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Photos Courtesy of Author



ARIZONA COUES' DEER

Whether the name Grey Ghost was coined by the late Jack O'Connor, whose adventures and writing ignited an entire generation's passion for hunting, really isn't as important as the fact that the dean of outdoor writers (whose writing was known for its thrift) felt it worthy of mention. Living in the unique mountainous terrain of the desert southwest, this whitetail subspecies is the perfect quarry for hunters looking to expand their horizons. These deer are plentiful through much of their range, but as their nickname indicates, Coues' deer can be very challenging to locate and stalk.

The author is all grins after connecting with a high 90's buck on an early October DIY hunt.



LOCATION

A look at Boone and Crockett's Trophy Search database over the last decade shows that Mexico leads in Coues' entries, though Arizona is a close second, posting 70 typical entries since 2008. For those looking to experience a Coues' deer hunt—or any first-time western hunt for that matter—don't set your sights or expectations at the level of B&C minimum scores. Statistics show that you will be disappointed, though this doesn't mean the data available from this source doesn't affect you. Our Records Program is maintained to monitor wildlife management successes and failures on a continental scale. If an area produces book-caliber trophies, the overall population generally will be healthy. Even if you are just looking for a respectable specimen to fill the freezer or to learn new country and habitat, areas identified by the presence of top entries is an indicator that those particular counties should move up on your list as you narrow down your search.

While Mexico offers great hunting for Coues' deer and an amazing cultural experience, for hunters looking to do it on their own, Arizona and New Mexico are more straightforward in terms of organizing a hunt. When comparing the two states, New Mexico produces some very high quality Coues' deer, though Arizona stands out as the best destination

NORTH AMERICANS ARE BEYOND FORTUNATE IN OUR ABILITY TO EXPERIENCE NATIVE WILDLIFE AND WILD PLACES.

for overall numbers (and ultimately, opportunity) to pursue the small whitetail. Both states are on a draw system, though a look at particular units in Arizona reveals that later-season rut hunts in December take a long time to draw, while an October hunt can be accomplished every year or two. Both my Arizona Coues' deer hunts have been done on draws with two or less points, and both trips resulted in us bringing back a buck in the cooler.

Especially for out-of-state hunters, my best advice is learn the biologic basics of the species you are hunting. For hunting deer in the southwest, a great starting point is Jim Heffelfinger's *Deer of the Southwest*. As you work your way through his book and start understanding *Odocoileus virginianus couesi*, you begin narrowing down the habitat you want to hunt. For this particular critter, you need to look at 4,000 feet in elevation and above. Another factor in Arizona, and pretty much any arid region for that matter (which covers most of the west), is sufficient water. Numerous platforms including onX Maps, many nonprofit wildlife

groups, etc., can help you locate guzzlers, stock tanks, and many of the manmade structures that, unfortunately, are required to sustain wildlife populations by supplying water on today's landscape.

Once you have a grasp on the habitat requirements, you can either begin looking for those particular traits and match them to Arizona hunting regulations for opportunity, or you can take a shortcut.

When using Trophy Search, historical numbers are interesting, but I want to know what has been produced in the last 10 years or so. This last decade search reveals four top counties around the Tucson area: Pima, Gila, Cochise, and Santa Cruz. Now you can go through each county separately and identify the units that fall within the county or, through the purchase of an onX Maps membership, you can search the county and view the unit's numbers on their platform. For Arizona, onX actually offers an overlay of the range of Coues' deer that can be turned on in map layers that reveals the units in their range.

From here, go to Arizona's website and read up on

the units. One of the first things you will notice is a warning for hunters down close to the border. If you are cautious about the unknown aspect of illegal border activities and prefer to avoid it, stick to the units north of Interstate 10. If you are okay with this unknown, you do have a higher chance at a big deer, and generally speaking, better draw odds south. This is where planning gets fun. For this example, let's assume you want to stay north. Comparing these units to the top counties can limit your search further, though Arizona's website outlines what to expect.

Once I have identified some units that sound intriguing, it's time to look at the opportunities each offers. For this I use Trophy Search, looking at kill dates by clicking the expanded date information and at the counties that cover the units I am interested in hunting. For Coues' deer, my data verifies that December is the rut and generally when the largest bucks are taken. When I researched the December hunt in the unit I was interested in, I saw that the draw odds for December were far lower. For example Unit 22

offered 400 permits the last week of October this year, 400 permits the second week of November, and 50 for the last two weeks of December.

This is where you can get creative. Say for example your significant other has always wanted to be standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona, and see if they can spot a girl in a flatbed Ford slowing down to take a look.... This is a great excuse to get some boots on the ground scouting—which can answer all your questions of a unit before

While the flora may be different than what you're use to, it's all beautiful though most of it in Coues' habitat will stick you!



