

A New World's RECORD

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Tule Elk

In August 2005, hunters who purchased state fundraising hunting tags kicked off the start of the tule-elk hunting season at California's Grizzly Island Wildlife Management Area near Fairfield. In doing so, they became part of a tradition dating back more than 15 years.

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Volunteers from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Safari Club International, the two organizations that sold the tags, along with staff from the California Department of Fish and Game, had followed a yearly tradition of putting together a top-notch elk camp on the island. It's all done to support the hunters whose funds are used to maintain and improve elk and elk habitat in California.

California's tule elk are one of America's wildlife success stories, thanks to hunters and conservationists. Tules numbered about 550,000 animals before the Europeans settled in California. In the mid-1850s, market hunters and meat hunters reduced the numbers to only a few animals. In 1874, on Henry Miller's ranch, near Bakersfield, California, only a handful of elk remained. This small herd eventually became the start of today's current population.

In February 1977, elk were relocated to the state-owned Grizzly Island Wildlife Management Area. Four bulls and three cows were brought in from the Tupman Tule Elk Reserve, and later one cow calf was transplanted from the Owens Valley.

By 1990, the herds were large enough that hunting became a viable management tool. In the fall of 1990, the first public hunt on Grizzly Island, located about halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco, was marred by animal-rights protesters. After their arrests, convictions, and jail sentences, the protesters decided to move on to other activities, and the next year saw the first of the Fish and Game

Commission-approved fundraising tags being offered.

When tags were first sold, more than 3,500 tule elk lived in 23 different herd locations. The fundraising tags were, and are, the only way an out-of-state hunter can hunt tule elk on California's public lands.

Since the hunts began in 1991, the program has yielded a number of great trophies. I guided a hunter in 1997 who took a tule elk that was recognized as a record-book animal in 2004.

One of the tag holders in 1997 was Bryce Evans from Concordia, Missouri, who purchased the permit at the Sacramento Chapter of Safari Club International Fundraising Banquet in February. The other tagholder was Duane Stroupe, who bought his tag at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

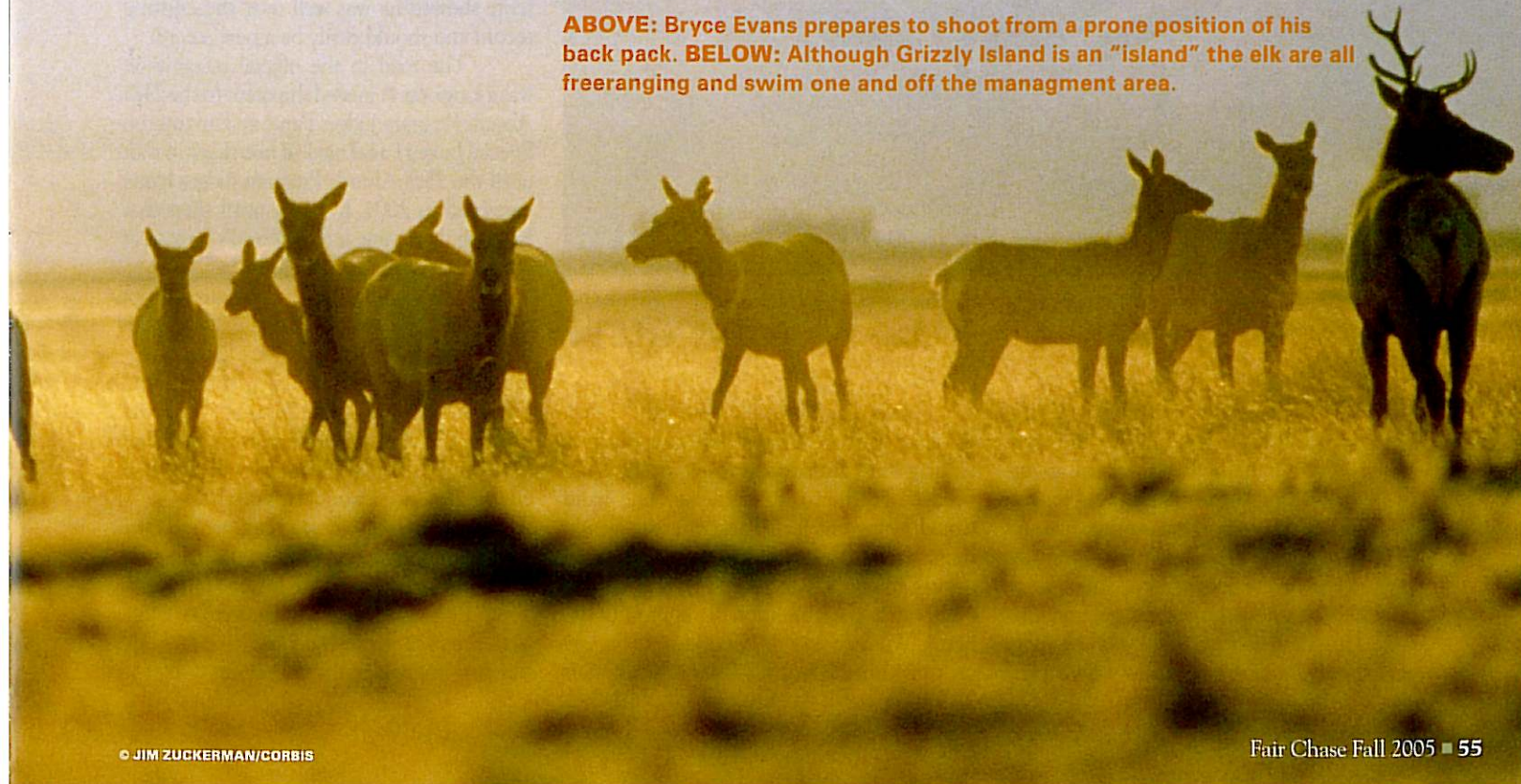
Elk Camp and National Convention.

