

DON'T FENCE ME IN

It's an old song with new meaning in modern hunting

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The concept that we know as “fair chase” is more than just the title of this magazine. It is a basic tenet of the Boone and Crockett Club, which can rightfully claim to be one of the principal architects of ethical hunting as we know it in America. Today the Boone and Crockett Club takes its role seriously as a guardian

of hunting ethics. Within the Club, our records book—*Records of North American Big Game*—isn't always considered our most important work, but externally it is without question Boone and Crockett Club's most visible, best known, and most recognizable symbol. Thus, it is extremely important for our Records Committee to keep our records listings and Awards Program as clean and accurate as humanly possible.

This is rarely easy, and the product isn't always perfect. Sometimes it's discovered long after the fact that a certain trophy should have been evaluated differently, or even that things weren't quite as they seemed when an entry was accepted. Over time, too, it might be determined that appropriate and legitimate categories are missing. In

recent years categories for Roosevelt's and tule elk have been added. There are now categories for non-typical Sitka and Columbia blacktail deer. So, our records system remains a work in progress, subject to change by committee action as new information comes to light.

In recent years one of the issues our Records Committee has continuously attempted to deal with is the business of fenced animals. In some contexts the answer is simple. The Boone and Crockett Club records system tabulates listings for native North American big game. Non-native big game animals are excluded from the Club's records program. Scattered here and there throughout North America we have wild, free-ranging populations of axis deer, sika deer, fallow deer, feral hogs, feral goats, ibex, oryx, aoudad, reindeer, various strains of mouflon and domestic-mouflon crosses, and a whole bunch more. There is no question that the term “fair chase,” when coupled with legal and ethical hunting techniques, can be applied to these species. I do a lot of wild



Where I live along California's Central Coast, we have lots of wild hogs. They're totally free-ranging, have been there for untold swine generations, are a ball to hunt, and a boar like this one shown here with John Lazzeroni and Greg Tinsley is a great trophy. Despite all this, they're not native North American big game, so should not be – and hopefully never will be – part of B&C's records program.

hog hunting near my home in central California, and I've hunted them in Europe as well. There isn't much difference. I have also hunted aoudad in the mountains of North Africa and in the mountains of west Texas. There wasn't much difference in the sweat expended! But these animals, whether fenced or not, will never be part of Boone and Crockett's records and awards system simply because they are not native North American big game.

A much knottier problem arises when it comes to the disposition of native big game animals that are confined within game fences. Again, some questions are easier than others. Due to the tremendous value of large specimens of high-profile species there is now a growing "game ranching" industry. The most common situations are whitetail deer and elk, partly because of availability of captive-reared individuals, and partly because of demand. Mind you, it is quite possible for an operator to offer a quality experience (if not a quality "hunting" experience) with a captive herd. Horror stories are also possible.

