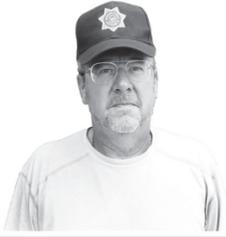


# Methods and benefits of tagging



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My old man mentor, Mr. Caster, was a wealth of knowledge. He taught me about the outdoors, and many other things my grandmother would probably wish he didn't teach me, like hunting, sex, fishing, camping, women, survival, women, sex, cursing, smoking Chesterfield Kings, and whiskey. He was also one of the early pioneers in tagging of game fish.

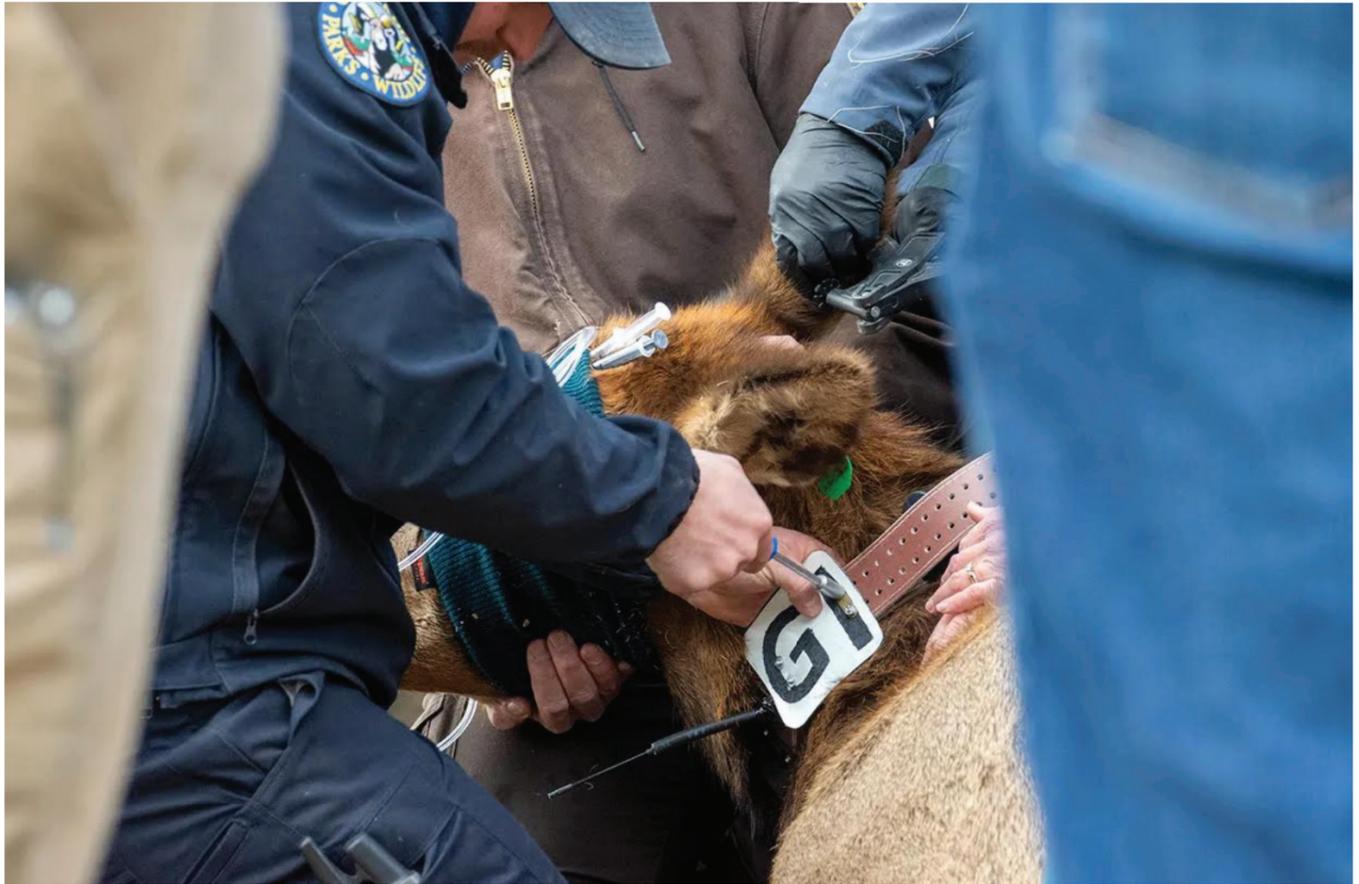
Mr. Caster would cut off a portion of the tail of every trout he released back into the stream. He claimed that when he caught that fish later on, it would be like a reunion with an old friend. Looking back, I doubt it was a good idea, cutting a fish like that. Seems to me, there would be a risk of an infection setting in. Backing that up, I never saw him catch one of his "tagged fish."