For the Evans hunt, I started scouting for elk in June, when I made the first of many scouting trips to the Grizzly Island Wildlife Management Area. Although the bulls are still in velvet and their antlers are not fully developed in the beginning – June is a good time to start evaluating them.

That year, I kept seeing two exceptional bulls that were running together every time I saw them. Both appeared to be of record-book quality. My job then, and now, was to evaluate the animals so I could discuss their size and rack configurations with my hunter. Antlers have many different configurations with abnormal points, crown points, and various traits that will make up the final score. The hunter, who paid for the tag, takes the information that I



ABOVE: Bryce Evans prepares to shoot from a prone position of his back pack. **BELOW:** Although Grizzly Island is an "island" the elk are all freeranging and swim one and off the management area.



provide, based on my experience, along with their personal likes and dislikes, and makes a final decision. I try to be very factual but not judgmental. They have paid the price, so they get to pull the trigger.

I kept Evans informed by telephone. About the end of July, the bulls polish their antlers in preparation for the rut. Tule elk start their breeding rituals about one month earlier than the typical mid-September dates for other elk. The two big bulls were a 7x7 and 9x8. The 7x7 was a little wider and had longer main beams, but his antlers were more in line, like a Rocky Mountain elk. The 9x8 had more crown points, more palmation, and looked like a natural tule bull. I felt he could be the new World's Record.

While scouting on Friday night before the starting day of the hunt, I was finally able to show Evans the two bigger bulls. They were far enough away that they didn't look much different from the other bulls that we saw. We would need to get a closer look the next day.

have stayed in bachelor groups for most of the summer. It's also a time when antlers get broken off. So if you see a bull you like, you might as well take it if you can, before any rack damages occur.

We were looking at three different groups of elk, separated by 200 to 300 yards. The herd to the south had an okay 6x7 bull that was with about 15 cows. Many of the other bulls would challenge him for his cows over the next few days. The herd to the north had about 20 to 25 cows, 6 spikes, and the large 7x7 bull with a long, large split fourth tine on the right side. A group of five bulls were in between the two herds, about 100 yards from both groups. All of these bulls were bugling and tossing dirt and weeds into the air, polishing their antlers and generally showing off. One of this middle group was the big 9x8. He had long first, second, and third tines. His fourth tines were average, but his fifth points were exceptional. The crown points, particularly on the top right side, were long and well polished.

had bedded down, and except for the occasional bugle from one or the other of the two herd bulls, all was quiet. We crawled 50 yards until we were 150 yards from the bulls in between the 2 cow/calf herds. We were in a good position. The wind was in our face, and our presence went undetected. Evans and I studied the 9x8 to see if any of his tines had been broken off. He looked magnificent with his white tips shining in the sunlight. Evans said, "He isn't any comparison to the others. He's much better!" Three of the other bulls bedded down with the 9x8 were an 8x7, a 7x6 and a 6x7. The fifth bull was a spike.

Next, we turned our attention to the 7x7, with his cows, to the north of us. We gave him a close visual inspection. He was a great bull also. Evans concluded that the 9x8 would score higher. The bull's extra crown points had convinced him.

Evans laid down and got comfortable. He used my backpack for a rest and prepared for the shot. The bull settled our discussion about whether we should bugle to get him up, or wait for him to get up on his own. I had just finished saying that we should wait for him, when he stood up. The bull had no clue we were there, and Evans took the shot. The shot was right on, and the trophy went down.

With the bull down, the work began. First, we called all of the volunteers from camp. They not only brought equipment to get the bull out of the field, but also brought cameras and lots of congratulations. Once the bull was field dressed and back at camp, it was time to put a tape to him. The green score showed he was well over the existing record and should easily be a new record.

The road to the official recognition was a long one. A missed shipment to the 24th Awards Program Judges Panel and an interim Special Judges Panel made it necessary to wait until the 25th Awards Program Judges Panel convened in 2004. It wasn't until then that Evans' bull became a new World's Record at 365 points. Congratulations, Bryce!

The credit for the quality of these animals must go to the California Department of Fish and Game Management Program, headed by elk biologist and B&C Official Measurer, Jon Fischer, and the Grizzly Island team of Dennis Becker and Jeff Cann. Their hard work with the tule elk has produced wonderful results.

Thanks to Bryce Evans and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, this new record tule elk is part of RMEF's "Great Elk Tour." By now, many, many, people have had a chance to see Evans' bull and the other outstanding animals in the collection. ■



Bryce Evans, left, and the author, are pictured above with the bull shortly after it was taken. In 2004, the bull was declared a new World's Record at the 25th Awards Program – seven years after the hunt.

Early the next morning, opening day, some of the mature bulls on the state property were banging heads, clashing antlers, and pushing each other around for the opportunity to claim the cows that would soon be in estrus. The night before, the two biggest bulls were four to five miles away from this area, but now they were in this mix. This time of year, the cows are magnets, luring bulls from places where they

Evans and I closely watched the 9x8. Because of the elk's position and the prevailing wind direction, any approach would need to be from the southeast. The wind would be in our faces, and the sun would illuminate the animals and their antlers.

About 9 a.m., we were on a high point in a good position to approach the herds. We used low dry drainage ditches to get to within 200 yards. Most of the animals