

Giant Bulls of the White Mountains

By R.J. "Rick" Smith – B&C Lifetime Associate

After 15 adventurous years of hunting white-tail, mule deer, and pronghorn, my interests turned to the majestic American elk in the fall of 1984. For the next five years my brother Dave, various hunting buddies, and I would pay our dues hunting elk on public land at 11,000 feet, usually in two or three feet of snow in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

Our success was limited, but the knowledge we gained during our elk hunting adventures was invaluable. Having filled a few cow tags, elk hunting had now become an endless passion. In 1989, I hunted for the first time with an outfitter and was successful in harvesting my first 5x6 bull elk in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico. That bull proudly adorns the family room wall to this day.

For the next several years I hunted bull elk successfully in Montana, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Colorado. My dream now was to someday witness a Boone and Crockett bull elk in the wild; and maybe, just maybe, have a slim chance to tag one.

My understanding and lovely wife, Linda, suggested that I search for the best place in North America to hunt trophy elk and then go there. After numerous hours of research, I concluded that the White Mountains of Arizona were where I needed to hunt for the opportunity of fulfilling my dream.

During the second year of being on a waiting list to hunt with the White Mountain Apache Tribe, I received the phone call. I was invited to their fall trophy bull elk

hunt. On the ninth afternoon of my nine-day hunt I scored on a beautiful 6x6 after an hour and a half stalk. What got me even more excited was being part of the experience Bill Tilley and Belden Beatty



R.J. Rick Smith with his two White Mountain bulls. The one pictured above scores 405-5/8 B&C points, the bull pictured on the right didn't quite make the records book.



had when they brought into camp an incredible 6x6 typical bull with 60-inch plus main beams and a final score of 406 B&C points!

The next three years at the White Mountains "west end camp" proved successful for me, as I was able to take bulls that came close to the camp average of 350 B&C points. The 2002 season was met with mixed emotions. The worst fire in Arizona's history had charred approximately 260,000 acres of the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation. After an exciting eight and a half day hunt,

my guide, Rivers Lavender and I were drawn to Buckskin Canyon for our last chance for a good bull on the last evening of our nine-day hunt. In mid-afternoon we located a great bull with nine cows and a couple of satellite bulls. We stalked the herd for about an hour and a half when good luck prevailed; the herd bull broke from its cows for a short rest. I first saw the bull's rack through the burnt timber at over 200 yards. It immediately was a "shooter" in my mind. After only a short rest, the great bull stood to find my lethal bullet. The date was September 17 at approximately 5 p.m. The bull later scored 375 points before deductions. The 5x7 had the most impressive brow points I had ever seen. With one more average tine on the left side, this fantastic bull could have qualified for Boone and Crockett's All-time records book.

Two great bulls in back-to-back years on the same day, at the same time!

The stage was set in 2003 as once again I had the opportunity to hunt with one of the White Mountain Apaches' premier guides, Belden Beatty. Day one was highlighted with a long stalk on an extraordinary 7x7 bull. We finally fooled its many cows and were in position to take this great bull at close range when I decided to pass. Day two arrived with much anticipation, it was September 17, and the same day I took last year's great "Buckskin Bull." At about the same time as the year before, 5 p.m., we spotted a tremendous lone bull standing broadside in the pines and pinyons at 150 yards. One shot from my Dakota Arms .338 Barnes X Bullet put the bull down 75 yards from where it was hit. As Belden and I approached this magnificent bull, it startled us by jumping up, and disappearing.

We decided to back off Grasshopper Mountain, as we did not want to push this great bull out of the area. Belden and I hiked back to his pickup, then drove several miles trying to get a radio signal to call back to camp for assistance. Belden was confident that the bull was down.

Shortly after 7 p.m. we went back to where we had last seen the bull. The anticipation was unbearable. My hopes were fading, as we weren't able to quickly locate our bull and darkness was upon us. After many agonizing minutes Belden shouted from the bottom of a ravine. The bull was found! It had only gone 80 yards, down hill, from where we jumped it. A short time later the mountain was covered with guides and hunters from our camp. After a couple of hours of work, 11 of us loaded the bull into the pickup. I was totally humbled and ecstatic when we roughly scored this magnificent 7x8 bull and the tape pushed toward 420 points!

