

Destina

Trophy Bull Elk

If you want to maximize your chances at a record-class Rocky Mountain elk, you have to hunt them where they live. Here's how to make it happen.

By Bob Robb
B&C Professional Member

I will never forget my very first elk hunt. I was a 20-something dude still very wet behind the ears, learning about the outdoor writing business by editing a weekly outdoor newspaper in southern California. But I somehow scrimped and saved enough money and before you knew it, there I was atop a saddle horse heading 22 miles back into Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area on my first-ever fully-guided hunt.

This was back in the late 1970s, when open rifle seasons during the September bugle were common throughout the West. I was packing along a shiny new Browning BAR in 7mm Rem. Mag., and buddy, I thought I was something! My chest got even more puffed up on the second morning when the guide, using an archaic old tonette-type whistle, called in two bulls, and my buddy and I shot them both. Mine was a dandy 6x6 that green-scored a tad over 330 Boone and Crockett points.

Never mind that those were the first bull elk I had ever seen. Right then and there, I knew I was an elk hunter of great skill. I remember bragging to my buddy Don that I would kill one of these big ol' bulls every year, no sweat.

For the next decade I went to war with elk. My next job, with a national hunting magazine, allowed me to get after them with a vengeance. I hunted at least two, and sometimes four, different states every year, sometimes adding British Columbia to the mix. I hunted them guided and on my own, with centerfire rifle, bow, and muzzleloader. I tried everything from fancy lodge-based hunts to do-it-yourself backpack adventures. Along the way I wore out a whole lot of boot leather and got a real education in the fine art of elk hunting.

I also did not kill a bigger bull for 12 years.

Over a career that has included more than 30 elk hunts, I have learned several important things about elk hunting. For the trophy hunter — the guy or gal who wants to maximize the chance of taking a true record-class bull in a fair chase manner — the most important lesson is simply this: You have to hunt where the big bulls are if you want



tion:

The top trophy producing states since 2000 for American elk are:

- UTAH
- ARIZONA
- NEW MEXICO
- WYOMING
- NEVADA
- MONTANA
- COLORADO
- WASHINGTON



Utah and Arizona are top producers for trophy elk. Several counties stand are producing top bulls.

to have a chance at tying your tag around one's antlers. And the way to find out where the big bulls live is research.

Record Book Research

When it comes to locating potential trophy hunting hot spots, I have always found the *Boone and Crockett Club's Records of North American Big Game* to be an invaluable source of research material. Sure, there are other sources of information, but this book is like the cornerstone of a well-built house. It's where I turn first.

When it comes to elk hunting, one must first understand that the game is not played the way it was when I made my first hunt so many years ago. With few exceptions, rut rifle hunts are now limited to a few special-draw hunts. In many cases, the best chance of taking a big bull means leaving ol' Betsy at home and instead hunting with either a bow or a muzzleloader, simply because this is when you can hunt during the rut. With increasing evidence that the world is getting warmer, counting on snow to drive late-season bulls down out of the high country is becoming a sucker's bet. The opportunity to

knock on a rancher's door and gain permission to go elk hunting is also becoming a thing of the past as hunting leases, outfitters, and high-dollar landowner tags are restricting private land access to those with deep pockets. And on the best public land units you sometimes need to accrue preference points for the tag draw for a decade or more before you even have a chance of picking one of these coveted tags.

Be that as it may, you still have to hunt in areas where record-class bulls live. So let's use the B&C records database and decide where we can find the very best odds of hunting a trophy bull both today, and over the rest of this decade.