Tagging, with collars or tags, are used to track the location of animals, which help researchers understand how animals use their habitats and how they may be affected by human activities. The type of collar or tag used depends on the species and the purpose of the data.

GPS collars, which can monitor an animal's location 24/7, and can detect if an animal is alive or dead, are often used on game animals. Ear tags can also be attached to animals, and some can also be transmitters. Birds usually have a band wrapped around a leg. Fish also use tags that can transmit data, called a Passive Integrated Transponder or PIT. These are microchips inserted into the fish's skin or belly and can last the lifetime of the fish.

More common in fish, are the small, wire-like tags that are injected near the dorsal fin. They have an individual tracking number and the owner's custom identification. They are cut off by the angler and mailed to the owner of the tag. The angler will usually receive information back, telling when the fish was tagged, where, and an estimate of the size when tagged.

We ran an offshore charter fishing boat in the Florida Keys for many years. The boat was called



Game officers placing a GPS collar on a Cow Elk. (Photo/Jason Clay, CPW)

Tag 'em, and we were very involved in tagging operations for billfish. Over the years, we tagged and released countless sailfish and marlin, for The Billfish Foundation. Prior to that, I tagged hundreds of released tarpon in the backcountry waters of the Everglades.

Any waterfowl hunter will tell you about tagged ducks and geese they have been lucky enough to harvest. An average of 350,000 aluminum leg bands are put on waterfowl each year, with about 85,000 bands actually recovered and reported.

Return of fish tags are much lower and are a rare occurrence. Of the tags I put on, I have only received 3 back in 20 years. The researchers get more information from the acoustic tags, and the fish does not have to be captured to provide information, just monitored by biologists.

The first person to tag anything in the United States was John James Audubon, who was placing silver thread on songbirds back in 1803. Modern banding began in 1914, and the mallard duck has been the most commonly banded species. Through 2004, more than 6.2 million mallards had been banded. The Canada goose is 2nd on the list with more than 2.8 million banded. Many non-game birds are also tagged, but recovery rates are much lower for them.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) is very active in collaring game animals for study. For example, in December of 2024, 30 members of a deer herd numbering over 5,000 were collared for tracking purposes over



Leg band tag on a Wood Duck I harvested 30 years ago. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

the next 2 years. CPW is studying their migration route between winter and summer ranges.

CPW placed collars on 10 of the wolves released in Colorado back in December 2023. 2 of the collars malfunctioned and had stopped tracking, but the wolves are still travelling with wolves with a functioning collar. CPW periodically releases a map, showing the travel of these wolves, and it can be viewed on their website, <https://cpw.state.co.us/wolf-sightings>.

What got me thinking about all the tagging operations was a report that a Wyoming mule deer that migrated farther than any other deer known to science, has died. She was known as deer 255, and

she was 200 miles from her most recent summer range in Jackson Hole. She was 10 years and 10 months old. Very long in the tooth for a mule deer.

Number 255 was first tagged March 11, 2016, near Superior, Wyoming, where she spent the winter. Later that year, she migrated 150 miles to Hoback Basin, left the herd, and travelled an additional 90 miles into Idaho. Her travels took her across the Interstate Highway, above the town of Jackson Hole, and for a swim across the Snake River, for a total of 242 miles, ending back where she started, in just one year. This made her a social media world celebrity, and she had many followers of her travels

from then on.

From that point on, biologists had an unbroken record of migration data for 255 covering seven spring and seven fall migrations, over some 3,300 miles. Her travels ended in a patch of sagebrush, just three days into her 2024 spring migration, 16 miles away from her winter range.

When last captured for a field check-up, just a month earlier, 255 was very healthy. Her weight was in the top 12% of all animals in her range that winter, and she was pregnant with twins.

She died around noon on April 11, 2024, according to the information provided by her GPS collar. Predation by a mountain lion was the apparent cause of death. We

learned a great deal from 255, and she had a very interesting life. Rest in peace 255, you will be missed.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for The Nautical Mile, and several other saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is [elkhunter77@icloud.com](mailto:elkhunter77@icloud.com) For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)

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