Sixty days later, this bull was officially measured as a non-typical with a final score of 405-5/8 points, which would have placed it in 31st place in the 11th Edition of the All-time records book as a non-typical. Chris Williams of Trappers Den Taxidermy, Lakeside, Arizona, did a beautiful life-size mount in time to display this bull at the SCI National Convention in January and the RMEF National Convention in February, in Reno, Nevada.

I have experienced the elk-hunting thrill of a lifetime. What next? My endless passion continues, as I will return to the White Mountains in 2004! ■

Another Monster Coues' Deer

By Michael Braegelmann – B&C Lifetime Associate

It was 5 a.m. on the last morning of my 2002 Coues' deer hunt with Pusch Ridge Outfitters, and I was fully clothed, sitting on my bunk, talking to myself. While waiting for breakfast, I was engrossed in a very private conversation steeped in self-doubt. The question that kept popping up in my mind was "Braegelmann, what have you done this time?" Regrets were running high as I had passed on three bucks in the 110-112 B&C range on the second and third days of the hunt.

Leading up to the here and now, I had been so confident of my chances of taking an exceptional buck that waiting seemed to have been the right thing to do. Just two years prior, in 2000, I had taken what was possibly the crowning achievement of my hunting career with a monster, 121-1/8 B&C non-typical Coues' deer off this same ranch. My decisions had not been questioned by my guide Alex Valencia. Well at the least, he'd continued to take me afield each day, and we had glassed more deer than usual. Now it was down to the wire and perhaps my expectations had been too

high! Had I purchased a two-deer hunt, one of the earlier bucks would have relieved the stress of holding out for another monster. Yes, maybe I was wishing for something that doesn't come around twice, but I knew this ranch was as good as it gets. Suddenly, I found myself reliving the fun and excitement of the previous five days. Yes, it had been another great time in Mexico.



Michael Braegelmann with his 2002 non-typical Coues' whitetail scoring 122-4/8 points.

It was way too quiet around the breakfast table that morning. My hunting buddy Glenn Gilmore, also from Tucson, and I were the last two hunters with unfilled tags. Glenn and I had hunted Coues' deer with Kirk the previous year with great success. Prior to the hunt Glenn had won the coin toss to determine who would get first choice. Now it was the last day and he'd have the first chance. Kirk, Glenn, Alex, Martin, and I left the camp well before sunrise.

As the sky turned pink, we were all glassing hillsides. Kirk spotted two mature bucks running out of a brush-filled ravine. They continued across a hillside dotted with oak trees and cedar bushes. Both bucks angled up and away from our location. Glenn quickly got set-up for the shot, which Kirk estimated to be at 350 yards. Kirk calmly coached Glenn to keep the bigger buck in the scope, but to wait for the shot as he felt both bucks would slow down as they crossed the hillside. That's just what they did! Glenn made a perfect one-shot kill. His buck dropped within 100 yards of where my wife Zona had killed her 109 B&C non-typical buck two years prior. I smiled at the memories of that year's successful hunt and rejoiced in Glenn's success as well.

After the photos of Glenn's deer were taken, we carefully green scored his buck at 106-7/8 points. Glenn was ecstatic as it was his best Coues' buck after a lifetime of hunting them! The day was off to a great start, but the morning hunt was about over. We packed up everyone's gear and moved to hopefully find another buck for me. We thoroughly glassed a different area that contained a good buck they'd seen two days earlier, but found nothing. We moved to a new area on a high plateau with heavy oak thickets. We glassed until 10 a.m. and then started to pack up our optics and other gear for the hike back to the truck. Kirk and I were walking along the rim when Kirk whispered excitedly for me to "get down." He had decided to take one last look over the edge with his 20x60 Zeiss binoculars. Amazingly, Kirk caught the glint of the sun reflecting off an antler in a huge mesquite thicket 400 yards almost directly below us! I slipped off my backpack, set up my rifle on the bi-pod and began glassing the thicket. Kirk told Martin and Glenn to return to camp with the deer Glenn had taken, and the rest of us would remain on this buck as he was certain it was huge. We soon heard the truck slowly, but quietly leave the plateau.

