

Alberta's Other Deer

By KEITH BALFOUR

Alberta...there's no question that this Canadian province is at the top of the list of today's marquee destinations for trophy whitetails. A trip through the records book will tell you that. The press given to Alberta whitetails over the years has been truly amazing. You can't pick up a magazine today and not read something about Alberta whitetails. Stories on individual "super" bucks taken, sheds found, hot areas and hot hunts fill the pages of hunting publications. There is no denying the facts. They just flat grow 'em big up there. Big bodies and big rack genetics are the rule, not the exception. However, big whitetails are not the only thing that has been growing big in Alberta.

Something exciting has happened to Alberta's less publicized mule deer. This something is moving mule deer along side of Alberta's whitetails in the race for the province's most popular trophy animal.

Modern game management is relatively new in terms of nature's timeline. We are just now seeing the benefits of changes made years ago to protect and enhance game populations and trophy quality. More easily affected by over-hunting, mule deer were experiencing a noticeable decline in both overall numbers and mature bucks. This decline prompted a change in the province's southern zone's management strategies. Since 1988, Alberta residents have been on a drawing system for

mule deer tags. This new program is now paying big dividends in record class bucks and mule deer closer to range carrying capacities.

I have been fortunate to hunt southeastern Alberta for the past three seasons and have seen, first hand, the results of Alberta Fish and Wildlife Department's decision to reverse this negative trend. I have

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also witnessed the trophy potential we can expect in the future from this highly touted "whitetail" province.

Like thousands of other sportsmen, I am a whitetail deer hunter at heart. I traveled to Alberta for the first time during the 1991 season in pursuit of their fabled whitetails, not mule deer.

I selected the southeastern part of the province for several reasons. The main reason was the

impressive track record of outfitter, Jack Franklin, and the opportunity to take both a whitetail and a mule deer on the same hunt. With the mind set of most sportsmen traveling to Alberta, I chose to fill my mule deer tag fast, in order to have more time to spend looking for a good whitetail.

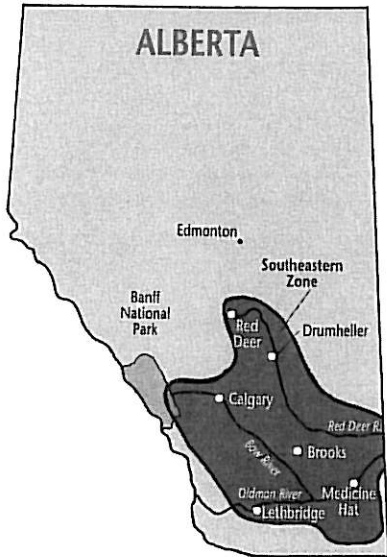
I took a handsome 160 B&C class mule deer buck on the second day of the hunt and felt good about my decision. That was until I spent a little more time looking around at what the country had to offer and saw what my fellow hunters in camp were taking.

The 150 B&C and 160 B&C class bucks were a dime a dozen. That fact together with an unofficial 235 non-typical and an unofficial 194 typical hanging in camp after the third day, took the starch out of my shirt. I made a mistake, a big mistake! My luck on whitetails went sideways, never getting the opportunity at the whitetail I had hoped for. I did get a clearer picture of why there was an abundance of good mule deer in an area known for its whitetails.

Jack explained that, although the river bottom willow and cottonwood thickets held some truly noteworthy whitetails, his area was coming on strong for mule deer. "We had very few of the class of mule deer bucks we're seeing now six years ago. Ever since resident hunters had to draw for a tag, mule deer numbers have exploded and bucks keep getting bigger each year."



Most residents are happy with the venison hunting season brings each year and a whitetail tag is still an over-the-counter purchase. Consequently, resident pressure on the mule deer is down drastically.



My decision to return to Jack's for the following two seasons was fueled by the prospects that the bucks that seemed to boil out of every other coulee, would be adding another year of growth to their racks. This hunch proved to be right on the money for the 1992 season. The 150's where now 170's and as abundant as ever.

A death in my family cut my hunt short in '92, but I was still able to take an unofficial 177-5/8 B&C mule deer. It was a good buck for a one day hunt. Not quite the new provincial record typical at 201-5/8 B&C that Hank Conrad from Twisp, WA, took with Jack the week before my hunt. My 1993 hunt also kept up with Jack's "better and better" theory with a super 188-3/8 B&C typical taken on the fourth day of my six day hunt.

I haven't been the only one taking these "sleeper" muleys. Other hunters in camp, in all

three seasons, took and saw the same caliber of bucks. Also, a recent trip to Edmonton, Alberta, proved that Jack wasn't the only outfitter cashing in for his clients on the new found wealth of these trophy muleys.

I attended the Professional Outfitters Association of Alberta (P.O.A.A.) convention this past December and was able to view the photo collections of other Alberta outfitters. The cat was definitely out of the bag, as they say.

A PINCH TO GROW ON

It is a well-known fact that trophy class animals are the product of three major factors; age, available food sources and genetics. Reducing the resident pressure is contributing to the age factor. Bucks are seeing their fourth and fifth years allowing them to reach their full genetic potential. In addition to this, hard winters and winter kill have been out of the equation for nearly a decade. Southeastern Alberta just doesn't receive the deep snow and winters with the prolonged cold that can take their toll on a deer herd.

