

# Destina

## Hunting for Trophy Coues' Deer

**By Bob Robb**

B&C Professional Member

As I sat on a brushy mountainside somewhere in Sonora, Mexico, waiting for the sun to give me enough light to begin glassing, I was puzzled by the way my heart was fluttering. It wasn't as if I had not done this many, many times before. Nor was I glassing for an animal with huge antlers that take the breath away from serious buck hunters. All things considered, it should have just been another routine day of deer hunting, something that brings me great joy and pleasure, but nothing that you would think would have given me sweaty palms and an adrenaline rush akin to the last time I had taken my bow and wiggled up a salmon stream in south-east Alaska on a September afternoon, looking for a big brown bear to poke.

### COUES' DEER LOCATIONS BOTH TYPICAL & NON-TYPICAL (1997-2007)

RANK	LOCATION	TOTAL ENTRIES
1	Mexico	98
2	Arizona	58
3	New Mexico	5

# tion





Instead, this day I was hoping to find a good Coues' whitetail buck, a deer that, with the exception of Florida's Key white-tail, is the smallest subspecies of deer in North America. Despite its diminutive size and lack of take-your-breath-away antlers, Coues' deer hunting is one of the most exciting and challenging adventures any North American big-game hunter can experience.

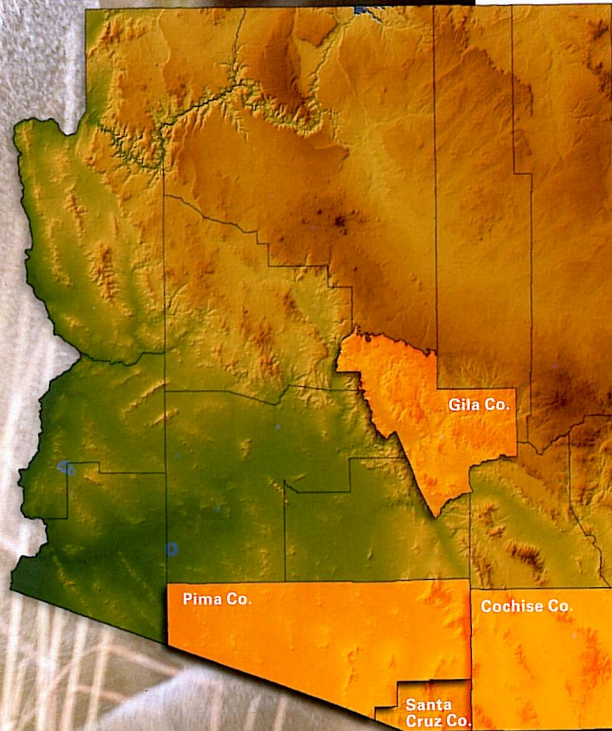
I made my first Coues' deer hunt back in the early 1980s when I was an associate editor at one of the country's big hunting magazines. At the time, I met Duwane Adams of San Manuel, Arizona (520/385-4995 — [www.arizonabiggamehunting.com](http://www.arizonabiggamehunting.com)). Back then Adams was beginning to make a name for himself as a premier guide for large Arizona mule deer, elk, and Coues' deer, and he graciously invited me to teach me what it was all about. It was also a time when drawing a Coues'-deer tag in Arizona was pretty much guaranteed (unlike today), so when I got my tag I called Adams.

Adams pioneered the use of glassing with tripod-mounted 15X binoculars at long distances, and to this day he can spot deer like no one else I have met since. After a three-hour climb in the dark, I killed my first buck by 9:00 a.m., an 8-pointer that might have scored 75 B&C points. Packing that little buck down the mountain filled my heart with a joy that is hard to describe. The incomparable kaleidoscope of a sunrise, the bright, sunny winter desert weather, the area's great beauty, the feel of my body working both up and down the mountain, the excitement of seeing quail, javelina, and

Coues' deer... sitting on that Sonora mountain late last year, I realized that nothing about this game has changed for me.

To date, I have taken 10 Coues' deer bucks, three with my bow and the rest with a variety of centerfire rifles. I shot my largest buck with the bow near Hermosillo a few years back, a real stud with five-inch bases that, unfortunately for me, had broken both his main beams just where his G-3's would have branched off. Still he gross scored 87 typical inches; I figured he was a 120-inch-plus buck had everything been attached. That may not sound like much, but in the world of Coues' deer hunting, a 120-incher is a stud.

Therein lies the rub for most American deer hunters



enthralled with oversized antlers. After all, the minimum score for a typical B&C eastern whitetail is 160 typical and 185 non-typical, while for a Coues' buck it's 110 typical and 120 non-typical. (The minimum Pope & Young score for whitetails is 120 and 155, while for Coues' deer it's 65 and 95 points, respectively.) To date there have been a handful of Coues' bucks that have been officially measured and score in the 140s, but not a truckload by any means.

