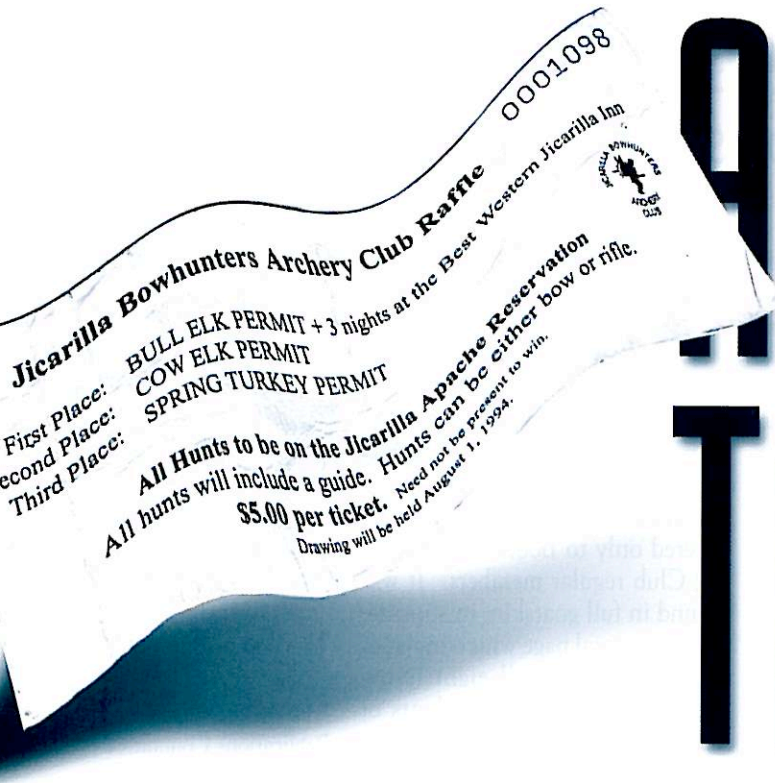


# A HUNTING TRADITION



By C. RANDALL BYERS  
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BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB

EUDANE CROUCHED SILENTLY AS HE SURVEYED THE OAKBRUSH AND PINION PINE RIDGE THAT GENTLY FELL AWAY BLENDING INTO THE BLUE GREY SAGE FLAT BELOW. KNEES BENT, HEELS RAISED HIS EYES SEARCHED FOR SIGN OF MOVEMENT MUCH AS HIS FATHER'S EYES AND HIS FATHER'S FATHER'S EYES HAD DONE. IN THIS, THE HOMETLAND OF THE JICARILLA APACHE, THE HUNTER WAITED.

Eudane moved his head, his sharp hearing detecting the faint high notes of a distant bugle. The bull again declared his presence - a defiant answer to those who would enter his domain; a response perhaps to the bull who had already beaten him in a fight for supremacy of the harem. The hunter waited, reflecting not only upon the early morning beauty of the semi-arid landscape and the bull below him, but also on the hunting tradition of which he was now a part.

Eudane - Jicarilla Apache - arose slowly, deliberately. Like his father and his father's father his keen eyes - the eyes of an eagle - had detected the tawny body of the bull as he emerged on the ridge some 400 yards below. Still the hunter waited, his senses alert and his body ready. In his hand he held a bow - a modern version of weapon from a time past. Still this recurve

seemed a fitting weapon here in the homeland of the Jicarilla Apache.

The bull moved on, drawn by a primal urge to find the source of the challenge which had been issued minutes early. He now was within a hundred yards, hidden in the brush, but betrayed by his own deep throated challenge. Eudane turned to the hunter and softly spoke.

"Go over by that bush and I will call him in. Don't shoot, he's

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"...we have just drawn your name for the bull elk hunt on the reservation."

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got a broken antler," - a broken antler detected in a moment's glance at a distance of 400 yards.

The hunter slipped to the gambel oak twenty yards away as Eudane raised the grunt tube to his mouth. A perfect response to the challenge, followed instantly by an equally perfect, deep, resonant re-

ply from the bull. The hunter now tense, heart throbbing stood motionless, waiting, listening.

I was the hunter. Here minutes into the first morning of the hunt I was about to encounter a bull within bow range and I had been told "Don't shoot!" I slowly pulled my camera from my pocket. It would be easier to remember not to shoot if I didn't have the bow in my hand. I caught sight of movement, then the tips of an antler. The bull was fifty yards downhill and moving. The sound of antlers scraping the oakbrush filled the air and the bull continued forward, skirting sideways to get downwind of his adversary so he could better size him up. The bull passed within fifteen yards before the wind and the sound of the camera shutter betrayed my presence. As he crashed away, Eudane appeared.