During the next 15 minutes, Kirk had two bucks spotted in the thicket. He advised me that one of the two was at least 110-112 points and to make sure I didn't shoot until he was assured that I was looking at the right buck. I had yet to see either of the bucks. Both bucks were bedded in a thicket that was almost impossible to see into. Kirk had me get into position with my rifle, and because of his excitement, I did not dare move off it!

The next four hours were spent with Kirk in what could best be described as a state of agitation and frustration. I could not locate either of the two bucks! My inability to spot the deer was because I was looking through a 6.5x20 scope cranked up to 20x while Kirk was watching the deer through his 20x60 tripod-mounted Zeiss binoculars. After four hours of trying to guide me to the biggest buck, Kirk was about to become unhinged! I never was able to spot either of the two bucks while they were bedded. At one point a doe, which neither of us had previously seen, stepped out into a small clearing. At least one of the three deer was up and I could be assured that there were indeed deer in that thicket. To say that Kirk was becoming impatient with me would be an understatement. The second hour we'd been waiting, the smaller buck stood up and fed into a grassy area below the mesquite thicket. Kirk said "Michael do you see that buck?" After much searching and frantic coaching from Kirk, I found it. That's when Kirk said, "That buck will book for sure! DO NOT SHOOT THAT BUCK." Kirk had known for some time that the other buck that was still hidden from me in the thicket was world-class. He had kept that to himself because he didn't want me to fall apart, which after the fact, I fully appreciated. He was also growing more and more frustrated with my inability to locate it. Kirk's patience was at its breaking point! After more than a dozen times of trying to explain to me exactly where the big buck was bedded, he'd had it with me! I turned to Kirk and said, "You @%#, do you think I don't want to shoot this deer?" He gave me this incredulous look and became extremely quiet. I thought, "Boy I put him in his place." But, that lasted all of 30 seconds before a new barrage of expletives and directions

came my way. This scene played out over and over again keeping Alex completely entertained. The only thing that spared me was that Alex couldn't find the buck either. But then again, he was only using 10x binoculars.

Finally, after over four hours the big buck stood up. Kirk directed me to a small umbrella-shaped mesquite tree and told me to place the cross hairs on the base of the trunk as the buck was feeding its way out of the thicket in that direction. Kirk measured the distance with his Leica range finder at 353 yards. I decided to hold low on the body since the downward angle was so severe. My rifle was shooting dead on a 350 yards. The buck stepped into the small opening under the mesquite tree, but was shaded by the umbrella configuration of the branches. The shade made it extremely difficult to see the buck clearly. I could see a shape, with large antlers, but nothing more. I whispered to Kirk, "Which way is he facing?"

I didn't dare look up from my scope. Not because of the fear of losing the site picture, but more because I didn't want to witness Kirk's suicidal leap off the cliff! As Kirk muttered, "He's facing left," I squeezed the trigger. My first shot struck just below the buck's chest. Kirk whispered, "Michael, he hasn't moved."

This time I held center of mass on its side and squeezed. The bullet hit. Kirk watched as the buck stumbled, fell and then got up and staggered back into the thicket.

