler. If there's another point rising upward behind this prominent dagger point, perhaps making a horizontal "Y," then you're looking at a six-point antler. Again, the dagger point is almost always the longest and thickest point, and unless something is missing (broken off or not grown), it will be the fourth point. Points behind the dagger point are generally shorter. So, not counting the main beam tip, one point behind the dagger means a six-pointer. Two points behind the dagger means the rare seven-pointer, with the sixth tine usually considerably shorter than the fifth tine.

## GOING BY THE BOOK

If a "six-point bull" is what you have in mind, this is all you need to know, but don't take it too literally because I've seen hunters pass huge five-pointers in favor of much smaller six-pointers! Now, let's progress to records book score. Elk are measured by a combination of beam lengths, point lengths, circumferences at four different places on the main beam, and inside spread. The minimum is lower for Roosevelt's elk than for American elk, also known as Rocky Mountain elk, and lower still for tule elk, but in all cases the minimum is very, very high, and it takes a real whopper to make the grade in any category. Although the basic criteria of beams, points, circumferences, and inside spread are the same, Roosevelt's and tule elk are measured differently because they often grow additional points near the dagger point, forming a cluster or "crown" of points like a European red deer. American elk, which rarely crown, are divided into typical and non-typical categories. We will focus initially on the most plentiful and widespread American elk, with notes on Roosevelt's and tule elk at the conclusion.

For American elk it requires a minimum of 375 points for entry into the All-time records book as a typical bull and 360 points to enter in the Awards book. The non-typical minimum is 385 points for both the Awards and All-time records books. As an indicator of how large such a bull really is, most nice, representative, good 6x6 elk will measure somewhere between 260 and 290 Boone and Crockett points. Relatively few people will ever see a true record-class bull, but the yardstick by which you would know them are the same for lesser bulls.

## A COMBINATION OF FACTORS

With any antlered game it's important to understand that all the criteria are important. No rack is perfect, not even a World's Record. Since there are more points than anything else, point length is very important, but what you really want is a combination of long points, long beams, good mass, and a wide spread. Since no wapiti has all of this in equal proportion, you have to look at the overall rack, longer points make up for short beams, extreme mass makes up for a narrower spread, and so forth. It's important to look at the entire rack and not become fixated on one feature, whether outstanding or weak. That said, some criteria are more important than others. We'll look at each.

## BEAM LENGTH

Long beams are not sufficient to put an elk in the records book. You need all the rest, but most great elk have long main beams. In the all-time records book, main beams of American elk range from a very few heads with a beam length in the mid-40s, all the way to beams well over 60 inches in length. The average beam length of the top 10 typical heads is over 58 inches. Interestingly, however, the average beam length of the bottom ten typical heads is 55-4/8 inches, not much difference. Note that the top 10 typical American elk average 426 points; the bottom 10 average just over 375 points. That's a 50-inch difference, but the difference in beam length averages just 2-4/8 inches.

What this should tell you is that most great elk have very long beams. There are exceptions, and they must have the rest as well, but long beams matter. It's very difficult to quantify beam length when you're looking at an elk through binoculars, but it isn't difficult to see that a bull has exceptionally long beams. With the head carried normally, antlers erect, look for antlers that are significantly taller than the elk's shoul-

der height. With the head thrown back, perhaps to bugle, look for main beams that appear to reach as far back as the haunches. It is difficult to precisely estimate beam length against body size, but this business about "being able to scratch his rear end with his antlers" is valid. An elk with really long beams can almost do this. Another good visual clue on a six-pointer is extreme length behind the last point, and, on any elk, the apparent length behind the dagger point, preferably at least 20 inches.

## INSIDE SPREAD

This is a measurement that many hunters don't like. It's a measurement of air, not antler. Looking at typical American elk (the category with by far the most entries) the range is quite considerable. The narrowest head in the book has an inside spread of just 32-2/8 inches, exceptionally narrow for a mature bull. At a total of 384-1/8 B&C points, this bull actually outscores the widest bull, 55-6/8 inches (total score 380-2/8). This suggests that spread isn't everything! Indeed it isn't, and this is borne out by the averages of the top 10 and bottom 10 entries. The top 10 typical American elk range from 38-2/8 inches inside spread to 53 inches, with an average of 46-2/8 inches. The bottom 10 range from 38 inches to 49-4/8 inches, with an average of 42-4/8 inches. Again, this is not significant against the 50-inch difference that separates these elk in Boone and Crockett's scoring system.

