

# Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

## Tule Elk

In 1851 some men near Lodi were herding their horses to water. One horse wore a bell. "Its tinkling excited the fancy or curiosity of some elk and they came out of the tules. ... The horses became frightened and stampeded, but the elk were not to be deprived so easily of their horse serenade, and started in pursuit. Away went pursuers and pursued, careening over the countryside." Lodi is in Elkhorn Township, named for the abundance of elk once found there.

Before the Gold Rush, the state had more than 500,000 tule elk, native only to California, ranging from Red Bluff down to Bakersfield and west to the coast. The Livermore Valley held many of them. In 1844 Robert Livermore realized \$600 from the fat of elk and grizzly bear that he killed in the Tassajara area. James D. Smith, who came to the San Ramon Valley in 1850 with his mother and father, noted animals that his father hunted that year: "Wild game was plentiful, deer and elk in particular, the latter in droves of 75 to 100." Their range was the foothills around Mount Diablo. Early surveyor Leander Ransom described the wildlife around Mount Diablo in 1851—"Herds of elk, antelope and deer ... abound here. One herd of elk that we saw on the mountain numbered at least 200."

A state law passed in 1873 that gave the elk complete protection. However, by 1874 the tule elk population had dwindled to only a few animals because of hunting and loss of habitat. Henry Miller of the Miller and Luxe Ranch down near Bakersfield discovered a few elk on his property. He ordered strict protection, offering a \$500 reward to anyone who caught a hunter violating his ban. Recent DNA evidence indicates that only one pair or possibly as many as four elk were left. By 1895, with Miller's protection, the elk total had climbed to 28. Tule Elk State Reserve, a 950-acre property, was established near the ranch in 1932 to create a permanent home for the surviving elk. In the early 1970s, the California Department of Fish and Game began to transplant small herds of elk to various places around the state in an attempt to broaden their habitat. One of these places was in the Mt. Hamilton area, east of San Jose. Four separate groups of tule elk were brought in from Owens Valley in 1978, 1980, and 1981, a total of 65 animals. These elk migrated north and now range between Maguire Peaks at the southern end of Sunol Valley Regional Park and San Antonio Reservoir. Occasionally, some of the herd wander over to Del Valle Regional Park. Two were spotted in August 2007 at Camp Arroyo. The entire local population was estimated at between 180 and 205 animals in 1994. In July 2006 the Nature Conservancy acquired the 2,899-acre South Valley Ranch in the San Antonio Valley near Mount Hamilton. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation partnered with the Conservancy on this acquisition by securing the grazing rights on the property to ensure the future of the elk.

Tule elk are shy of human contact. The usual view of them for the casual hiker is their white rumps fading into the distance. Bob Seval, while hiking to the top of the Maguire Peaks in 1981, saw "three creatures ... directly ahead. I looked, and there were the white rumps. A second or two later, they had bounded away, disappearing over one of the outcroppings." Tule elk reproduce rapidly when conditions are right, and they migrate to find appropriate feed. These two characteristics, as well as their protection by the state, have brought them back from the threat of extinction. However, their gene pool is very small, from the few 1874 survivors, and an increase in deformities is expected as the population ages.

Smaller in size than elk species in other parts of the country, the tule elk is tolerant of the hot climate in the Central Valley. Mostly light brown, it has a darker conspicuous mane. It stands four to five feet at the shoulder. Bulls have an average weight of 450 to 500 pounds and carry a large six-point rack of antlers. The high-pitched squeaky bugling of the bulls signals rutting and mating in late summer; a single calf is born the following spring. Tule elk feed on grasses and broad-leaved plants; after these dry up, they browse on terminal growth of bushes and trees and also eat acorns. A 2007 statewide census listed 3,800 tule elk.

Vera Revelli has her own tule elk herd of five in Pleasanton. They'll never reproduce because their large antlers identify them all as males. They also will never reproduce because they are silhouettes made of a decorative iron material that creates a protective coat of rust on itself. In 2003 Revelli was redoing the parking lot near her office building at the busy corner of Bernal and First Street. "We wanted to make that corner stand out—so many people pass by." She commissioned the five elk and also landscaping of rocks and grasses around them that reflects their habitat, not the typical commercial parking lot look. Her favorite elk is the one that stands alone, looking back over his shoulder. We can imagine him looking back in history at the rest of his herd that used to run so freely over the natural landscape.

(Readers can reach me at [am50homan@yahoo.com](mailto:am50homan@yahoo.com).)