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Captive Tule Elk Herd at Tomales Point in Point Reyes National Seashore Lacks Water and Needs Help

In a disturbing replay of National Park Service (NPS) neglect during the drought of 2011-2015, the Park Service is again allowing the old stock ponds in the Tomales Point Tule Elk Reserve¹ to go dry. These ponds are an essential water source for the captive Tule elk² because there are no perennial streams in the reserve. During that drought, approximately 250 out of 500 elk died for lack of water. We are concerned that NPS is going to let that happen again.

In order to fully understand the effect of the current drought on the estimated 445 Tule elk in the reserve now³ it is necessary to understand where the elk are located and where the ponds are that they rely on.

A detailed study by wildlife biologist McCrea Cobb was published in 2010 that delineated the home ranges of four distinct herds in the elk reserve which he named the North Herd, the Plateau Herd, the White Gulch Herd and the South Herd. Below is a page from that study that delineates the four home ranges.

As Cobb's text below his map states, there is little spatial overlap among the four tule elk herds. That is clear from viewing the telemetry fixes of collared elk taken every three days from 2005 to 2008. In other words, individual elk from one herd rarely go into another herd's home range and that includes never using ponds located in another herd's home range.

¹ The elk in the reserve are held captive behind an 8-foot, woven-wire fence that was built to hold the elk captive contrary to NPS wildlife management policy that wildlife not be confined. .

² Tule elk are endemic to California. Once numbering approximately 500,00 animals, they were nearly wiped out by market hunters and ranchers and are now at a population of only 5700 animals. They have very low genetic diversity.

³https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/nature/tule_elk.htm#:~:text=The%202019%20annual%20census%20of%20445%20individuals%20at%20Tomales%20Point.