"Did you see him?"

A positive nod.

"Too bad he had that broken left beam and broken fifth point."

I too had noted these features, but at fifteen yards not 400. We paused for a few moments reflecting on the bull and his approach. Silently I admired the skilled hunter who was to be my guide and companion for the next five days as I toured and hunted the Jicarilla Apache Reservation in Northern

New Mexico. Here I would enjoy a marvelous hunt and meet people for whom hunting is not only a part of their traditional heritage, but also a part of their daily activities and an important contributor to their economic well being. Here I found that hunters, as well as their prey, are respected and that young and old alike see the role of hunting as part of one's existence. Here too I found that modern game management practices can coexist with grazing, mineral extraction, logging and other recreational activities to produce quality hunting opportunities.

Hunts have a variety of ways of coming about. Somedays one just goes. Others are a result of careful planning and preparation. Others come about by luck. This was one of the latter.

This past June I was instructing a class of potential Boone & Crockett official measurers at the Club headquarters in Missoula, Montana. Twenty-some individuals were in the class, some from Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin; others from as far east as Virginia and Florida. Some were local folks from Montana and Idaho, my home. Two

individuals, Tom Watts and Eudane Vicenti, had been invited from New Mexico. Both work for the game and fish department of the Jicarilla Apache tribe - Tom as a Wildlife and Fisheries Specialist and Eudane as a Biological Technician.

During the next few days, those of us in the class got to know each other pretty well as we stretched tapes across horns and debated the proper techniques to use for measuring various North American big game trophies. Towards the end of our session, Eudane approached me about buying a raffle ticket for a bull elk hunt. The hunt, sponsored by the Jicarilla Bowhunters, was for a five day period on their reservation. "Sure," I told Eudane, I would take a ticket and that he would have to be my guide when I won.

Time passed and it was early August when I got the call. The voice on the other end informed me I had won the bull elk hunt. No, I must have heard that wrong; he must want some information on measuring elk. So I asked him to repeat what he had just said. Once again the voice repeated "This is Isaac Julian, president of the Jicarilla Bowhunters and we have

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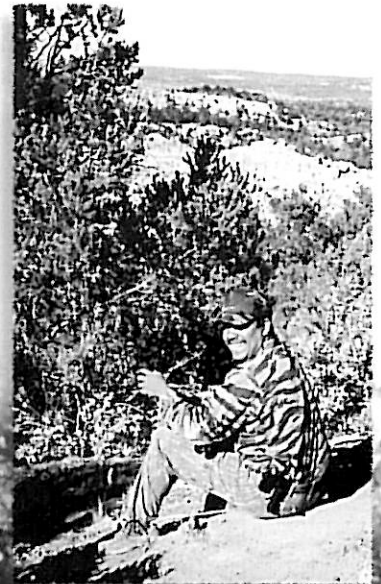
drawn your name for the bull elk hunt on the reservation." I thought of Eudane and decided that this was a pretty good joke. No joke, and when Tom and Eudane called the next morning, I knew I was on my way and that Eudane was to be my guide.

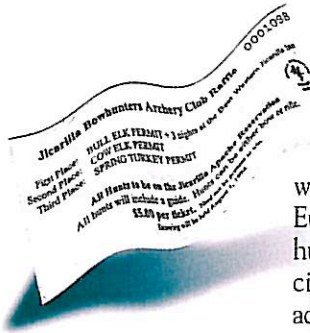
I chose to hunt the last few days of September and the first two of October. Their bow hunt for non-tribal members begins September 24 and ends October 30. Their rifle season for bulls then runs from October 1 until October 30. During the rifle season one can hunt with a bow as well as a firearm. Cow seasons follow later as does a late bull hunt from November 26 to December 26.

Upon arrival at Dulce, New Mexico, I checked into the motel and then headed over to the game department headquarters. Eudane was in and after a few minutes I had the proper permits for the hunt. I was soon to come to appreciate what an excellent hunting opportunity I was about to experience for the next several days. It was late afternoon as we left town, the day before

EUDANE AMIDST THE PINION PINE AND OAKBRUSH DURING A MIDDAY STOP ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE HUNT.