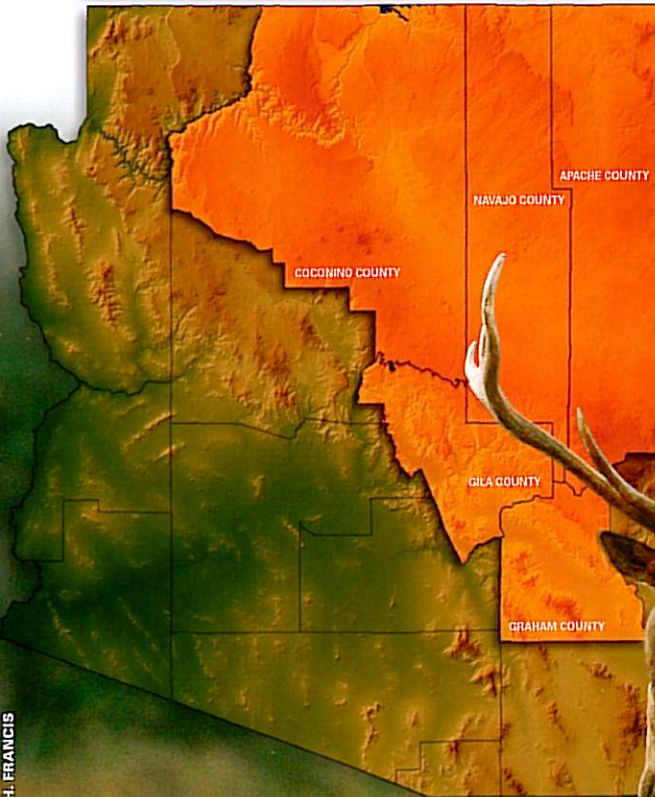
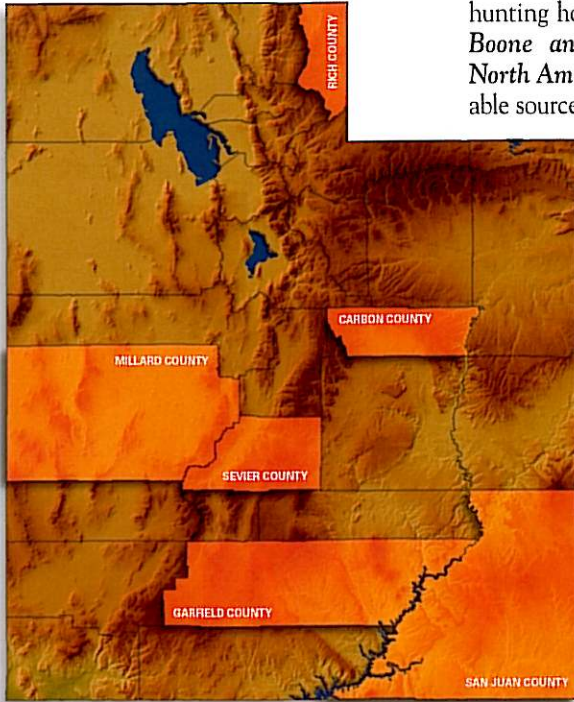
First, a quick disclaimer. Record-book animals of any species are where you find them. Yet while some lucky guy might bang a 400-class bull in eastern Washington this fall, the odds are very much against it. And this game is all about stacking the odds in your favor.

Boone and Crockett Trophy Search

While you can use the record book to do your research, a far more convenient method is to use the Boone and Crockett Club's new Trophy Search section on the club website, www.booneandcrockettclub.com. This is a subscription-only section, but believe me when I tell you the value for the minimal fee is priceless when it comes to quickly and efficiently searching the records.

To plan a future hunt in which you hope to have any hope of seeing a record-class bull elk, here's what you need to do. Go to the Trophy Search area of the website and search typical American elk. My first inquiry is to find out where, historically, the majority of record-book bulls in both the typical and non-typical categories have come from.

According to the records, Arizona leads the way with 117 typical entries, followed by Montana (109), Wyoming (97), Utah (72), Colorado (62), New Mexico (58), Idaho (45), Alberta (38), Nevada (32), Oregon (22), and Washington (15). For non-typical entries, the leaders are Arizona (57), Montana (31), New Mexico (16), Nevada (14), Idaho (13), Wyoming (12), Utah (10), Washington (10), British Columbia (7), Colorado (7), Manitoba (7), and Alberta (4).



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Add them all together and here's what we come up with in terms of the leading all-time states/provinces that produce record-class elk: Arizona (174), Montana (140), Wyoming (109), Utah (82), New Mexico (74), Colorado (69), Idaho (58), Nevada (46), Oregon (25), Alberta (42), and Washington (25).

That's a great start. But it is only a start.

Next, I broke down the records to show me where the most record-book elk, both typical and non-typical, have been taken since the year 2000. The reason I do this is simple — the face of hunting changes over time. Not only do I want to know where the biggest bulls have been taken since records have been kept, but as a hunter the information I really want to know is where the big boys are coming from today. Unless you have a time machine, if you want a record-class bull you need to look ahead, not behind. The best way to try and predict the future — as best as anyone can — is to take the most current data, mix it with the old data, add a pinch of intuition and a dash of common sense, and voila! Here's where we need to go hunting.

According to the data, in the record-keeping period 2000-2005, the most typical elk entries come from Utah (40), Arizona (21), Wyoming (20), New Mexico (18), Montana (14), Nevada (12), Colorado (9), Idaho (3), 2 each from Pennsylvania, Saskatchewan, and Washington, and 1 each from California, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, and South Dakota. In the non-typical category, the leaders are Arizona (18), Utah (8), Nevada (7), Montana (4), New Mexico (4), 2 each from British Columbia, California, Colorado, Washington, and Wyoming, and 1 each from Alberta, Manitoba, Pennsylvania, and 1 from an unknown location.

