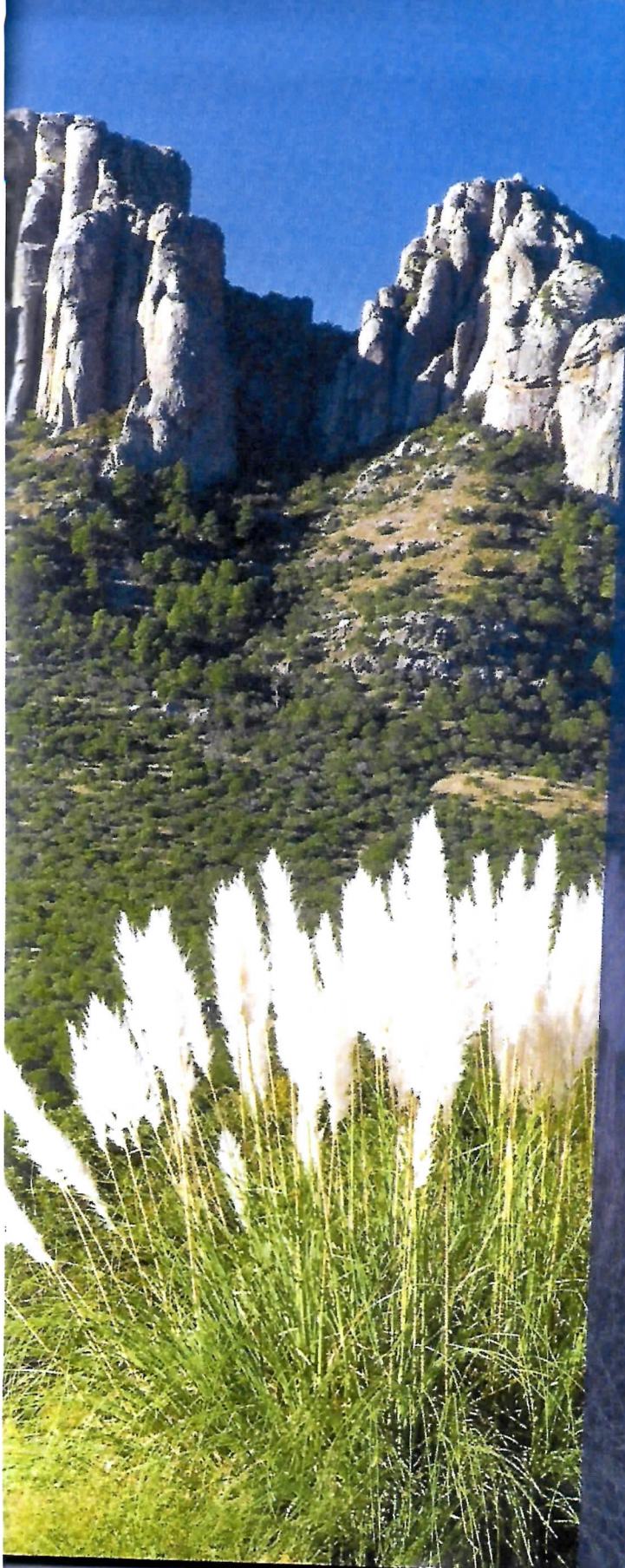


TEXAS ELK:

WHY IS A LONE STAR
NATIVE TREATED
AS AN EXOTIC?

by Kyle Shaney and Paul Queneau



Despite being branded as an exotic species for the past 20 years, wild elk are flourishing in west Texas. Draft legislation aims to make them a bona fide managed game species once again—if it can garner the support.

When hunters think of Texas, four images often come to mind: big whitetails, scarce public access, exotic game and high fences. Yet elk roamed the land where cactus and creosote collide in the rugged mountains and prairies of west Texas for thousands of years before Europeans arrived.