BOTTOM: A SMALL FIVE POINT PASSES BY AT 10 TO 15 YARDS.





my hunt was to begin officially. We drove to a nearby mesa. On our way to the crest of the flat topped mountain, we passed one elk and then another. Eudane spoke of other hunts and hunters. As with all hunters, the excitement of the upcoming hunt added to the zest with which our tales flowed.

After a few practice shots, I put my bow back into the cab of the pickup and followed Eudane as he headed towards a bugling bull. A hundred yards, maybe two, further the sounds of bugling began to fill the air. Bulls were working down the ridge before us; others were on the flat to our right. Another group was out in front! Here, minutes into the field, I was hearing more bulls on one ridge than I had heard all season at home. We rounded a pinion pine and there seventy yards away a bull stood, fighting an



AN EXAMPLE OF THE JICARILLA APACHE TRIBE'S MANAGEMENT EFFORTS ON THEIR HOMELAND WITH WATER DEVELOPMENT. PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM WATTS.

oakbrush with his antlers. We moved on only to hear the antlers of the bull we had just left crash with those of another bull. No imaginary foe in the gambel oak, the bull now was engaged with a real opponent. Other bulls continued their serenade. Cows were drifting through the meadow. Bulls moved in towards the cows only to be met by the herd master as he feverishly attempted to maintain control of his harem. He chased from side to side in the meadow, slowly losing the battle as other bulls would venture forth once herd bull was detracted by an opponent. In the fading light, we watched and listened. At least ten bulls disap-

peared into the darkness as the last light of day traded places with the sounds and sights of darkness.

On the way back to the truck, I asked Eudane how they were able to maintain this kind of quality. For one, he told me, "We carefully manage the number of hunters. Only twenty permits are issued at a time." Here a hunter would be afield all day and never encounter a fellow sportsman or sportswoman on the 850,000 acres owned by the tribe. I was to find that the philosophy of providing a quality experience was one that guided the practices of the tribal game managers.

Several hunters greeted our return to the motel. One had taken a nice 6x6 bull; others had not seen the one they were after or the shot just hadn't been there.

As I headed for my room, Eudane said, "See you at five thirty." I had no problem being ready by the appointed time. I only awoke two hours too early! Finally we were on our way. Imagine my surprise when Eudane said, "Let's head west" instead of to the southeast where we had seen the bulls the previous evening. And it didn't matter! Our first stop along the road in the predawn darkness was greeted by the bugles of four different elk. And we went on!

As the darkness turned to light, we drove from the sage flats to the base of a pinion covered ridge. The beauty of the high desert was striking as the soft light of dawn flooded the valleys, highlighting the reds and golds of the gambel oak and the olive greens of the pinions and darker hues of the ponderosa pines. Our departure from the truck was hailed by the nearby challenge of yet another bull.

Now that the broken antlered bull that Eudane had so expertly called to me had departed, we hunted onward. Our trek brought us back to the truck. The morning turned to midday as the sun moved towards its daytime zenith. Evening found us on the same mesa we had been on the previous night and once again a bull was wandering towards me - this one a five point.

He turned away at twenty yards. Again we found elk in the meadow. We stalked one bull only to be betrayed by a raghorn. Once again, we were engulfed by darkness amidst the serenade of a vocal choir of wapiti.

The hunts of the next days followed the same pattern. Eudane

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Quality game management programs depend upon cooperative efforts among multiple stakeholders especially where habitat plays a key role...

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and I would leave Dulce before dawn and head to a new location. It did not seem to matter which direction we selected on the compass, we always found the elk. Once, at dawn, Eudane heard 11 different bulls as we stood on the roadside trying to ascertain the herd's movements and destination. During our hunts, Eudane pointed to numerous ponds that the game division had developed to enhance the water supply for the resident herds of elk and deer. Over 400 such structures had been constructed in the past seven years. In this land of high desert, the equation was simple. More water equals more game.

The evening of the second night was particularly eventful. As we left the truck, we were greeted by erratic, strong winds. Eudane issued a challenge from the top of the first ridge. His call was answered by the response of not one but three bulls, all close. In the twisting wind and blowing brush, I had trouble