EXCERPT FROM ARIZONA'S HUNT PLANNING PAGE FOR UNIT 27:

The largest whitetail deer population in Unit 27 is around the Mitchell Peak/Grey's Peak area, and along the southern face of the Mogollon Rim. Hunters report good numbers of deer in these areas. In particular, some quality deer are found in the areas around Strayhorse Canyon and Raspberry Canyon. Walnut Tank west of the highway in this area is excellent, as well. All the areas east and west of the highway and down toward the larger canyons coming off the Mogollon Rim offer good whitetail hunting. This country is rough and steep, with very limited vehicle access. Hwy 191 runs between Mitchell and Grey's Peak and climbs the Mogollon Rim at Blue Vista.

The Big Lue Mountains are located on the southern edge of Unit 27. There is fair to good whitetail hunting here. These mountains are in what is commonly known as the Mule Creek/Martinez area. Again, vehicle access is limited. Access north of the Big Lues is by Hwy 78. FR 212 will get you north of the Big Lues. Vegetation is pinyon-juniper with some open grassland.

Robinson Mesa and Hot Air Canyon have a whitetail herd that is increasing in numbers. It can be accessed via FR 217, then by trail No. 37. The shortest access from Hwy 191 is from Sheep Saddle using trail No. 16, or west along trail No. 33 (East Eagle). Vegetation is pinyon-juniper, oak thickets, and chaparral. The area is very brushy, but there are plenty of trails. A hot spot is an area known locally as Walnut Tank.

More populations of whitetail can be found throughout the rest of the unit, as well, although in much lower concentrations. For those lucky enough to draw a tag, it is a good idea to get out in the field and scout the area to locate where whitetail are abundant.

dedicating years to drawing the premium tag. With national forests, cave dwellings, the Grand Canyon, etc., there are many opportunities to combine a family vacation to Arizona with some scouting.

In my case, my wife had no desire to burn vacation unless we were hunting, so we elected to draw an easier hunt in an earlier season—which, according to draw odds, was a top December unit—and go do a scouting hunt. This allowed us the opportunity to learn the unit and decide if we wanted to dedicate six to eight years of applications to a particular unit in the future. In our case, the first trip down was great, but we saw a lot of people hunting very hard, and the areas we found didn't seem to be what we were looking for. My wife took a great buck on this hunt, and we were fortunate enough to have an Arizona resident show us the ropes of glassing, but we switched up units after this first trip and basically went through the above steps again.

LESSONS

We learned so much on that first trip. It behooves the hunter to know that it may well take more than one hunt to get a new species. If you are putting all your eggs in one basket for a one-time hunt out west, the all-in-one approach leaves many opportunities for you to be disappointed. Though, to me, the reward of figuring it out solo and enduring the fails along the way is a very important part of the hunting experience.

Coues' deer hunting is an optics game, plain and simple: 15x powers on a tripod is a must, and

sitting for extended periods is the key to success. If you haven't learned how to grid an area with bins on a tripod, start practicing before you go. Once you have covered a canyon, start again. After learning this technique on Coues' deer, we have found the technique useful on nearly all other species we pursue in open country.

What we found is every canyon that had the necessary ingredients for Coues' deer had Coues' deer, though two or three hours of glassing may be required to see them move. First and last light had deer moving, and much was dictated by temps. Interestingly enough, we also found lunar tables to be useful in predicting Coues' deer movement on our first trip, as no weather, rut, or any other factors seemed to be having an effect on movement times.

Unsurprisingly, finding glassing points off the main roads that revealed habitat not visible from roads resulted in the most deer and highest number of bucks seen. Most units in Arizona, including ours, had ample forest service and BLM to roam, and studying topo lines helped us identify glassing points before ever reaching the unit.

THE HUNT

My second trip started coming together after an acquaintance took a tremendous buck on a December hunt, and when I looked at the draw odds for the October tag for that unit, I found it easy to draw. The Tonto National Forest covered most of the area I was interested in—decent main access roads but



The authors wife Rebecca poses with her first Coues' whitetail on their first Arizona trip.

AS DAYLIGHT LIT THE CANYON, I WAS AWESTRUCK.

significant areas within an hour's hike offered seclusion—so I applied. Arizona's draw system is interesting, and it basically uses your first and second choices as a first choice, so you are included in the applicant pool whether you put down your unit first or second. There is always a chance to pull a great tag, so I put down the December hunt as choice one and the October hunt as choice two. July results told me I would be headed down in October.

The weather forecast showed highs in the 90s, so we froze all our food then added frozen two gallon jugs and Nalgens of water to our coolers. It was 19 hours to get to the first area I had identified through onX and Google Earth to hunt, so I left at noon a day and a half before the season was to open.