The current World's Record typical as found on the Boone and Crockett Club's website was taken in Pima County, Arizona, by Ed Stockwell back in 1953, and scores 144-1/8 points. It has main beam lengths of 20-2/8 (right) and 20-5/8 (left), an inside spread of 15-3/8, and base circumference measurements of 5-4/8 (right) and 5-6/8 (left). It has five scorable points on both sides. The current World's Record non-typical Coues' buck was taken by an unnamed Native American in Graham County, Arizona, in 1971 and is now owned by D.J. Hollinger and B. Howard. It scores an astounding 196-2/8 points. It has a right main beam of 20-4/8 inches, a left main beam of 19-3/8 inches, 4-6/8-inch bases, and 11 scorable points on the right side and 15 scorable points on the left side. It is almost frightening to look at!

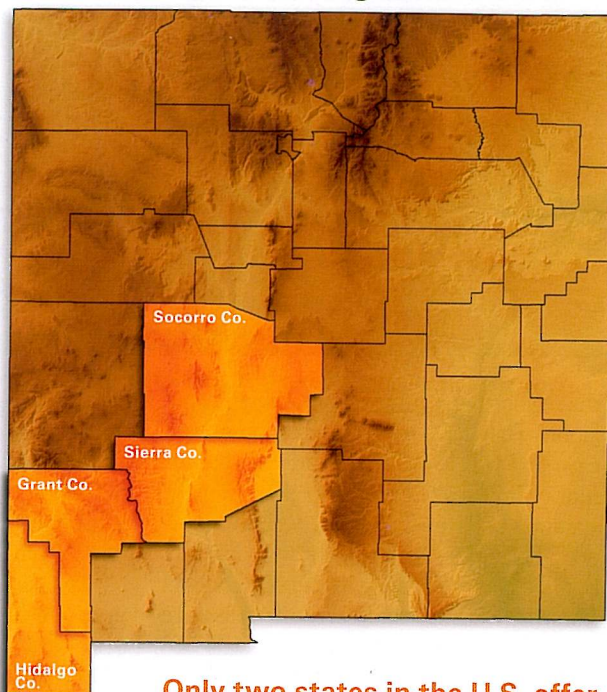
The average Coues' whitetail buck will only stand about 30 to 32 inches high at the shoulder with a chest measuring just 12 inches deep, and weigh in at about 100 pounds, with a mature doe weighing about 75 pounds. An extremely large buck might weigh 135 pounds if you're looking for some great-tasting meat for the freezer. However, it is not easy to come by. Most Coues' bucks are killed after some sort of long walk, and then must be packed back. And after you're done with them, there really isn't much to cut and wrap. A big buck will rarely field-dress 100 pounds.

Another factor that inhibits this incredible little deer's popularity is its small home range. Coues' deer (*Odocoileus virginianus couesi*) were named after Dr. Elliott Coues (pronounced "cows"), an army quartermaster stationed at Ft. Whipple, Arizona Territory, in 1865-66. Coues spent just as much time studying the region's flora and fauna as the little desert whitetail, which is his legacy. The animals are a slate-gray, almost dainty-looking whitetail with the most limited range of any huntable American deer subspecies. Arizona's Mogollon Rim forms their northern range boundary, while the Colorado River forms the western boundary. The boundaries stretch eastward across Arizona into the southwestern region

of New Mexico. To the south they range well into old Mexico, with Sonora holding the largest numbers and the deer reaching as far south as the state of Sinaloa (for records-keeping purposes, Coues' deer are only accepted from the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua). They like mountain and foothill country, usually between 3,000 and 8,000 feet, preferring arid and semi-arid scrub oak and mesquite country filled with grassy bowls, jumbled rocks, and a plethora of thorny plants and cactus. No hard population estimates exist, but most experts seem to agree there are only about 50,000 Coues' deer in the world.

Coues' deer are easily the most skittish deer species I have ever hunted. I sometimes think they are afraid of their own shadow! Of course, that is easy to understand when you realize that from the time they are born they are really little more than cat food for

# Destination: Trophy Coues'



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**I arrowed my largest-ever Coues' buck near Hermosillo, Sonora, while sitting on a water hole in an old river bed. He has 5-inch bases, and had he not broken both main beams right where the G-3's would extend, would have scored in the 120s. As it is, he has 87 inches of antler.**

find out where, historically, the majority of record-book bucks in both the typical and non-typical categories have come from.

This search shows that, All-time, Arizona leads the pack with 267 typical and 73 non-typical entries. Second on the list is Sonora, Mexico, with 117 typical and 27 non-typical entries. Third is New Mexico, with 26 typical and 4 non-typical entries.