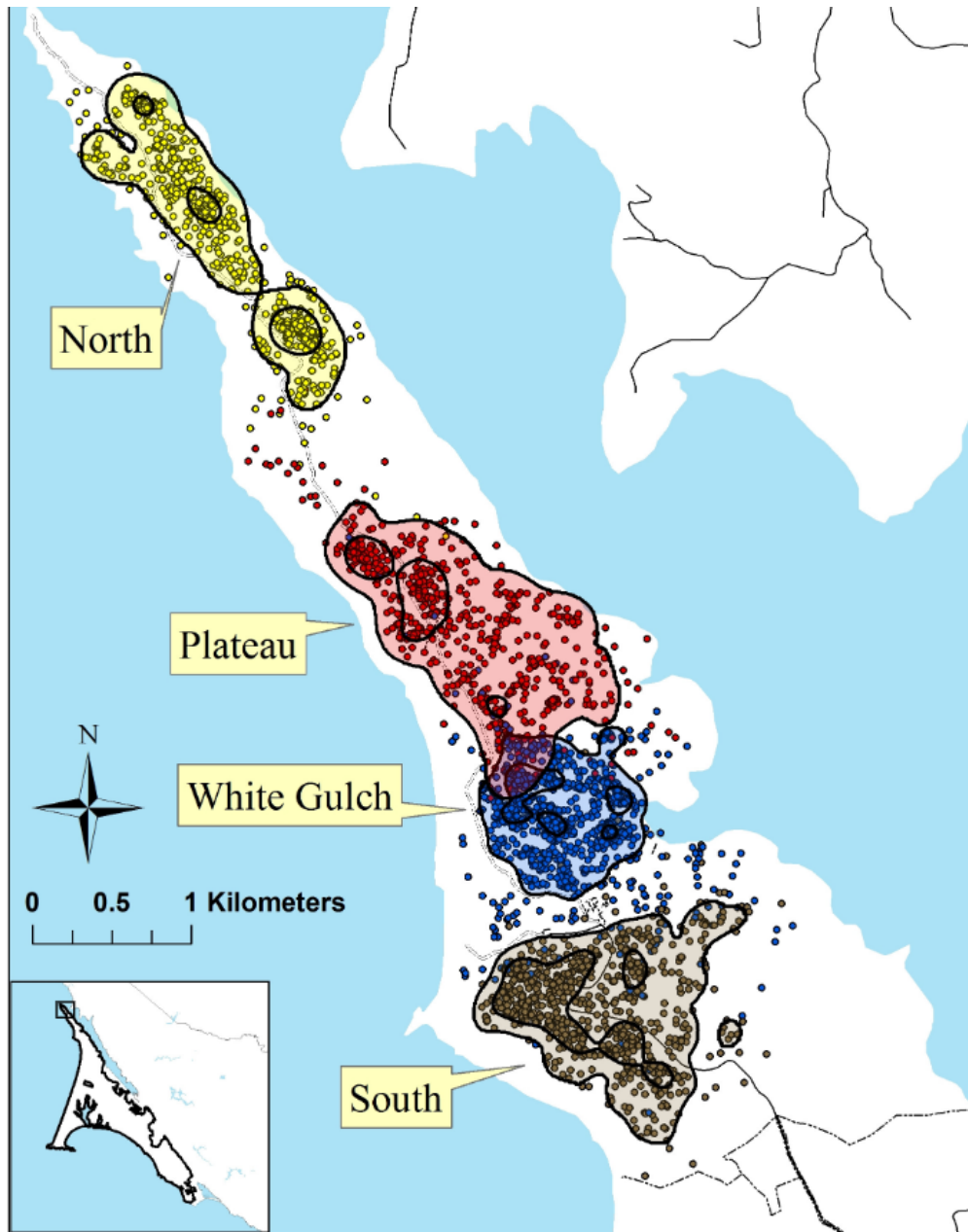


Figure 1. Radio telemetry fixes and herd ranges (50% and 90% fixed kernels) of radio-collared tule elk at the Tomales Point Elk Reserve, Point Reyes National Seashore, California, 2005 – 2008. Fixes were taken on radio-collared elk approximated every three days. Neighboring elk herd ranges showed little spatial overlap.

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wt3h3rc> at 37.

If you look closely between the White Gulch and South herds, you will see that Cobb has included the location of the Pierce Point Ranch complex and the trail down to McClures Beach to help orient the viewer. The entire road from the reserve entrance to the ranch complex is also depicted.

Below is a screen grab depicting the six ponds in the elk reserve that we found using Google Earth. To help orient the viewer we have also marked the Pierce Point Ranch complex. We have recently visited and photographed all six ponds.



The North Herd

Starting with the North Herd, there are two ponds in its home range, North Pond I and North Pond II. North Pond I is completely dry as seen below. Photo taken on August 21, 2020.



North Pond II is the biggest pond in the reserve. It has water, but it is way below capacity. See photo below taken on August 16, 2020.



The North herd seems safe now with one of its two ponds having some water, but now the herd has only one pond to drink from so it will consume that water faster than when there were two ponds with water.

The Plateau Herd

The next herd is the Plateau Herd. Comparing that herd's home range and the pond locations, the Plateau Herd has Central Pond I and Central Pond II in its home range. Central Pond I is dry. See photo below taken on August 21, 2020.



Central Pond II is very close to dry. See photo below taken on August 21, 2020



It will likely go completely dry soon. When the Plateau elk consume the last drops of water from that pond they will have no water, at least none that we can find in Google Earth or on the ground ourselves.

The White Gulch Herd

The next herd is the White Gulch Herd. We could not locate a pond in its home range on Google Earth, but there is some sign of a seep that drains toward Tomales Bay. Whether it is running now is unknown. Its home range does overlap the Plateau Herd a bit, but it doesn't seem to overlap enough to include Central Pond II. Even if it did, that pond (above) will be dry soon. Cobb's map shows the White Gulch Herd seems to wander away from its home range more than the other three herds and water may play some role in that. There are some radio telemetry fixes showing White Gulch elk not far from the seep that ends up at McClures Beach which is a short distance from the South Herd's home range. That seep will be discussed below.

The South Herd

The last herd is the South Herd. South Pond I and South Pond II are within its home range. Both of these ponds are dry and have been for a while.

Below is a photo of South Pond I. Photo taken on August 7, 2020.



This pond is a short distance off the left side of the road about a quarter mile before the historic Pierce Point Ranch. The pond went dry during the 2011-2015 drought when 250 elk died for lack of water in the reserve.

