

THE FIRE STILL BURNS

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THIS STORY IS ONE OF THE 104 THAT APPEAR IN THE NEW Boone and Crockett Club's 22nd Big Game Awards book due out this October. The book is available for \$31.95 for current Associates. You will find an order form enclosed with this issue.

It was just breaking day as I shouldered my fifty-five pound pack for a nine day Coues' whitetail deer hunt in a remote section of southeastern Arizona. Suddenly and much to my surprise, the early morning silence was broken by the nearby whistle of a buck. Through the early morning's light I watched as he made a spectacular escape out the canyon bottom. What a way to start the day!

It was mid-December and I possessed one of three hundred permits for Coues' whitetail. This particular hunt runs from the 17th of the month through the 31st. During this time, the rut begins and the bucks become very active. This makes spotting deer ideal. However, it can make finding a particular buck extremely difficult because he may cover an enormous amount of territory in hot pursuit of the ladies.

I look forward to pursuing these beautiful creatures and consequently make plans for the hunt year around. This year was no exception. My trip was carefully planned well in advance. Throughout the year, I had diligently scouted for a record class Coues'. In this particular area, I had previously spotted two potential candidates. I was certain that either of these bucks would easily surpass the 110 point Boone and Crockett minimum requirement. One of the bucks was an old timer that I had observed on numerous occasions. He sported five even

tines on each beam. Although his headgear seemed to be smaller than the previous year he was still very impressive. The second buck had four even tines on each beam. I didn't have the opportunity to score him well, but I was certain that he would be the highest scoring of the two.

I have shared deer camps as far back as I can remember and in 1953 I took my first Coues' buck. Even then I was intrigued by the thought of what monster buck might make his home in the mountains that I so dearly love. I got serious about meeting the monster of my dreams about twenty years ago. I hunt both New Mexico and Arizona each year and throughout the seasons my hunting techniques have significantly improved. These deer have challenged me to become a good hunter and I have enjoyed the learning even though some valuable lessons were the result of a costly mistake. But mostly I enjoy the beauty of the Southwest and its unique variety of wildlife. I now measure success by the amount of enjoyable days spent afield and not just harvesting an animal.

I consider the Coues' whitetail to be the ultimate challenge and one of the most beautiful of all animals. They are small in size and their coloration blends well with the desert terrain. I have observed these dainty deer for hours on end and have come to better understand their habits and ten-

dencies. The mature bucks are extremely weary and elusive. They move cautiously and are aware of every movement and sound that surrounds them. Their survival depends on this character trait because to the cougar and coyote it has been open hunting season on them since birth.

As afternoon arrived, I had camp set up at a predetermined site miles from the nearest road. I glassed a nearby basin until dark then settled deep into sweet dreams of days to come. The next morning, the day before the season, would be dedicated to glassing my favorite areas.

By daybreak, I was working my way along the base of the rim rock in an attempt to locate the 4x4 buck I had seen earlier. I crawled out on a huge rock which is one of my favorite glassing spots. Directly below I spotted a bedded doe. She watched intently as I glassed the canyons below but appeared content and unconcerned. Occasionally I would look her way to make sure the situation had not changed. On my final "doe check" I noticed that she was about to be joined by a large deer approaching from the other side of the hill. Although I remained motionless, the moment the deer came into sight it spotted me. After a lengthy stare down the deer relaxed and continued on about its business. Safe for the moment, I turned my 15x tripod mounted binoculars toward the intruder for a closer look. As I had

hoped, it was the 4x4 followed by two does. I was able to study him for about four hours at 200 yards. Mentally I scored him, trying in vain to be conservative. When my calculations went beyond 120 points I thought I must be crazy. At that point the only thing I knew for certain was that I was staring at the largest Coues' I have ever seen in the wild during forty plus years of hot pursuit. Then and there I vowed to hunt him exclusively until the hunt's end.

Concerned about the wind, I eased from the rock and slipped under a piñon tree for one last look before crawling out of site. Tomorrow was the opener and I would be in the same area at first light. During the hike back to camp, I tried to control my excitement by playing mind games. I could not allow myself to believe that the buck would score in the 120's yet in the back of my mind I knew that he must. By the time I reached camp I had a perfect game plan outlined and couldn't help but be overtaken by confidence. My plan was based on years of experience and practice and I was sure it would work. This was the opportunity of a lifetime and after years of hard work and anxious anticipation I would not let it slip away at the moment of truth.

Morning found me painstakingly dissecting the landscape with my binoculars. Moving ever so slowly, to gain access to each vantage point. I could not let the buck and his harem spot me first. By day's end I had seen several bucks - none of which were the 4x4. My confidence remained. It was as though I knew our paths would cross.

Before daylight the next morning I was once again working my way along the base of the rim rock. I set up at a good vantage point and began to glass a large canyon. Above the canyons crest I spotted him. He was bedded about 600 yards from me in the adjoining canyon. He looked absolutely huge against the grassy yellow background! I knew the area well and quickly reviewed my game plan while following a well

worn trail to a rock outcrop. I eased out on a rock which overlooked the small canyon that contained the trophy of a lifetime. With binoculars in hand I was able to spot him up and feeding. He was accompanied by three does and a very respectable buck. I carefully placed my pack on the edge of the rock and prepared to shoot from the prone position. As I settled in for the shot the rising sun began to interfere with my sight and I had trouble distinguishing him in the canyon darkness. I had to be certain that I chose the correct buck.

With binoculars I was able to locate him again considerably uphill from the original spot. Evidently he had been chasing the lesser buck. He was now about 125 yards from me moving broadside back down toward the doe. This time I easily picked him up in my scope. Making certain this was the trophy buck I left nothing to chance.

At the crack of my .25-06 he jumped and landed behind a large juniper. The shot felt perfect. I chambered another round and waited. In a flash, he sprinted out to a small bush and disappeared behind the rifle. A few minutes passed and I began trying to locate him with my binoculars. No luck. The doe, not knowing what had happened to her handsome companion, began to investigate the situation. She approached the bush and began stamping in bewilderment. Thirty long minutes had passed since the shot. I was quite certain it was safe to approach.

The buck was a sight to behold. In the past I have been somewhat disappointed by my judgment. This time however, I was very satisfied!

Long ago I set a goal of taking a 120 point buck during my lifetime. I knew this would be a dif-

ficult task at best and probably unrealistic. My hard work and diligence had finally paid off. The gods had successfully guided me on this one, I felt their presence in my confidence and as we celebrated this long awaited occasion.

By the light of the camp fire that evening I rough scored my trophy at 127 points. Needless to say I couldn't help but admire the beauty of my prize long into the night.

The anticipation of sharing my good fortune with family and friends made the rough trip out seem much easier. It would require two trips, one with my gear and the other with the deer. Once again I devised a plan to insure that the head and cape would never have to leave my watchful eye.

In February of 1994 the final official measurements were taken. The score was 124 typical points. According to the Records of North American Big Game, 10th edition



my trophy had the potential of becoming the new number thirteenth of all time. As it turns out my Coues' deer received the First Award in the 22nd Awards Program.

I feel blessed and consider this to be the accomplishment of a lifetime. I wondered if my desire to hunt Coues' would continue? After my hunt the next December, I am pleased to say the fire still burns and probably always will.

RONALD M. GERDES WITH HIS COUES' WHITETAIL THAT SCORES 124 POINTS AND RECEIVED THE A FIRST AWARD AT THE 22ND BIG GAME AWARDS BANQUET.