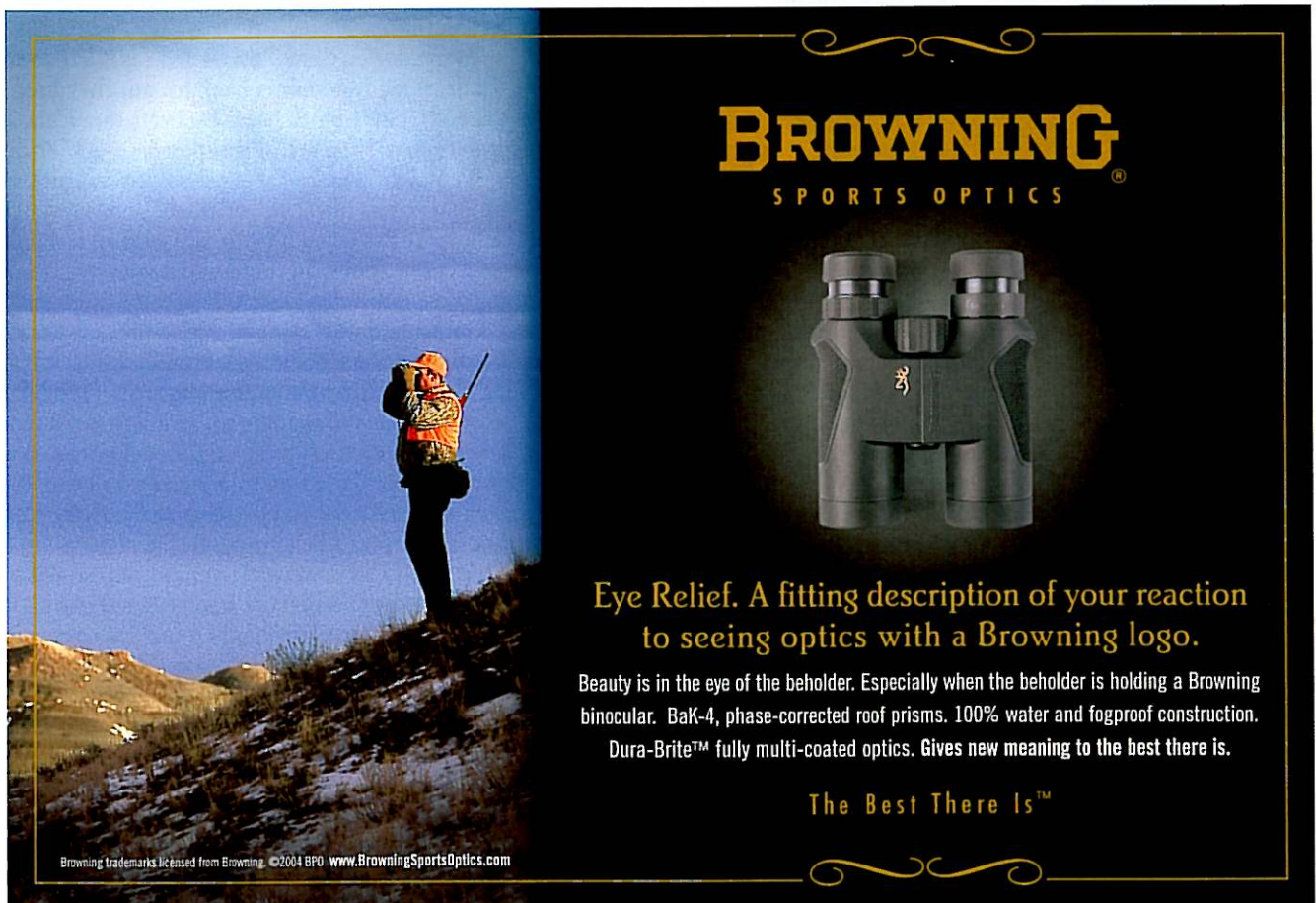
The four hour ordeal was over! My legs and neck were cramped, my arms were stiff, my eyes were watering and my ears were burning! Kirk decided that we should wait 30 minutes before dropping down off the cliff to locate the buck. The suspense after the shot was greater than the four hours of waiting.

While we were waiting, I focused my thoughts on the previous four days.

Truly, this hunt was full of memories. When I booked my hunt, Kirk told me that both Jim Zumbo and Craig Boddington would be in camp. The opportunity to spend time with two of my favorite contemporary outdoor writers was a dream come true. I looked forward to this trip for months. As it turned out, Craig had a conflict due to his military deployment to Kuwait during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but Jim Zumbo was there. Meeting and spending time with Jim was truly a highlight. Reliving the stories around the campfire and the many jokes brought a smile to my face as I wondered silently if the buck was down or had possibly slipped away.

While we waited we heard the truck returning to the mesa. In the truck were Glenn, Jim, and another client, Scott Anderson. After we told them the entire story, we decided on a plan of retrieval. Alex would find a route down off the cliff and into the thicket while Kirk manned his 20x60s and I stayed on the rifle in case the buck wasn't dead.