In the field, this is not a criteria I would worry about too much, except in the relatively rare case where you're looking at a very narrow, straight-up-and-down rack. Most "big" elk will come well outside the ears or, from the rear, will have antlers that extend well outside the body profile. This will put you somewhere in the low to mid-40s, and that's all you need be concerned about. A really wide bull gives you a bonus, and that's good. A really narrow bull may be a problem, but not if the beams and points are spectacular. Note that the fourth typical American elk in the all-time records book has an inside spread of just 39 inches, and the ninth head in the same listing has an inside spread of just 38-2/8 inches.

## MASS

As a bull reaches full maturity, he may or may not grow additional points, and he may or may not add significant length to his rack, but his antlers will become more massive. Most really good elk have heavy antlers and carry the mass the length of the main beam. An individual circumference measurement is not a large number, but there are four circumference measurements on each side, so they add up. "H-1" is taken at the smallest place between the first (brow) tine (G-1) and the second tine (G-2). H-2 is taken between the second and third (G-3) tines, H-3 between the third and fourth (G-4, normally the dagger) tines, and H-4 is taken between the dagger point and next point (G-5) or, if a G-5 is lacking (a five-point rack), then the measurement is taken halfway between the G-4 and the end of the main beam.

Mass is very hard to judge, and isn't something worth spending a lot of time on. Few elk that are "big" in the more visible characteristics have thin antlers. The average H-1 (between first and second point) on the top 10 typical American elk is 10-4/8 inches, which is very massive. The average H-1 of the bottom 10 is 8-6/8 inches. That is a fairly significant difference, especially if you figure this average difference of 1-4/8 inches is carried through all 8 circumference measurements. However, the next-to-last head in the all-time book has an unusually small H-1 of 6-7/8. This is the very rare "big bull" that is not at least reasonably heavy. Throw that one out and the average goes up to nine inches.

You want to look for antlers that are visibly as large or larger in circumference than the ear bases, and, more importantly, maintain the appearance of thickness at least

# FIELD JUDGING

to the fifth point. It's unusual to have a lot of time to look at a big bull, and mass is not where you should spend most of it.

## TINES COUNT

On even the most massive-beamed bull elk the total circumference measurements will not approach 20% of the total points. Spread is worth perhaps as little as 10%, but never much more than 15%. Beam length matters, a lot. The total of both the beam lengths can easily exceed 100 points, and on a "record-class" bull, will surely exceed 90 points, so it is worth close to 25% of the total score on a big bull. Do the math. That means tine length accounts for at least 40% of the total, sometimes more, but rarely less.

If you have time to really study a bull, look at the main beams and really look at the tines. Obviously you want to count points. Because there are additional points to measure, 7x7s score well and the rare bulls with additional typical points score even better, provided they match. Tines that are not matched on the other antler are deducted, unless they're non-typical points and the animal is measured as a non-typical. So a big 6x6 will outscore an equally big 7x6 every time. Broken points also count against you, so you do want to look for symmetry, but don't get carried away looking for a 7x7. Elk with more than six points dominate the first page of the records book listings, but after that the most common configuration among record-class elk is the same as the most common configuration among mature bulls: 6x6.

This being the case, it should be obvious that point length is the single most important criteria, regardless of how many points the bull has. There are many 7x7s that won't make the magical minimum, while a lot of 6x6s have. It is even possible for a bull to "make it" without the sixth point. There are currently no 5x5 bulls in the all-time records book, but there is one 6x5, scoring 378-6/8 points. Remembering that differences in symmetry are deducted, thus the length of the sixth point on the one side was subtracted. This was one big elk.

The good news is that point length is one of the easiest things to judge because there is a yardstick. On a big American elk the distance from the eye to the tip of the nose is about 12-4/8 to 13 inches. Perhaps better, the distance from the base of the burr to the tip of the nose is about 15-4/8 inches. There are variances, but they're slight, and this is not an exact science, nor will you


INSET: Tines that are not matched on the other antler are deducted. So a big 6x6 will outscore an equally big 7x6 every time.


The tine length accounts for at least 40% of the total, sometimes more, but rarely less. If you have time to really study a bull, look at the main beams and really look at the tines.

normally have time to make it so. The most important thing on a big elk is long points, as many and as long as possible.

Start at the bottom and work up. The brow tines are usually strong. You want them to extend at least to the end of the nose, preferably longer and with some curve, which greatly adds to the length. A curved brow that appears to reach the end of the nose should be about 18-inches long. The G-2s and G-3s are often a bit weaker, but they can't be too weak. They, too, need to approach the distance from burr to tip of nose. Now comes the truth-teller, the dagger point. The dagger point is usually the longest point, and there are a lot of potential inches there. You want it to be considerably longer than the burr-to-nose distance, approaching double the eye-to-nose yardstick. If it's a clean 6x6, the G-5 point matters a lot. It has to be strong, at least 8 or 10 inches. This is less important if the bull is a 7x7, but you still need some inches in the top of the rack.