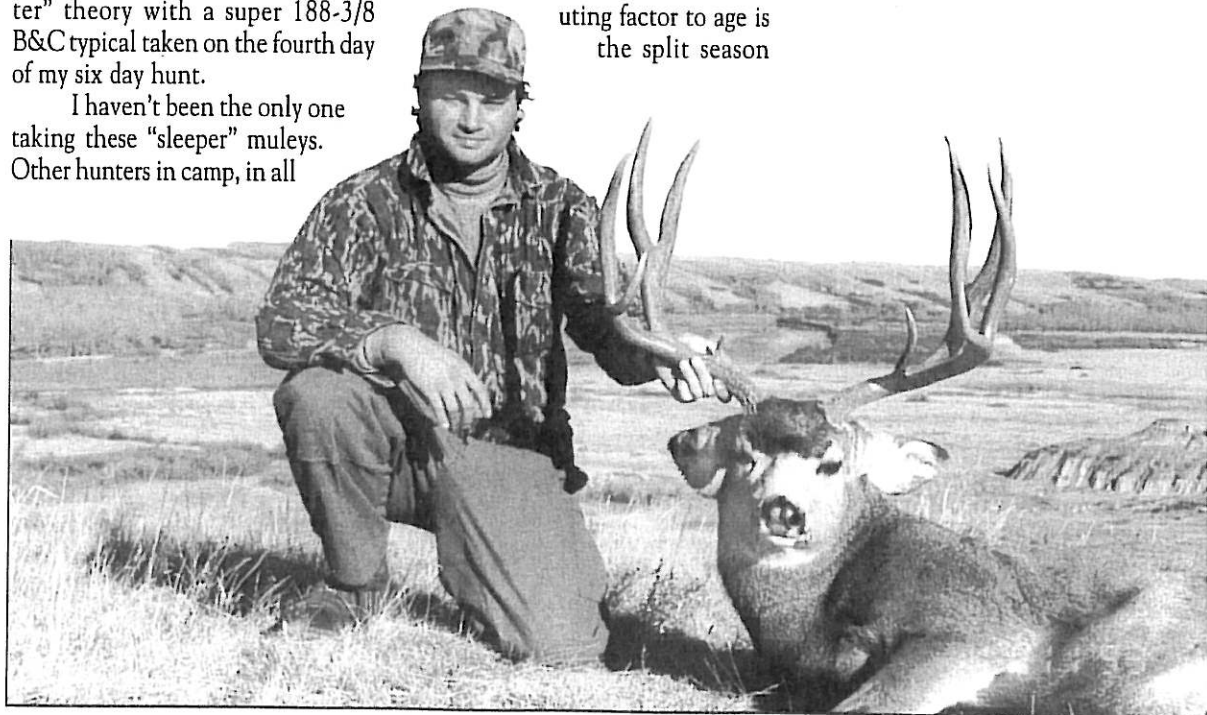
Another contributing factor to age is the split season

in the southern region of the province. Also introduced in 1988 was the four-week deer season (basically the month of November) and the limiting of hunt dates to three days a week. The season is open for Thursday, Friday and Saturday of each week and closed for the other four days.

At first impression, this on again, off again season seemed to be a little out of the ordinary and a real hassle. You end up with six actual hunting days in a ten day hunt. Some outfitters do offer three day hunts and believe it or not, three days can be enough time. The country is fairly open and accessible. When you locate a good buck, your chances are better than even you can get on him, especially during the November rut.

This split season is also directly responsible for the rise in herd populations and the quality of bucks. There is no doubt that less available days afield and undisturbed breeding time are major contributors to the Alberta mule deer success story. Their whitetail herd isn't hurting from this strategy either.

AUTHOR WITH HIS MULE DEER BUCK FROM THE 1993 SEASON. THE UNOFFICIAL BOONE AND CROCKETT SCORE IS 188-3/8.



GROCERIES

Alberta's south eastern zones are predominately open prairie, brush covered river bottoms and agricultural lands. With plenty of natural grasses and the added bonus of healthy supplies of wheat, alfalfa, rye and barley, the deer herds aren't missing many meals, especially during the critical winter months.

IN THEIR GENES

Resident genetics is another strong reason for this area's past success and future prospects. Although the mystical 30 inch yard stick shows up in a few bucks taken each year, the norm is for a narrower "goal post" rack and good scoring typical genetics. The majority of bucks you see will be clean, "box rack" bucks with deep front and back forks and good mass. All the makings for an area that is staged to produce typical record book entries each year. There are a fair number of non-typical bucks showing up each year, but not to the extent found on the Arizona-Kaibab, Utah-Paunsaugunt, southeast Idaho or Colorado plains. Normally, the most you will see in non-typical points are drop tines and "kickers".

The southeastern zones of the province near Red Deer, Drumheller, Brooks, Medicine Hat and Lethbridge are the prime areas that have been prospering from the new regulations. Another area to look over includes the resident draw zones near Calgary and west into the foothills near Banff. The Banff area is paying off in super bucks for the horseback, high-country hunter.

If a big mule deer has been on your wish list, these areas in Alberta are worth keeping an eye on. I do not think that this rising star will ever unseat the whitetail as Alberta's most sought after trophy big game animal, however, if present conditions continue, look for some truly impressive heads from our neighbors up north in years to come.



TOP: HANK CONRAD FROM TWISP, WASHINGTON WITH THE NEW PROVINCIAL RECORD TYPICAL TAKEN IN 1992. BOONE & CROCKETT SCORE OF 201-5/8.

MIDDLE: PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK FRANKLIN OUTFITTING.

BOTTOM: PHOTO COURTESY OF AMERI-CANA EXPEDITIONS, INC.

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