Add these together and the leading states/provinces for producing record-class elk since the year 2000 are Utah (48), Arizona (39), New Mexico (23), Wyoming (22), Nevada (19), Montana (18), Colorado (11), Washington (4), Idaho (3), California (3), Pennsylvania (3), British Columbia (2), and 1 each from Alberta, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, Manitoba, and South Dakota.

As you can see, since the year 2000 things have changed somewhat from the overall historical data. I mean, since 2000 there have been as many record-book elk taken in California and Pennsylvania as there have in Idaho? More from Washington state than British Columbia or Alberta? Nevada, a state that issues just a handful of elk tags each season, has produced a total of 19 record-book bulls since 2000, more than

Montana and Colorado and nearly as many as Wyoming, states that issue a truckload of tags. Hmmmmmm ... this is beginning to get interesting!

Let's Dig Deeper

OK, by now we have narrowed our record-book research down to states that produce the most record-class elk, both typical and non-typical, both overall and in the last five years. It's time to break that data down even further. Now it is time to see which specific counties produce the most big bulls.

Arizona is one of the top producers, both historically and currently. Both historically and within the last five years, here are the Arizona counties that have yielded the most typical record bulls: Apache (33, 4); Coconino (32, 6); Navajo (17, 6); Gila (10, 2); Ft. Apache Reservation (6, 0); Graham (5, 1); Mohave (2, 1); Yavapai (2, 1). In addition, since 2000 Navajo County has produced 6 book non-typicals, Gila County 5, Apache and Coconino counties 3 each, and Greenlee County 1.

Utah has produced the most record-book bulls since 2000, and is the No. 4 producer all-time. By county, the most productive are Millard (11, 2); Garfield (10, 8), San Juan (8, 3); Rich (6, 2); Sevier (6, 2); and Carbon (4, 0). In the last five years, however, Cache, Beaver, San Pete, and Juab counties have all yielded 2 record-class typicals, while Piute County has produced 3 book typicals. Since 2000 in the non-typical category, Garfield has produced 3, and Beaver, Juab, Millard, Tooele, and Utah counties 1 each.

Given the limited number of tags issued each year in Nevada — and the chances of drawing one are pretty slim — this is one of modern elk hunting's real gems. Here, in the last five years, White Pine and Elko counties stand out. White Pine has yielded 9 typical and 2 non-typical bulls, while Elko has produced 3 typicals and 1 non-typical bull. In the same period, Lincoln County has produced 3 book non-typicals, while Nye County has produced 1. Historically, White Pine leads the way with 18 book typicals, and Elko has produced 10.

Montana is an elk hunter's dream state, producing the second highest total of both typical and non-typical book bulls over the years. But how about today's chances? Historically, the top-producing Montana counties are Park (13), Gallatin (10), Beaverhead (8), Madison (8), Sanders (7), Jefferson and Lewis & Clark (4 each), Cascade, Flathead, Granite, Missoula,

Nevada – One of modern elk hunter's real gems

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Montana, Petroleum, Powder River, and Powell counties (3 each), and a slug of counties that have produced 2 or 1 bull. However, since 2000 the top-producing counties for typical bulls are Gallatin and Powder River, (2 each), and Broadwater, Cascade, Fergus, Garfield, Lewis & Clark, Missoula, Park, Rosebud, Sanders, and Sweet Grass (1 each.) Historically for non-typical book bulls, the leaders are Granite (4), Lincoln, Park and Petroleum (3 each), Beaverhead, Fergus, Gallatin, Hill and Powell (2 each.) In the last five years, Fergus leads the way with 2, and Hill and Park counties have produced 1 each.

New Mexico also has earned a reputation among serious trophy elk hunters. If you want to hunt here, where should you look? According to the data, historically and currently, the top counties for both typical and non-typical bulls are Catron (20, 5), Otero (9, 4), Cibola (6, 2), Grant (4, 0), Socorro (4, 2), Colfax (3, 1), and Sierra (3, 0), and Taos (0, 1). Since the year 2000, however, the numbers are Catron (8, 1), Sierra (2, 0), Socorro (2, 1), Otero (2, 1), Cibola (1, 1), and Grant, Lincoln, and Rio Arriba counties, 1 typical each.

You Get The Picture

As mentioned earlier, finding a book animal on a fair chase hunt is as rare as finding a four-leaf clover. However, to tip the odds in your favor, you have to hunt them where they are. The first step in this is to find out where they historically have been. That's why using the Boone and Crockett Club's record book and Trophy Search database are so helpful. This data helps you cut through the hype so you can tip the odds — miniscule though they may be — as much in your favor as possible.

Plus, mining this data is just a lot of fun! ■