A good friend who is always down for an adventure, though doesn't really hunt much himself, agreed to go along. The drive was over 1,200 miles, and with gas at \$3.25 a gallon put us at just under \$200 each way. We made it through Montana, Idaho, and most of Utah before I hit the wall and paid about \$100 for a hotel room to grab a quick four hours of sleep. Other than a couple gas stops and way too long of a stop at a Red Lobster in Utah for dinner, we pretty much drove constantly. I don't

remember exactly what time we hit the road that first morning, but by 7 a.m. we had made Arizona and were scouting by early afternoon. Unfortunately what I was looking for didn't really exist in the first area I had identified during pre-scouting. There was habitat and we saw a few deer but the areas that seemed remote from Google Earth turned out to be rather easily accessed so after a few hours my number two spot became my better option.

The drive down took significantly longer than I expected, and as we crawled up the Forest Service road, light was quickly fading. The road was rutted hard, driven by flash flooding that left huge, exposed rocks repeatedly testing the new tires I had bought a few weeks earlier. The west is not 4-ply or rental car-tire type terrain. Watching my elevation, I knew I was short of Coues' habitat. As we crossed a major creek at a low-water crossing, I was feeling far more confident—there was water, and the access road was not easily navigated. We began climbing as soon as we made the crossing, and the road narrowed to about three-quarters of the width of my truck. I gripped the wheel tighter and tighter with each passing hole, rock, or arroyo as we crawled up the road. It was

long past dark by this point, and we approached 5,000 feet in elevation, according to the GPS. We hadn't seen a flat spot, let alone a campsite for the last hour, so when we came to a cattle guard with a fence across the bypass to the left, I pulled the truck over and we leveled the vehicle the best we could.

Originally my buddy Tony had planned to stay in a tent, but we both just crawled into our bags in the back of the truck. Sleep was rough for the few hours we had, so we rose well before daylight on opening day. We retrieved a couple partially frozen pre-made breakfast burritos that I tried to heat up on a propane grill as the percolator started chattering on the stove.

As daylight lit the canyon, I was awestruck. Wanting to be on the glass at first light, I set up the tripod on the edge of the road and began breaking apart the countryside as light filled the canyon. A small ridge just up the road from where we had camped appeared to offer a great high point for glassing. A decent trail ran a couple hundred yards out the ridge where a huge flat rock hung off the end right before the topography dropped hundreds of feet to the creek bottom. Positioning my tripod on this rock, I had an unobstructed view for about 340 degrees. Within a few minutes I spotted a couple does coming up from the creek below and disappearing into a draw just out of sight. I stayed at this glassing point until about 10:30 that morning and saw a few more does before the heat of the day forced me back to the limited shade of the truck.

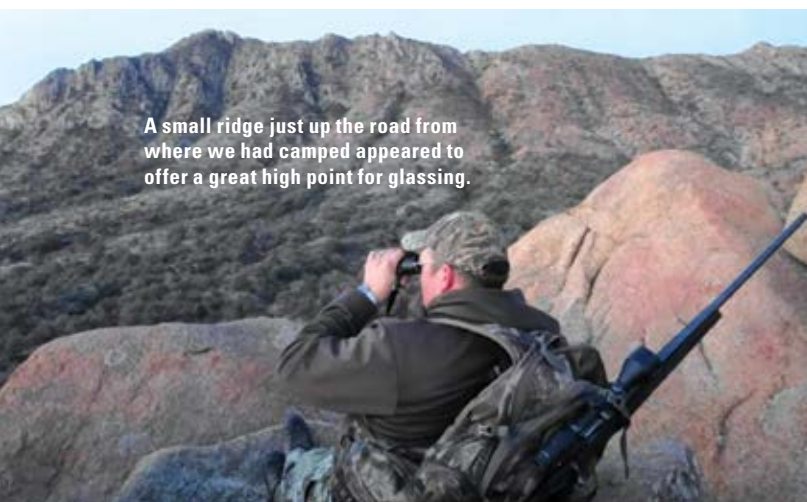
That evening, as soon as the sun neared touching the ridge above us, we began the hot hike above the road to look over the top into another hidden basin to our west. By the time we reached the top,

the sun had dropped low enough that the canyon before us was in the early evening shadow and we soon picked out a couple more does feeding. We stayed at the lookout until dark, though we didn't spot any more deer.

The next day we hiked into the creek bottom to try to work up into the draw where the does had disappeared that morning. Calculating the distance from my GPS, I figured an hour would easily put us in a good position by daylight. Tony and I bailed off the ridge and were making good time until we neared the creek. Our headlamps only illuminated a few feet in front of us, and as I paused to ensure direction I put my foot on a boulder that instantly dislodged and tumbled into a black abyss. The canyon walls of the creek were nearly vertical, and while Tony was down to try it, I decided to hold up until daylight to ensure we could safely descend.