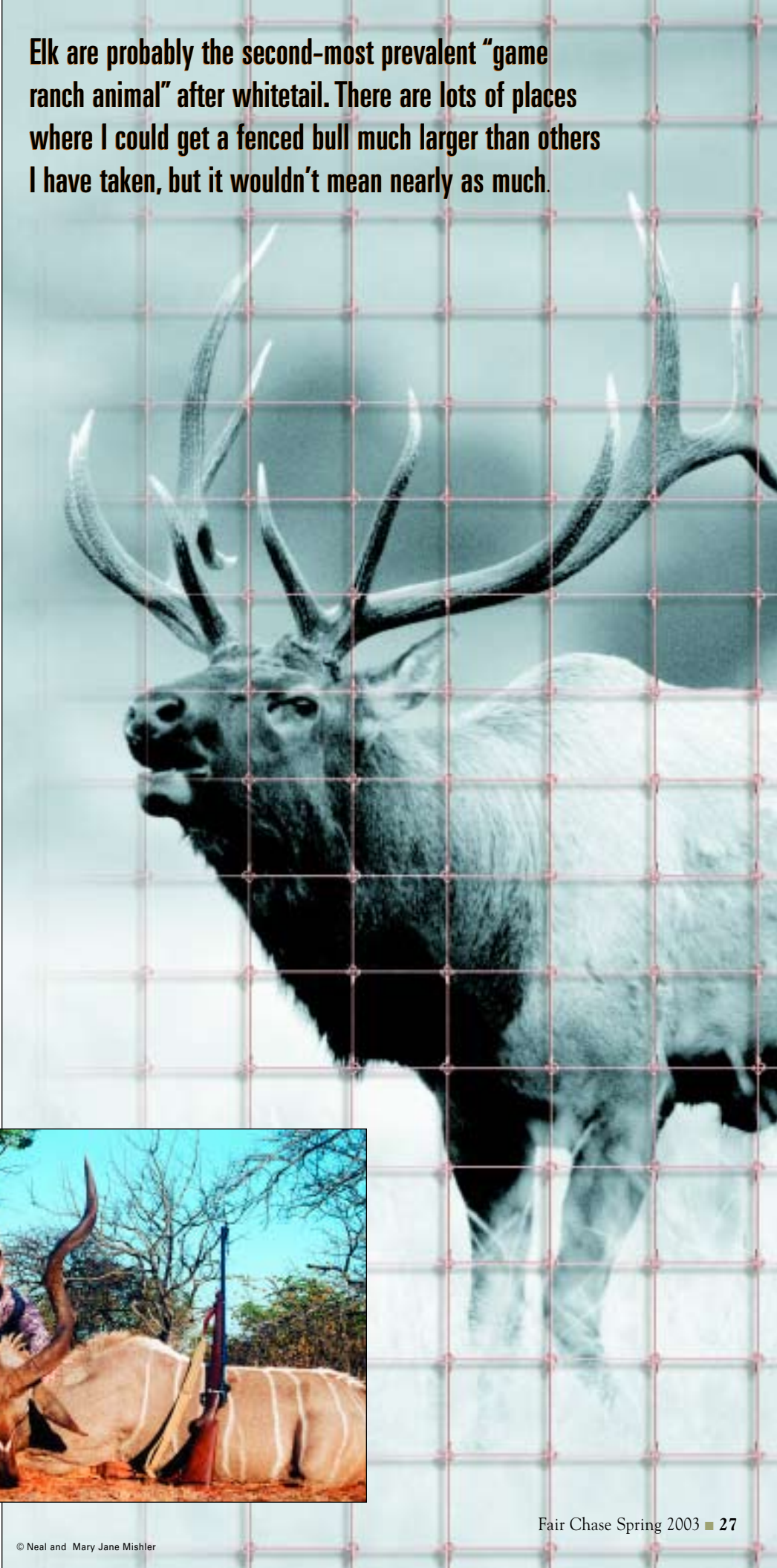
These days there are some very big elk and some very big whitetails confined on some very small properties, awaiting someone with a big enough checkbook. Personally, I don't blame the operators; we have a free enterprise system, so I blame the shooters who support this industry. I also blame all of us, collectively, for placing such a premium on size of antler and horn that some of us have forgotten what our sport is all about. Montana has taken decisive action, outlawing game ranching. Maybe that's the wave of the future. However, to date this has not been an issue for the Boone and Crockett Club's North American Big Game Awards Program, because animals that qualify for inclusion must not only be hunted by legal and ethical means; they must also be taken from unfenced breeding populations.

So now we get to the real rub. What about native game in natural habitat, existing in breeding popula-

Game is largely privatized in South Africa and game ranching is responsible for the return of that country's wildlife. This kudu was taken on a typical game ranch. It was fenced, but I was never aware of the fence and neither was the kudu.



Elk are probably the second-most prevalent "game ranch animal" after whitetail. There are lots of places where I could get a fenced bull much larger than others I have taken, but it wouldn't mean nearly as much.