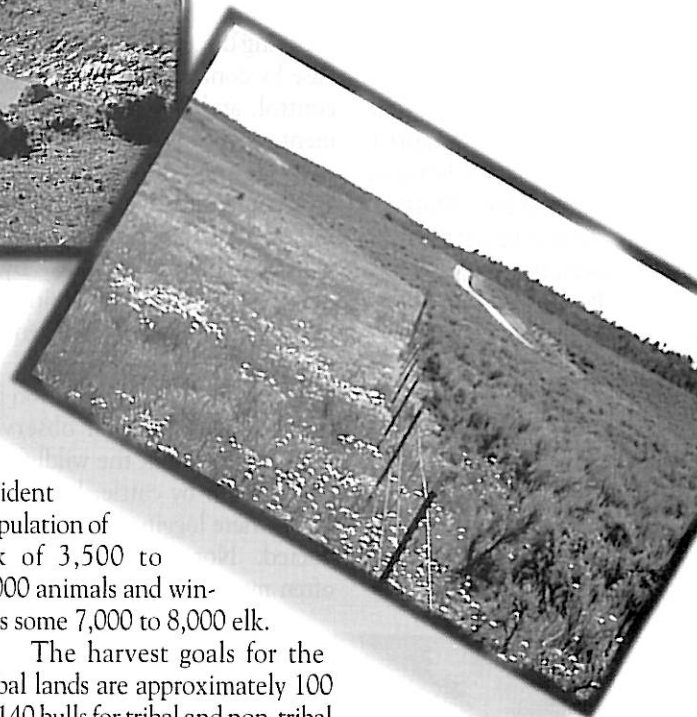
tracking the progress of the bulls. I would look one way and then another! Soon I detected the antlers of a six point moving towards Eudane's calls. His route would bring him by to my right some fifteen to twenty yards away. As fate would dictate, he passed on the outside of an oakbrush. A narrow shooting lane appeared but as I tried to draw he detected the motion and flared. Eudane and I moved towards the second bull that was now moving down the ridge away from our vantage point. Our stalk was interrupted by the appearance of a small five point as he stepped over the ridge a mere ten yards away. In order to keep the small bull from bolting from us into the herd below, Eudane charged him which sent the immature bull scurrying back up the ridge.

Soon we had cut the distance to the third bull but the wind and the herd of cows he was with were working to our disadvantage. The herd moved from the timbered ridge to the sage flats. There, some seventy yards away, stood the master, a big bull somewhere in the 340 class. So close, so far! We followed along until the deepening shadows indicated that another day was at its end. Our trip home was punctuated first by the sight of a cougar in the headlights followed only minutes later by a Boone & Crockett class non-typical mule deer standing along the roadside. Another sleepless night followed.

Back in Dulce, other hunters were arriving. The first of the non-tribal rifle hunts was scheduled to begin on October 1st and the twenty or so hunters selected for this hunt were now around. Conversations in the restaurant were marked by hunting tales and the prospects for the next few days. The other bowhunters were finishing their stay. Jack had taken a 6x5 with his long bow; brother Steve had bagged a nice three hundred class bull two days before with his compound.

Now a different group of

TOP: VIEW OF SAGEBRUSH ERADICATION PROJECT IN JICARILLA APACHE HOMELAND.  
MIDDLE: EXAMPLE OF THE WATER DEVELOPMENT AREA.  
BOTTOM: SAGEBRUSH CUTTING AND GRASS RESEEDING AREA SEPARATED BY FENCING.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOM WATTS.



hunters were to take their place afield and to enjoy this adventure in the land of the Jicarilla Apaches. Each hunter was to be accompanied by his or her own guide, himself a hunter whose father, and whose father's father had hunted these same mesas and flats. Many had hunted before on the reservation and were well acquainted with the guides and quality of the hunt.

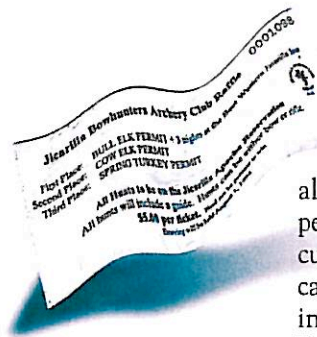
Later Tom and Eudane further explained their approach to big game management on the Jicarilla reservation. Rather than manage with a goal of maximum harvest levels, they have chosen to manage for a quality hunting experience for both tribal and non-tribal members. To do so, they limit hunting pressure while seeking to enhance the habitat base. On the Jicarilla reservation, the game management and habitat management programs go hand in hand.

Tom and other game biologists in the area work together as members of the San Juan Interstate Wildlife Working Group to coordinate seasons and management practices for Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado for private and public lands in the region. Their efforts have proven successful as the elk herd in this region has boomed in the past fifteen years. The Jicarilla reservation boasts a

resident population of elk of 3,500 to 4,000 animals and winters some 7,000 to 8,000 elk.