Merriam's elk once inhabited this landscape, but like most native big game here, they were killed off by the late 1800s. The now-extinct subspecies made its final stand in the state high in the Guadalupe Mountains just south of the New Mexico border. Bugles fell silent in Texas until 1927, when a private citizen released 44 elk hauled in from South Dakota's Black Hills to McKittrick Canyon five miles northeast of Guadalupe Peak, Texas' highest summit.

That herd took to the mountains and multiplied, expanding south across the Trans-Pecos, a region roughly the size of South Carolina running from the border with New Mexico south to the border with Mexico in Big Bend National Park. Elk have also cropped up in the Texas panhandle thanks to wild herds sifting down the Canadian River from New Mexico.

Texas elk have also been aided in no small part by a raft of both public and private releases into many of the ranges of the Trans-Pecos as well as the panhandle (see accompanying timeline). Herds have done particularly well in the Glass and Davis Mountains, the latter of which receives enough precipitation to support aspen stands.

"I think it's very safe to say there are more than 3,500 free-ranging elk in the Trans-Pecos region right now," says Louis Harveson, professor of wildlife management at Sul Ross State University, which lies in the town of Alpine right between the Glass and Davis ranges. State biologists in the panhandle, meanwhile, estimate 500 to 1,000 elk in that region. Harveson is the founder of the Borderlands Research Institute and has overseen numerous studies of elk across the Trans-Pecos. He believes Texas now boasts more wild elk than it has for at least a century.

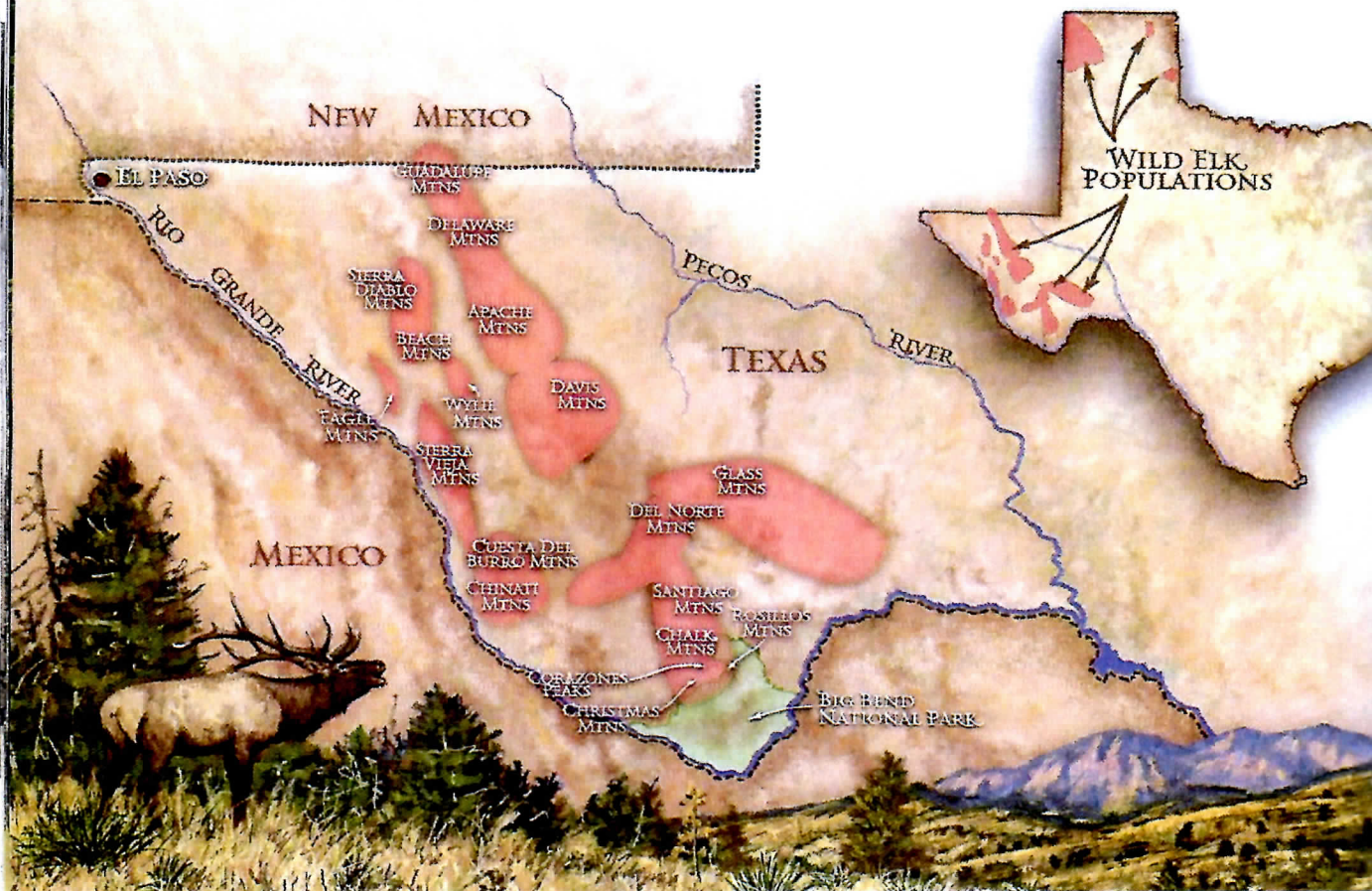
For the past two decades, though, elk population growth has taken place inside a management vacuum. In 1997, the Texas legislature passed a bill that reclassified elk from "game" to exotic species—placing them in the same category as feral hogs, aoudad sheep, blackbuck and oryx. This blindsided wildlife managers, hunters and elk enthusiasts statewide following decades of work to restore them. State officials were suddenly mandated to place elk under an unlimited, year-round hunting season. The reclassification also stripped funding for herd counts and other management to gauge and improve the health and productivity of the population.