After the die off, Park Service official Dave Press stated that “the seashore is developing a plan to truck water to an easily accessible pond if it runs dry again in the future.”⁴ The easily accessible pond Mr. Press refers to is the pond in the photo above. By letter dated August 10, 2020, Jim Coda, a wildlife photographer, wrote to the park telling it that that pond was dry again and it was time for the park to act on its earlier commitment to fill it when it ran dry. To date it has provided no water for the elk.

Below is a photo of South Pond II which was taken on August 18, 2020.

⁴ <https://www.ptreyeslight.com/article/seashore-elk-herds-rose-and-fell-fences-2014>



According to the 1998 Tule Elk Management Plan, there were eight old stock ponds that the elk relied on for water in the reserve. The ponds were deemed very important to the elk's survival because the plan states there are no perennial streams in the reserve. We can only find six ponds which we have named based on their location. Over time, ponds tend to fill in and slowly disappear if not maintained. That may be why we could not find two of the ponds mentioned in the 1998 Plan. The six ponds we did find are probably shallower than they were in 1998 and even more so compared to when they were originally dug.

There is one other water source. It is a seep which flows down adjacent to the McClures Beach trail and ends in a pool at the beach. It is not clear from Cobb's map whether the White Gulch Herd or the South Herd is using the seep or possibly both herds. There is sign that elk are using the seep at the beach and a short distance up from the beach.

Here is a photo taken on August 19, 2020, of an elk that went to use it and died in the seep just before it reaches the beach. This is one of four dead elk found last week while checking ponds and surrounding areas.



The seep is flowing now, but its flow is decreasing and the pool at the beach is extremely shallow. The canyon that the trail and seep runs through is quite steep on both sides and the area the seep runs in is heavily overgrown with vegetation until it gets near the beach. The pool at the beach up to a short way behind the elk in the photo is the only easy access to the seep's water. The pool on the beach is extremely shallow at this time, about 1 to 2 inches, possibly an inch or so more in spots.

Below is a typical view of the steepness and heavy vegetation as seen from the trail. Photo taken on August 21, 2020.



The heavy vegetation hides the seep until it gets very close to the beach. Dave Press told us that based on a trail cam, NPS has determined that the elk don't use the seep during the daytime, probably because people are on the trail during the day. He also told us that NPS will not put water in the easily accessible pond near the road until the seep stops running, thereby contradicting what he was quoted as saying in the Point Reyes Light in 2015. And how long will it take before NPS finds out the seep has stopped flowing and it can get a tanker truck loaded and out to Pond I? And what about the Plateau Herd and its almost dry pond? Does anyone in the Seashore know what the word "empathy" means?

In summary, the North Herd has water for a while. The Plateau Herd is about to run out of water not many days from now. The White Gulch Herd doesn't appear to have any ponds in its home range, but it does appear to have a seep which may or may not be flowing at this time. The next closest water would be the seep at McClures Beach which may stop flowing at any time. The South Herd is out of water except to the extent the McClures seep keeps flowing and the animals can go all day without drinking water.

This is absurd. NPS policy prohibits holding wild animals captive. The Park Service has an obligation to provide adequate water (and food) for these captive elk. If you're going to hold them captive, then you have an obligation to keep them alive.

If any elk die because any NPS personnel failed to care for the captured elk humanely, like zookeepers are required to do, those employees could be found guilty of animal abuse, neglect or cruelty.

NPS should fill the South Pond I immediately. It should also bring in water by helicopter for the Plateau Herd whose remaining pond (Central Pond II) is about to run out of water. While the reserve is a wilderness area, flying in water would not violate the Wilderness Act because mechanized vehicles are allowed where necessary to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the area.

Concerned citizens are contacting the Superintendent of the Seashore and asking her to please fill South Pond I with water to ensure the South Herd elk don't die. Furthermore, the park should also fly in water to fill Central Pond II, which is close to drying up, to prevent members of the Plateau Herd from dying.

Finally, all of this requires that holding the elk captive behind an 8-foot tall woven-wire fence without adequate water (and possibly forage) must end now. The fence is contrary to the 1916 NPS Organic Act and the Point Reyes legislation which both require NPS to give priority to elk and other natural resources, not to private, subsidized ranching, which is the only reason why the fence is there.

The Superintendent can be reached as follows:

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