The original 30-minute wait turned into an hour by the time Alex made the hike off the steep mesa. He found the buck dead in the thicket. After a treacherous climb back up to our position I was overwhelmed with the antlers attached to Alex's pack frame. My buck was huge. The congratulatory handshakes commenced. Out came the cameras. As the sun started to set, the rocks and cliffs took on the reddish hue of the southwestern desert. What an ordeal and what a happy ending. I had experienced another magical hunt with great friends, both old and new, and it was my good fortune to harvest my second monster Coues' whitetail in three years. This one scored 122-4/8 B&C points! ■



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ALASKA BROWN BEAR

By Brandon Budnick

The Koyukuk breathed a cool dense mist throughout the chilly morning. The added desire to locate ol' mossy horns as we floated down the river teased my willingness to focus, and instead left me dreaming of distant adventures. Visions of 70-inch antlers were briefly succumbed to by revelations of stocky blacktail bucks running through the alpine-rich forest of Hinchinbrook Island. It was a trip both my hunting partner, Ted and I looked forward to, and this was as good a time as any to hash out a few predetermined plans. "So, Ted," I murmured, "Have you given any thought to whom should shoot the first buck next month?"

"You can," he replied. "I really wanna bear!"

I've always considered Ted to be quite giving in past times, but this was the icing on the cake. As a result, I was given the opportunity to shoot the buck of my choice on any given day in exchange for Ted to take a one-time crack at the first bear we saw. I could only help but wonder how my dear friend could be so foolish as to

think his chances of killing a bear,

much less spotting one, would be worth passing up a choice

buck. Regardless, he was pleased

with the decision; as such, I was, too. I reached

my numb hand out to finalize the bargain,

then redirected my attention

to what remained ahead. The pact was binding.

Six weeks later, Ted and I were thrashing our way through

gorges of towering devil's club seven-feet high. While neither

of us could see one another, the

sounds of blasphemy echoing out kept us together as we steered for higher country. I held my rifle out before me with both hands and plowed the needled creepers over.

At last, we broke free of the tangled nightmare, simply to enter another — the deadfall of the old growth forest. Among the freestanding spruce lay toppled trees, scattered about as if it were a game of "Pick-Up Sticks." The treetops shielded the dark, damp underworld from the morning's warmth. Covering ground through the ankle-busting real estate was no easy task. Our quaking hurdles over the fallen logs resembled that of a three-legged equestrian horse on hot coals. My friend and I emerged from the havoc hours later, and into a gaping backwater creek I had located on the map the night before. This was the passageway to venison valley, or so I hoped.

Sparkling sunshine that mirrored from the flowing watershed brought life to our dilated eyes. Ted and I,

happy to be out of dense brush, continued our way upriver looking the landscape over for blacktail deer.

Recently sculpted deer tracks skimmed the sandy reaches of the creek bed, stimulating my anxiety to scale higher, where I knew our quarry existed. We yielded to shortcuts through the brush when feasible, avoiding the subtle cutbacks the creek delicately wove.

It was upon stomping through a spongy fen that Ted and I made our initial discovery of bear sign. A molten brewery of hydrated scat saturated the peat. I kneeled, and drew myself closer to investigate the creature's intake — a hodgepodge of mussels and blueberries. Not far from there lay the diced roots and shredded leaves of a freshly tossed "skunk cabbage" salad. Ted's eyes dazzled with overflowing delight.

Once back into the openness of the creek, it appeared no different. In fact, carved hoof prints were now supplemented with bear tracks nearly nine inches in width. Focusing my attention away from Ted's fascination, I caught

a glimpse of a ripple breaking the water's surface.

Circulating in the landlocked pool were a dozen spawning Coho salmon.

Their decayed, frail bodies conveyed an ending to life's journey.

The skeletal remains of others lay strewn across the

sand and algae-covered

bedrock. My friend and I stood on the very dinner

plate of a huge beast. Suddenly, there it was, ambling in our direction.

"What do you think," asked Ted, "Is it a shooter?"

I drew my binoculars back for another look. A one-ton body, cinderblock head, big beefy shoulders, and no apparent rubs, "You bet," I whispered.

We slid the packs off of our shoulders and took aim. Our objective was obvious; get the bear down quickly and cleanly. Ted steadied his rifle and held for a shoulder

shot. The bear continued forward, and it soon became clear nothing more than a headshot was going to be offered.