The harvest goals for the tribal lands are approximately 100 to 140 bulls for tribal and non-tribal members and an annual harvest of 400 to 500 cows. Tom indicated that continued growth in the elk herd will necessitate additional cow harvest in the next few years to maintain a sufficient forage base. The herd enjoys a 35 to 40 per 100 bull/cow ratio in the winter (and a higher ratio during the fall as many of the elk that move on to tribal lands after season closure come from more heavily hunted, public lands). The winter cow/calf ratios are in the 45 to 50 per 100 range. Both ratios are indicators of healthy elk herds.

Mule deer management is higher priority. The reservation has enjoyed a significant increase in herd numbers since 1988 when seasons were closed for three years. Since then the deer population has increased to an estimated popula-



tion of four to five thousand resident animals. One hundred fifty to two hundred bucks are harvested annually. Twenty trophy mule deer permits for non-tribal members are currently allocated. These hunters can select a seven-day period during the first three weeks of December for their hunt.

Quality game management programs depend upon cooperative efforts among multiple stakeholders especially where habitat plays a key role in the management plan. Working directly with the habitat base by controlled burning, brush control, and watershed enhancement, and working cooperatively with grazing and forestry groups and having effective, limited hunting enables the tribe to meet its wildlife management goals. By so doing, the tribe is maintaining a hunting heritage for future generations.

Signs of this cooperation are present to the casual observer. Ponds that benefit the wildlife are also utilized by cattle. I observed areas where logging had been conducted. Not the garish cuts that often mark some lands, but rather

selective harvest conducted with rubber tire skidders. Tom described the logging practices of the tribe as single tree selection, uneven height and age management. Cooperative efforts can and do exist.

The programs and philosophy displayed on the Jicarilla reservation match well the philosophy displayed by the mission statement of the Boone & Crockett Club.

The fourth morning of the hunt marked a turning point. Eudane and I were met by silence in marked contrast to the multitude of bugles that had hailed us the three previous days. The change was not due to increased hunting pressure from the arrival of the rifle hunt but rather by the passage of a storm front. A lone bull whistled high on the ridge above us. We moved in slowly. Soon we spotted him, a 6x5, as he rubbed his antlers on the branches of the oakbrush. I moved into twenty yards but no shot - too many branches and no opening. Again so close, but so far. We backed out so as not to disturb him. Later we got another bull to respond. He too offered no opportunity as he came in downwind behind a screen of brush. So the day went. That evening as we drove back to Dulce, we decided that tomorrow, the last day, we should return to the mesa we had visited my first night.

The next morning we encountered a different problem, simply too many elk. We moved with the herd but were unable to separate out one

bull without being first detected by another elk. Around ten thirty in the morning, I attempted to stalk a big bull as Eudane kept him occupied with an occasional bugle. Just as I slipped in to thirty yards, the bull turned to follow his cows which earlier had departed the timber patch. It was looking more and more as if this would be one of those great hunts where the hunter returns home empty handed.

Morning turned to midday as we followed two bulls across the mesa, back past the truck and on out to the south rim. It was hot and time for lunch. Still, the bulls would occasionally respond to Eudane's call. As we sat at the edge of a two hundred yard wide meadow, Eudane issued a defiant challenge to the bulls hidden in the timber on the far side. He received an immediate response. Minutes later we heard the clash of antlers as the two bulls began to spar.

Time to move, so we closed the gap. Our set up was just below the ridge. Eudane bugled. An answer! We waited, but the bull did not come to meet us. So we went to him. I moved over the ridge as Eudane prepared to issue another throaty challenge. Moments later I caught sight of the back legs of an elk and soon could see the bull as he stood rubbing his antlers on an oak.

As I planned my approach, the bull suddenly turned. He was headed directly at Eudane and would pass within yards of my location. This time no brush screened my shot and the wind did not betray my presence. The arrow was on its way. At 1:30 in the afternoon of the last day, my hunt was over. But the memories remain - the opportunity to visit the homeland of the Jicarilla Apache, to hunt where the heritage of hunting remains, to watch as bulls and cows faded through oakbrush filled ravines, to listen as bulls began and ended the day with their magnificent voices. These memories, coupled with others, demonstrate that what once was can still be.

BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB RECORDS COMMITTEE CHAIR, RANDY BYERS, WITH HIS SIX POINT BULL THAT QUALIFIES FOR THE POPE & YOUNG BOWHUNTING RECORDS WITH A SCORE OF 270-3/8 POINTS.