How could you fence enough ground so that a caribou could move naturally?



tions, hunted legally and ethically . . . but confined by game-proof fencing? This is not altogether an American problem; game fencing is now extremely common in many parts of the world. In the last 30 years South Africa's game has increased dramatically, and now has the largest safari industry on the African continent. The primary reason is game ranching, economically viable only because the game has value. Game fencing is a simple fact of life in South Africa. Not all areas hunted today are fenced, but the vast majority are.

There are good reasons, some not altogether apparent. During her pioneering era South Africa's game was seriously depleted, much like our own. A big difference is that game on private land is largely privatized. Most of the reintroduction of long-gone species has been done at the landowners' expense, with future profits in mind. South African landowners have four primary means of marketing game: venison, much of which is exported to Europe; live-trapping of surplus, which is auctioned to other landowners for breeding stock; photo tourism; and safari hunting. While many areas had remnant populations of certain antelope, huge investment in both money and time was required to bring most properties up to where any of these four avenues were economically viable. Game fencing was required to protect that investment. Not so obvious is that most South African provinces do have specific hunting seasons not unlike our own, and much too short for a viable safari business. A quirk of South African law is that, if properly game-fenced, a landowner can gain exclusion to the hunting seasons and operate year-'round, weather permitting. So in the context of South African law, game fencing doesn't exist to

keep animals within the fence, but rather to protect the animals without the fence from the less regulated hunting within!

In practice, South African hunting isn't much different from the situation over here. Some fenced properties are so large that the hunter may never see a fence or be aware that one exists. Some are a whole lot smaller, but there are also differences among the many African species. Cover-loving antelope like bushbuck, kudu, and nyala can elude hunters quite nicely in suitable thick-cover habitat almost regardless of the acreage. Other antelope are much less wary, prefer more open country, or both; the challenge is considerably less whether the area is fenced or not.

Game fencing is also common in New Zealand today. None of New Zealand's large game animals were native, and in an ideal climate with no predators several species propagated to near-plague numbers. For a time the government's policy was one of annihilation; the red deer especially were market-hunted from helicopters almost to the point of no return. Today there is still pretty good unfenced hunting for the mountain game, chamois and tahr, but most of the hunting for antlered game takes place on fenced game ranches. Game fencing is becoming more prevalent in Europe, and some of Argentina's best red stags also come from fenced estates.

So there are numerous international precedents for game-fenced hunting. None of this is Boone and Crockett Club's problem because the Club is concerned only with native North American big game. In the context of fair chase and the impact of questionable hunting practices upon the future of the hunting in an increasingly urban society that lacks an appreciation of hunting as a recreational pastime, the harvest of farmed animals from non-breeding populations is very important to the Boone and Crockett Club. The Club's concern to date has been focused on how to maintain a system of records for native big game in a country where

Dr. Johnny Bliznak (right) with a great Arizona bull that is big enough to make the B&C minimum. I've never taken a bull like this, but they're out there, and they can be taken and entered without resorting to a fenced hunt.



stewardship of wildlife lies in the public domain; and how to keep that records system as clean and pure as possible in the context of legal, ethical “fair chase” hunting.

The proliferation of game-fenced ranches in recent years has presented the problem to the Club’s North American big game records committee of how to deal with free-ranging North American big game animals taken in native habitat, from breeding populations, but within game-fenced acreage. Game fencing is becoming much more common, especially in Texas where the state has official programs aimed at better managing habitat and whitetail deer on private land. In certain situations in Texas, wildlife may be considered a commodity for sale or exclusive use of the private property owner.

This has come about for several reasons. As a state, Texas is something like 98 percent privately owned, with an accordingly strong tradition of protecting property rights. Unlike most parts of the U.S., wildlife in Texas has long had economic value; Texans have grown up understanding that, in order to hunt, they needed to either own their own land (or have friends or relatives who did), or invest in a hunting lease. Texans love their whitetails, and have long been in the forefront in managing deer for quality. In order to manage a ranch for quality deer, both habitat and deer numbers must be managed. Hunting and fences are two important tools for a sound habitat and herd management program. Fences are as important in keeping deer out of an area as they are in containing them. Unless all of your neighbors are like-minded or your property is huge, the only way to really manage for quality is to fence the land.