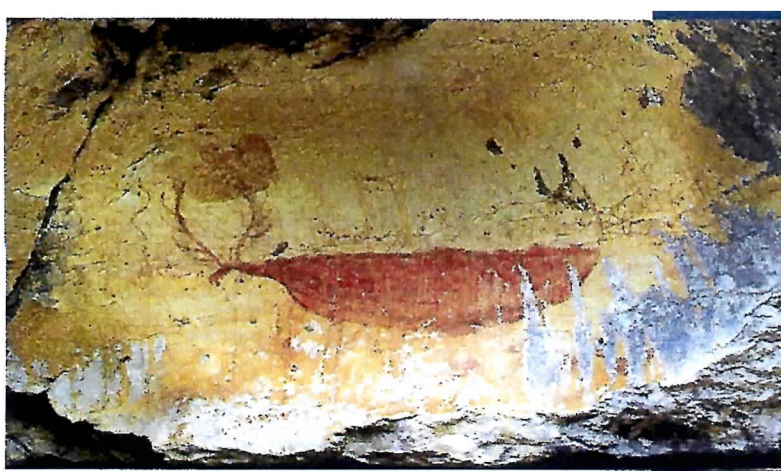
The lawmakers that pushed the change never went public with their motivations beyond arguing that since the elk restored from 1927 forward belonged to the Rocky Mountain subspecies—as against the

extinct Merriam's—they qualified as non-natives. Similar debates occasionally crop up about elk in the East, although biologists remain divided over whether elk have any true subspecies. Many cervid experts believe the unique characteristics of Roosevelt's elk and other subspecies are more a reflection of habitat and climatic conditions than any divergence in their DNA. For the two extinct elk subspecies, of course, that question is not only blurrier but moot.

