

# THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

## ABOUT 15 MINUTES OUTSIDE TRACY, THE ONCE DECIMATED TULE ELK IS THRIVING

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TRACY - They might be the largest wild animals in San Joaquin County, but the tule elk grazing the hills southwest of Tracy are remarkably skilled at avoiding detection.

Mark Connolly scanned the fields with his eyes one recent afternoon as he drove the back roads of his ranch.

Unfortunately, this time of year those fields are about the same color as the 650-pound elk.

Connolly finally hit the brakes after his daughter, Bridget, spotted jagged antlers silhouetted against the bright sky over the next hill.

He turned around and drove as close as he dared - within a few hundred yards of three bull elk lounging near an oak tree. He killed the engine while photos were taken, then fired his vehicle up again, inching closer.

"They're gonna split," he predicted.

Within seconds the horns vanished, replaced by three fluffy white rumps receding in the distance.

It often surprises low-landers that these social yet reclusive animals are found barely 15 minutes outside Tracy, once in a while wandering within sight of Bay Area commuters racing past on Corral Hollow Road.

The elk have thrived there for perhaps three decades - with the help of Connolly, an attorney by day and a cattle rancher by life. The Connolly family has long worked with the state Department of Fish and Game to enhance habitat for elk and other critters, while also hosting a limited hunt each summer and fall, luring big-game hunters at a high price.

"It used to be farmers and ranchers didn't want endangered species on their land," Connolly said later. "But over the last 50 years, land management has changed. It's becoming more sustainable now. We're trying to manage our ranch as a complete, more rounded operation - not just cows.

"The elk are compatible with all these other uses."

Prior to European settlement, about 500,000 tule elk inhabited the state, including the Central Valley. They were hunted near extinction for their hides. According to Fish and Game, DNA evidence suggests the population was down to a handful of elk - if not a single pair - before rancher Henry Miller began protecting them on his ranch near Los Banos.

It worked. But the elk grew in number to the point where they began damaging Miller's crops.

Using baited traps, biologists caught the animals and started new herds in the Owens Valley, and near Cache Creek and the Mount Hamilton area east of San Jose.

The elk on Connolly's property are believed to be the descendents of the Mount Hamilton herd. They migrated up the Diablo range and spread out in the hills above Tracy and Livermore.

The herd is believed to be comprised of 120 elk, though recent numbers on the Connolly ranch have declined - probably because the elk have dispersed even more.

Statewide, there are about 3,800 elk in 21 herds.

Not that the public would know.

"We do get reports of sightings, but they're usually isolated," said Conrad Jones, a senior environmental scientist with Fish and Game. "Elk aren't seen in abundance."

Mostly unseen are the bull elk clashing antlers in a battle over the right to mate with a female elk, known as a cow. That impressive display begins each summer about this time.

Mostly unseen are the calves, about 3 months old now, spotted like fawns. The young males with the velvety soft horns that have yet to harden like the big boys by the oak tree.

Mostly unheard is the bugle sound as a bull seeks a mate.

Connolly helps maintain all of this through his agreement with the state. He rotates his Black Angus bulls around the 9,000-acre ranch to ensure there is enough forage left for the elk. He provides water sources and sometimes hay. He thins the juniper and pine trees to reduce the odds of catastrophic fire.

The hunt helps offset the cost of all this. For \$10,500, a hunter can buy a tag to pursue one of the bulls during a four-day guided hunt on Connolly's ranch. Probably only one bull will be taken

this year, Connolly said; the number is set so elk will not be over-harvested, but also so the herd does not grow so large that it eats all the grass and starves itself.

"We have a list of 80 people who want to shoot a bull, and most of them aren't local," said Gordon Long of Valley Springs-based Multiple Use Managers, which organizes the Connolly hunt. "Tule elk are only in California, so big-game hunters need to come here to hunt."

Back in the truck, Connolly left the retreating bull elk behind and headed down the hill. He passed a much larger herd - all cows and calves, who similarly dismissed him with a turn of their tails.

"They don't like people contact very much," Connolly said.

In the distance, the late-afternoon traffic passed on Corral Hollow Road.

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### **Where to see them**

Mark Connolly's elk sometimes wander down to Corral Hollow Road, but you are not likely to see them there. Department of Fish and Game environmental scientist Conrad Jones offers up these areas for publicly accessible viewing:

- Grizzly Island Wildlife Area, near Fairfield. Call in advance; the trails are closed during hunting season, (707) 425-3828;
- San Luis Reservoir, off Highway 152 west of Los Banos. Look near the dam off the side of the highway;
- Cache Creek, along Highway 20 west from Williams toward Clear Lake;
- Point Reyes National Seashore. Elk are seen throughout the park, but your best chance is the Tule Elk Preserve at Tomales Point.

Tips: Observe from a distance with binoculars; do not come between a cow and her calf or between a bull and a group of cows; be quiet and move slowly.

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