So we have a situation where some hunters and landowners, and not just in Texas, are producing spectacular whitetail deer (and occasionally elk and other species) that have antlers large enough for inclusion into the Club’s records book. They are producing them without tricks, from breeding populations in native habitat, and they are hunting them by legal and ethical means. The only problem is that many of these animals are coming from game-fenced acreage, and under the current rules are not eligible for inclusion into Boone and Crockett Club’s Awards Programs. Obviously this rankles many hunters, so the discussions have been long and heated.

Personally, I have come full circle on the issue. The whitetail is a homebody, a creature of close cover and edge habitat that normally establishes a very finite home ter-

ritory. If you know anything about whitetail deer it will be apparent that, in proper habitat, a whitetail confined within a relatively small area is not handicapped in its ability to evade hunters. Many years ago a Texas outfitter had a huge, hand-raised, non-typical buck in a brushy pen of just a couple of acres. He wanted to show him to me, so we went to look. No deer. Perplexed, we walked that entire pen for quite a while looking for him. Still no deer. My friend was horrified, certain that either the deer had escaped or had been purloined. No, he was just being a whitetail. The next day he was standing placidly by the gate—on the inside.

Expand that concept to the fenced hunting ranch of several hundred to a few thousand acres, and it’s clear that there is likely no ethical issue, nor should any be implied. Knowing all this, and having some experience with game ranching in South Africa and elsewhere, for years I imagined that there must be some way to recognize the great animals taken under such conditions. I’ve finally circled back to the simple fact that there isn’t a way to recognize big game taken from fenced ranches under the Boone and Crockett Club’s current North American Big Game Awards Program, and I applaud the strength and determination of the records committee in holding a very difficult line: Excluding North American big game animals taken within a game fence into Boone and Crockett Club’s Awards Program as we know it today. This is unquestionably patently unfair to the landowners and hunters who have done so much for quality deer management and have produced spectacular animals, using game fencing as just one of their tools. I still support the decision, because the ultimate problem is really quite simple: How do you decide how much acreage is enough, which management practices are acceptable and which are not . . . and who decides?

It depends on the habitat, as well as the size of the area for the animal, using its natural defensive behavior, to elude its pursuers. In some areas a mature whitetail deer could take good care of himself in a few dozen or a few hundred acres, but he couldn’t if you put him in a fenced parking lot of several thousand acres. Where do you draw the line? Who draws it? Could you realistically create a formula for acreage versus habitat, inspecting and certifying properties on a case-by-case basis, deciding what constitutes “fair chase” and what doesn’t?

This isn’t just about whitetails, either. The rules are the rules for all North

American big game, as it should be. To behave naturally and use their senses and defenses properly, elk require a lot more country than whitetails, and how could you fence strongly migratory animals like caribou and create a “natural” situation? Mind you, the records committee does not impugn or imply that a great whitetail taken by ethical means from a breeding population on a large fenced area is a lesser trophy than a buck of the same size taken on unfenced acreage. It’s a can of worms. Our records system is, admittedly, a work in progress, but it’s a work of several generations now, and crossing a line that is now very clearly black and white is a very difficult task.

It’s said that people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. I’m not personally rabidly against fencing, and I have enjoyed several good hunts within fenced areas . . . not only on other continents, but here at home as well. Some years ago, when this issue of fenced hunting and its impact on fair chase was just coming to the fore, my friend Bruce Keller invited me to hunt red sheep on a Texas ranch of his that was, well, pretty small. Except that it was a rolling piece of the Hill Country that was nearly wall-to-wall with thick cedars. I stalked and belly-crawled for three days before I got a shot. It was a great hunt, and I’m not the least bit ashamed of that red sheep on my wall. I’m also not the least bit ashamed of a good blackbuck and a super axis deer that I took on fenced acreage.