The push to cut any focus and funding for elk was also driven at least in part by concern over the limited water and forage in west Texas, combined with crop damage complaints from farmers in the panhandle. Vast cornfields blanket the panhandle, and the Trans-Pecos is covered in sprawling cattle ranches and hosts both reintroduced herds of desert bighorns and the state's largest and healthiest populations of mule deer. This makes for a lot of mouths vying for limited resources, and conflicts are inevitable. This tension only increases as well-heeled hunters pay upward of \$100,000 to chase the monster bighorn rams in the region—more than 10 times what hunters will pay to hunt the big bulls there.

In 2015, a pair of bills hit the Texas legislature aimed at reinstating elk as a managed game species. They died in committee and never made it to a vote, but Texas Representative Poncho Nevarez, who sponsored the legislation, resubmitted it as House Bill





This pictograph from the Lower Pecos canyonlands of west Texas almost certainly features the antlers of the now extinct Merriam's subspecies, which roamed the southwest U.S. and northern Mexico. Biologists believe Merriam's elk carried the largest and straightest antlers of any subspecies. Whether or not they have any genetic links to the record-breaking Rocky Mountain elk in Arizona's White Mountains is debatable.

904 to go before the 2017 legislature. Ryan Perales, legislative director for Rep. Nevarez, said he couldn't speak yet to its chances, but that public support would be key starting in March.

Harveson feels if the bills do reappear, chances of passage are likely bleak, especially after chronic wasting disease was found in a wild elk in the northwestern corner of the Texas panhandle in December. That's put managers only further on edge about elk and could lead to more aggressive culling efforts.

Ironically, the fact that Texas is 97 percent private land may well be elk's salvation. In the two decades since elk were ostracized by the legislature, many ranchers have remained deeply enamored with them and have sought to grow the region's herds. Harveson is now working with a consortium of ranchers in the Davis Mountains to build an elk management plan that will ensure the sustainability and health of the species across the state's largest, wettest and most elk-rich mountain range.

"We are in discussions with those landowners to come up with a kind of elk co-op, basically a general agreement across multiple properties to manage the elk as a single herd unit," Harveson says.

Hunters with access are also finding some enormous bulls (see "Beginning of an Obsession" on page 64), though their exotic status and resulting lack of state management excludes them from Boone and Crockett's record books.

Despite the challenges elk face in Texas, they appear to have enough appreciators in the Trans-Pecos region to ensure a reasonably secure future. Whether the legislature will reverse course about their status and make these great natives welcome once more remains to be seen.

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TIME LINE

- 1880s Texas' last native elk shot in the Guadalupe Mountains
- 1927 44 elk from South Dakota released into the Guadalupe Mountains
- 1930s Nine elk released into the Davis Mountains
- 1944 Three elk released into the Glass Mountains
- 1970s 25 elk released into the Eagle Mountains
- 1983 Sul Ross State University concludes a preliminary study of elk in the Glass Mountains.
Glass Mountains elk population estimated at 165 elk
- 1988 Midland Chapter holds first Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation banquet in Texas
- 1988 TPWD releases 51 elk into the Wylie Mountains
TPWD releases 48 elk into the Davis Mountains
- 1992 In his authoritative textbook *The Mammals of Texas*, David Schmidly reports Guadalupe, Davis, Wylie, Eagle mountain ranges each host 15 to 40 wild elk, and 150 to 180 in the Glass Mountains.
- 1993 Texas A&M concludes study of elk movements, habitat use and population dynamics of elk in Guadalupe Mountains National Park
- 1997 Status of elk changed from native game to exotic by 75th Texas Legislature
- 2006 RMEF contracts with Borderlands Research Institute for Glass Mountains Elk Study
- 2008 Sul Ross State University concludes elk study analyzing range size and habitat use of elk in the Glass Mountains
- 2009 Sul Ross State University concludes elk study assessing landowner attitudes toward elk and elk management in Trans-Pecos region
- 2015 Senate and house bills to reclassify elk as game animals fail in Texas legislature
- 2017 Texas House Bill filed to classify elk again as game (HB904)