Even after daylight, dropping into the creek was precarious, but we made great time once we hit the other side and soon found a small hill to glass up into the canyon. Nearly as soon as we set up, I spotted three bucks maybe 500 yards into the canyon. They were quickly moving about a small tree, almost running in a circle, preventing me from being able to accurately judge what any of them had for antlers, though none were huge. All of a sudden, the group split with each buck going a different direction and disappearing with a few bounds into the juniper.

We stayed there until mid-morning when the heat of the day forced our retreat. Tony and I would move as quickly as possible from tree to tree, standing far closer to one another than made either of us comfortable, trying to recover in the limited available shade.



A small ridge just up the road from where we had camped appeared to offer a great high point for glassing.

When we got back to the truck, nearly all the water in the cooler was at least two-thirds thawed, and the ice cold water could have been the best tasting thing I have ever had. Surmising these deer had gone further up this canyon and not being extremely impressed with number of deer we had seen west of camp, I decided to make a move east as another road appeared on the map three or four miles in that direction and at what appeared to be the top edge of the canyon where the smaller bucks had headed.

It took us a few hours to work around there, though the air conditioning felt good! The thermometer readings in the 90s confirmed this was the place to be sitting instead of glassing. By mid-afternoon, we had worked around the opposite side of the canyon and grabbed a quick bite of

lunch. Though it was still significantly hotter than I would prefer, we grabbed some bins and went for a short hike down into the brush. Within a couple hundred yards, I noticed a Coues' shed on the ground. While sheds obviously don't indicate where deer are in season vs. wintering, the size of the antler had me very excited as it was far better than I had hoped to find for a Coues' buck.

While we didn't find any great location to glass in this particular canyon, we found ourselves at the head of a knife-backed ridge that appeared somewhat accessible for a scouting hike that evening to make a plan for the following morning.

We followed through on this plan and couldn't have been more than a quarter mile off the main road at a nice rock outcropping which provided

cover and a great vantage point. We soon surmised most folks were on this particular access road of the unit as ATV after ATV would drive by. As the afternoon shadows first invaded the bottom of the canyon maybe 45 minutes into our glassing, Tony tells me he sees a couple bucks below us and one is pretty good. As soon as I got the buck in the glass, I knew it was a shooter and in range. I quickly popped the bins off the tripod and placed my .25-06 on it for a rest. The first shot hit hard and he was down, but a couple follow-ups were necessary to ensure he was anchored.

The recovery was fairly uneventful; the buck was soon field dressed, and we were heading up the hill again as light faded. It was good and dark with no moon as we neared where the truck should have been, but the juniper was thick and headlamps didn't appear to be illuminating anything familiar. Tony and I paused to discuss which way to go but unfortunately did not agree. With both of us feeling

TOTAL COST

LICENSE/TAG: \$475

FUEL: \$400

HOTEL: \$200

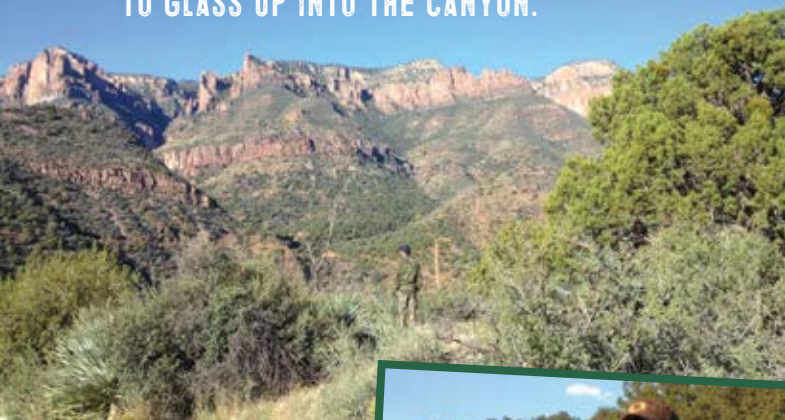
ICE/FOOD: \$125

**\$1,200 BUCKS,
FIVE DAYS,
95-INCH COUES' DEER**

extremely confident in our guess, I wasn't quite sure how to proceed. I remembered I had my keys in my pocket. When I hit the unlock button, the headlights revealed we had navigated to within about 30 yards of the truck.

After skinning the deer, temps were still in the 70s, and when I looked into the cooler to get some water, I saw that all our ice was gone on just the tail end of the second day of the season. Knowing it was so hot, we had no option but to get the deer back into a town to get some ice. ■

DROPPING INTO THE CREEK WAS PRECARIOUS, BUT WE MADE GREAT TIME ONCE WE HIT THE OTHER SIDE AND SOON FOUND A SMALL HILL TO GLASS UP INTO THE CANYON.



The author's October buck. The recovery was fairly uneventful; the deer was soon field dressed, and the author was heading up the hill as light faded.



NEXT UP: ALASKA CARIBOU