Our ambush was terrible, and to prevent from being discovered, we grabbed our packs and fell back 10 yards to seek refuge behind the archaic spruce. Through all

the dense thickets surrounding us, an ample-sized shooting lane presented itself to the right of the tree. It was

evident the bear was going to continue its hunt down the creek and pass right by, providing Ted with the shoulder

shot he needed. Then again, maybe it wasn't so obvious. Murphy's Law contested our plan, and unwillingly

baffled our strategy! Where we stood not seconds earlier, the brush began to part. Ted and I found ourselves going

"Mano y Mano" with a bear of a lifetime. The sound of Ted's heavy breathing was the only thing fading out the dull

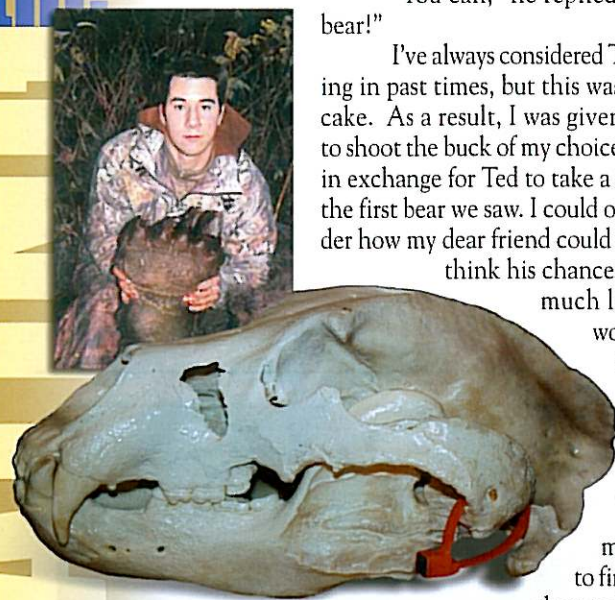
drum of my now sunken heart. I ran through my mental checklist, "Safety off, round chambered, finger on the trigger and relax." Now was not the time to make errors. I

looked over at Ted who stood between the tree and me. "Are you ready," I asked.

He nodded. My attention focused back on the cross hairs of my rifle scope. The gargantuan paw appeared first

through the tall shoots, followed by the massive, robust cra-

The skeletal remains of others lay strewn across the sand and algae-covered bedrock. My friend and I stood on the very dinner plate of a huge beast.



Theodore A. Winnen showing the size of the bear's paw. His trophy Alaska brown bear scores 28-14/16 points and was taken on Hinchinbrook Island in Alaska.

nium. The boar stepped closer. Its head was lobbed low; its rusted muzzle leaked clouds of nasal vapor through quarter-sized nostrils; those beady, bloodshot eyes stared through my partner and me. The solemn look alone was enough to make one feel threatened, but oddly the bear showed no sign of aggression. Each step closer the bear inched, I felt more compelled to renege on my agreement with Ted, and kill the bear myself. "Pull the trigger!" I demanded Ted, "Pull the trigger!"

The blast of Ted's .338 Winchester Mag. rang out and sent a direct hit to the bear's nerve center, bringing it to its hindquarters. Two shots to the vitals followed, completely dropping the bear. It dropped in its tracks. What played through my head in slow motion seemed endless, but in reality was over in a fraction of seconds. Ted had taken a bear that scores 28-14/16 B&C points.

My nerves were so fired up they sizzled the blood in my body to a boiling concoction. There was no doubt in my mind — Ted and I had chanced death. Stepping off the distance behind the confines of the spruce tree to where the bear lay totaled a mere 10 yards. Were it not for collective awareness and cool heads of my partner and me, the situation could have become ugly, if not tragic. That

evening I was convinced we had double dipped our lives with luck. Not only did we escape with all limbs intact from our close encounter with the world's largest omnivore, but Ted had taken this true specimen of a trophy bear. I think next time I will opt for the first shot on a bear, but then however will I see that dream buck? Perhaps I'll be with Ted when he takes it. ■

Editor's Note: You have just read the true and accurate story of Ted Winnen's hunt for a trophy Alaska brown bear that scores 28-14/16 points. If you have access to the internet, you have probably seen several fictionalized accounts of Ted Winnen's hunting story for this magnificent trophy that have been circulating for the past three years. Every time it surfaces, someone has added another nonfactual element to the story. Ted harvested a large bear — large enough to be invited to the 25th Awards Program in Kansas City, Kansas, earlier this year. However, this bear did not attack Ted; it was not confiscated; it was not 12' 6" tall; it did not weigh more than 1,600 pounds; it was not shot with a 38 cal. pistol; it did not kill or eat anyone, including a U.S. Forest Service employee; etc.; etc.

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