



TULE ELK

Classification: Phylum Chordata, Class Mammalia, Order Artiodactyla, Family Cervadia
Cervus nannodes

Sometimes called the dwarf elk, the tule elk is our smallest elk. It is a cousin of the wapiti (*cervus canadensis*), a large North American deer, which is closely related to the Old World red deer. Several other species of the genus *Cervus* are found in Asia and North Africa. The Cervids are all antlered instead of horned.

Length: 7 feet

Weight: Males=700-1,000 pounds

Females=about three-quarters as large.

Lifespan: 15-22 years



Habitat: Originally a valley animal, it would move into the low foothills during the rainy winter months. They inhabit marshes, river bottoms, open plains, grasslands and sagebrush shrub.

Range: Tule elk are confined to the state of California. At present they are limited to a small area near Button Willow, in Inyo County, and Tupman. Recently, a small herd was introduced in the coastal range west of Bakersfield.

Status: Gold prospectors almost wiped out the Tule elk in the 1840's. In 1885 there were only 28. This number has now increased to over 900 mainly because of three reserves in California's chaparral region. They are listed as endangered by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources).

Diet in the Wild: Tule elk are herbivores (plant eaters), grazing and browsing on grasses, leaves, and twigs. A poor diet can restrict the growth of their antlers.

Special features:

- Long hair on the neck forms a grizzled, grayish-brown throat mane. They are buffy gray on the back with a white rump patch. The tule elk's coat is paler both winter and summer than other varieties.
- As members of the Cervidae family, they have no upper incisor teeth, but have canine teeth in the upper jaw. Their lower canines are incisor-like.
- The bucks normally grow and shed a set of antlers once each year. Their antlers grow from two little bumps on the frontal bone of the skull. The antlers are covered with a skin called "velvet" while they are growing. During this period, the antlers are filled with blood vessels and nerves, are highly sensitive to the touch as well as being easily injured. By the time mating begins, the antlers have shrunk and become hard, the velvet has been rubbed off on trees. The new, tough antlers are effective for combat.

The number of points on an antler gives only a rough estimate of the age of the elk. It has been believed that the number of points, or tines, represent years of life. This



is not reliable. A mature buck will recreate a similar rack every year. After about six years, the number of tines decreases and very old bucks may have very tall antlers with only two points each.

- Only males have antlers. The antlers are shed in March with new ones fully grown by September.
- Tule elk, like all deer, have four-chambered, ruminating stomachs.
- Wolves, coyotes, and cougars prey on elk. Since healthy elk can run as fast as 35 mph they can usually escape.

Social Organization and Behavior:

- Generally gregarious. Frequently, the younger males will join females with their young to form bands. The older mature bulls usually spend the summer alone or in small bachelor groups.
- Tule elk bucks contest among themselves. The bull elk fiercely guards his harem from young bucks and will drive them off. The contest is vigorous but seldom harmful. It can end in death by starvation and thirst for both bulls if their antlers become interlocked in the struggle.
- The bulls make their presence known by “bugling” a clear musical whistle that calls the cows to them. New bands are formed which consist of 5 to 20 females and a single bull. Each bull, by his dominance, holds the cows together in a harem band.

Breeding and Care of Young:

- Tule elk are capable of breeding at 28 months of age. Cows carry their young about eight and a half months. A single calf is born in May or June of the following year.
- The calf is spotted when born and will remain so until their winter hair grows out.
- It is eating green vegetation by the time it is a month old, but the mother continues to nurse until winter.
- The calf can take care of itself by fall but may stay with its mother through the winter.