## THE PERFECT ELK

The best people in the world at judging elk are the veteran guides at the White Mountain Apache Reservation, because they have seen more big elk taken than anyone else in the world. Typically, they take an average for mass based on "feel," and they take an average for inside spread based on a "narrow, wide, or normal" judgment. Where they spend the time is working out the beam lengths and the point lengths because that's where it's at.

So let's look through the spotting scope at a really good 6x6. Get your notebook out. He seems to have really long beams, almost scratching his rump. We'll give him 55 inches on each beam. Spread is fairly wide, not noticeably splayed out, but wide. We'll give him 45 inches of inside spread. Mass isn't humongous, but is pretty good. We'll figure he starts at a normally heavy 9 inches and keeps it pretty well, maybe 30 inches of circumference on each antler, 60 total.

Now we're going to work out the points. The brow tines curve nicely and seem to pass the tip of the nose. Let's give them 18 inches. The G-2s and G-3s are also good, but not quite so long, and they seem about equal. Let's give them 16 inches each. The G-4s are quite good, about half again the burr-to-nose distance. Let's give them 22 inches. The back fork is also pretty good. We'll call the G-5s at least eight inches each.

Now let's look again for visible differences from one side to another. No, no points are missing, and while there will certainly be subtle differences, none are obvious. Okay, do the math. We've got 110 inches on the beams, 60 inches in circumference, and 45 inches of inside spread. The point length is 80 inches per side, total of 160. If you're right, you're looking at a bull that will score 375 points. Hopefully you've been conservative rather than generous in your estimation, and hopefully you haven't missed any significant deductions. If these two things are true, you're looking at a Boone and Crockett typical bull.

It's unusual to have a lot of time to look at a big bull, and mass is not where you should spend most of it. As with all antlered game, the secret is to look at the whole rack, not just one feature, and to know what you're looking at.

## NON-TYPICALS

The only non-typical elk category is for the American elk. A non-typical point is not a mismatched point from one side to the other, but a point that grows somewhere other than in the typical pattern, perhaps a drop point or a horizontal point coming off the main beam. As is the case with deer, the possibilities are almost endless, but, if anything, non-typical elk are less common than non-typical deer, and it's rare to see more than a handful of true non-typical points. Reflecting this, the non-typical minimum is 385 points. This means that only 10 inches of true non-typical points are required above a typical measurement of 375. In theory, a couple of non-typical "kickers" of five or six inches would take the "perfect bull" we described above out of the typical and into the non-typical category. Non-typical bulls are extremely hard to judge, but you can measure the points by the same criteria. The trick is to make sure you're looking at non-typical points and not deductions.

## NOTES ON ROOSEVELT'S AND TULE ELK

Roosevelt's elk and tule elk are generally measured in the same way with one major exception. Both subspecies often grow irregular "crown" points near or above the G-4 or dagger point. These points are measured separately and added into the total score. Abnormal points below the G-4 are deducted, and there is no category for non-typical Roosevelt's or tule elk.

The other major difference is the racks are more compact. Roosevelt's elk are giants in the body, with the eye-to-nose and burr-to-nose distances maybe 1/2 inch longer than with American elk. The racks on the best bulls tend to be just as heavy, but main beams are considerably shorter. Beam lengths above 50 inches are rare, with most of the best Roosevelt's elk having beams in the mid-40s. Reflecting this, the minimum score for Roosevelt's elk is 290 points.

Tule elk are much smaller in the body, and although the best racks tend even more toward crown points than Roosevelt's elk, the main beams are shorter yet and not quite as massive. Deduct about 1-4/8 inches from the eye-to-nose and burr-to-nose distance and judge accordingly. Mind you, it's all a matter of scale. The minimum score for the new tule elk category is 285, reflecting that tule elk are likely to have more points than Roosevelt's elk, but shorter beams and less mass.

During hunting season there won't be many occasions when you have the time to get out your notebook and try to figure all this out. Nor should you. Sometimes, when elk are feeding on a distant hillside, you can sit down and work it out. But "the big ones look big," and if he looks that big, your time may be better spent making a stalk. On the other hand, the more time you spend really judging elk the better (and faster) you will be at it. This is a great exercise for off-season scouting, or while game viewing in a park. It takes practice and no one will reach perfection. The more time you spend looking and judging elk, the better prepared you will be when you see a big bull in the field. As with all antlered game, the secret is to look at the whole rack, not just one feature, and to know what you're looking at. ■