I have also hunted whitetail deer on game-fenced ranches, and I make no apology. A great whitetail taken by ethical means from a natural, free-ranging, breeding population is a super trophy . . . whether it qualifies for inclusion into Boone and Crockett Club’s Awards Program or not. Very few of us actually hunt “for the book” anyway, but these are personal decisions we must all make. The entry requirements for the Club’s North American Big Game Awards Program are clear, and if you are hunting behind a game fence—under any circumstances—your animal will not be accepted. This is not fair to all, but on the whole I think this is fair for our sport, because some animals taken behind fences are not from breeding populations, and should not be allowed to compete with, nor gain the recognition of, animals taken in unfenced circumstances. And, of course, some fenced areas are smaller than others . . .

Whether or not you choose to hunt behind a game fence is purely a personal decision. It’s probably splitting moral hairs,

This fabulous bison was free-ranging, legally taken, and I think it was an ethical hunt. But he was not part of a breeding population so he cannot be entered in the B&C's Awards Program. That's okay with me; I understood the rules "up front." I agree with them – and I will still enjoy this superb trophy.



but I have no problem with a fence where there are no options, such as South

African hunting and many of our introduced species. I personally have issues with hunting our native big game behind game fencing. Partly this is because there are unfenced options, and partly it's because there have been so many abuses. If you don't have a problem with fencing that's okay by me so long as it's legal, ethical, and you understand the end result will not qualify for the Boone and Crockett Club's records book, *Records of North American Big Game*.

I can tell you exactly when and where my issues with hunting in fenced areas developed! Some years ago I was present at an invitational hunting event. I guess my host figured he was doing me a favor by putting me in a position where I could take a spectacular whitetail. Before daylight he dropped me off at a stand, carefully describing the buck I should look for. I knew I was in a fenced area, because we had gone through a gate, but the full impact of what I'd gotten myself into hadn't hit me. Shortly after daylight I realized I was in little more than a pen. It was a brushy area comprised of small draws and fingers—but it wasn't very big and it just wasn't real. To this day I'm sure my host doesn't understand how I managed to spend a couple of days in there without seeing that buck. I guess I'm not a very good deer hunter, but that buck I didn't see sure was big and beautiful!

At that time he was bigger than any whitetail I had taken, but I found myself unable to squeeze the trigger under those circumstances. It was a good lesson, almost an epiphany, because in the years since then the "game ranch" industry has increased tremendously in this country and the hunting opportunities offered on these ranches run the gamut from large acreage where free-ranging populations of whitetail deer exist to areas that amount to little more than shooting an elk in a pen. I've had tempting invitations, but I've po-

lately avoided them because I personally place much greater value on and derive more satisfaction from taking a trophy in an unfenced environment.

This is all a very personal matter, and I deal with it on a case-by-case basis. I know I don't want to hunt whitetail or elk behind a fence because I have lots of unfenced options, and the idea of hunting North American wild sheep on a game farm horrifies me. But I'll probably hunt in South Africa—behind a game fence—a few more times before I'm done, and just the other day I enjoyed a really great hunt here in the U.S. for which I make no apology.

I went on a bison hunt with John Ray of the Thousand Hills Bison Ranch near San Acacio, Colorado. There are a few genuine, native range, free range, breeding population bison hunts that Boone and Crockett Club will accept, but very few, and all by permit drawing. I've tried to draw to some of them, but "Boone and Crockett qualification" wasn't a big deal, I wanted a midwinter bison, a big bull, for a head mount, under the best circumstances I could find. With John I hunted a big bull that was free-ranging on 60,000 acres—none of it game fenced, and the southern quadrant not fenced at all. That's free range, and southern Colorado is native habitat. However, that bull was not part of a current breeding population, and no hunting license was either available or required. So we hunted on horseback in December, eventually finding and taking a truly spectacular bison. By Boone and Crockett Club's standards the bull does not qualify for the North American Big Game Awards Program. I can live with that. My bull is a great trophy taken on an enjoyable hunt. I have no problem with his exclusion from Boone and Crockett 'cause them's the rules, but I won't have any severe attacks of conscience over participating in such a hunt, either. ■



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