Okay, this is all fine and dandy, but these are huge geographical areas. To zero in on where to look exactly, narrow it down. In Sonora, that is impossible, because the necessary information is not available. In Arizona it is, and it looks like this.

The Arizona county that has produced the most typical record-book entries over time is Pima, with 77 total entries. Next in line are Santa Cruz, 25; Gila, 24; the Santa Rita Mountains, 23; Cochise, 22; and Greenlee, 10. The Mexican state of Chihuahua has produced 9 total typical entries. In New Mexico, by far the leader is Hidalgo County, with 12 entries; next is Grant County, with 7, and Sierra County, with 3.

In terms of non-typical entries, the huge geographical area of Sonora, Mexico, leads the way with 27 entries. However, in Arizona, Pima County has 19 entries, followed by these counties: Cochise and Gila, 10 each; Santa Cruz, 9; Graham, 5; and Apache, and Yavapai, 3 each. Hidalgo County, New Mexico, has also produced 3 entries.

Serious trophy hunters know that to separate the wheat from the chaff, you need to find out where the monsters are coming from in recent years. After all, so many things can affect a given area's ability to produce good deer hunting. Over-hunting, development, etc., does change the picture over time. That's why when I am researching trophy-hunting areas, I always look at data from the past 7 years. This gives me a clear picture of what my potential is today to find that buck of my dreams.

For typical Coues' deer, in the period 2000-2007, the most typical record-

book entries came from Sonora, Mexico, with 56 total entries. Next on the list are the Arizona counties of Pima with 13, and Santa Cruz, with 5. Chihuahua, Mexico, has produced 4, the same number as Cochise County, Arizona. Gila County, Arizona, has produced 3 during this period, while one record-book typical was entered from Graham and Greenlee counties, Arizona; and Grant, Sierra, and Hidalgo counties, New Mexico.

In terms of non-typical entries for the period 2000-2007, the database shows that Sonora, Mexico, leads the way again with 16 entries. Arizona's Graham and Pima counties have produced 2 entries each, while Chihuahua, Mexico, has produced 1.

So, then, given the data, where do you hunt? While Arizona still produces some outstanding Coues' deer hunting and has several superb guides who can help you find a big deer, today the very best Coues' whitetail hunting both in terms of overall deer numbers and trophy potential is found south of the border, in Sonora, Mexico. On the very best ranches it is possible to see more mature bucks in a single day than you can spot in a week of hard hunting in Arizona or New Mexico. Your chances of finding a buck that scores over 100 typical Boone and Crockett points — a benchmark score for serious Coues' deer hunters but still below the book minimum — is greater, too.

That doesn't mean hunting Sonora is a no-brainer. You'll need to go outfitted, and that means sifting through the many outfitters who offer Coues' deer hunts and choosing the one you think can produce the kind of hunt you want. Choosing an outfitter is a whole 'nother ball of wax, but I will say this — if a record-class Coues' buck is your goal, forget about tacking a Coues' deer hunt onto the back end of a hunt for desert mule deer. Odds are you'll end up doing neither well.

Nonetheless, do not overlook Arizona or New Mexico. As Adams told me at our seminar this past winter, he is still finding big deer in the same mountains he has hunted since he was a kid. He said, "Killing a book Coues' deer is about the hardest thing a big-game hunter can attempt to do in all of North America. You have to hunt the right place, hunt it hard, have some luck, and when the opportunity presents itself, be able to make what may be a tough shot."

We all know there are no guarantees in Fair Chase hunting. When it comes to hunting what Jack O'Connor called The Desert Elf, I am willing to wager the farm that it will get under your skin. Sometimes, big things do come in small packages. ■

the region's burgeoning mountain lion population. They have excellent eyes, noses, and ears, and will leave the country at the first hint of trouble. They are also great "hidlers," standing or laying stock-still seemingly forever. Recently, I was part of a Coues' deer hunting panel at a big sport show in Phoenix featuring Adams and Western big-game bowhunting expert Randy Ulmer. When both were asked about how they hunt Coues' deer with a bow, both unashamedly said, "From a blind or tree stand." That's because stalking within bow range of a Coues' buck is more difficult than sneaking the sunrise past a rooster. That's one reason the use of an oversized, tripod binocular of 15-20X makes so much sense. The big, relatively open country makes it possible to spot deer up to a couple miles away. Doing so allows you to find them before they can find you, allowing the hunter to plan a stalk to a vantage point overlooking where the animals are feeding, or if the morning has worn on before you find them, bedded for the day, and set up the shot with your rifle without kicking them out of the country.

When it comes to locating potential trophy hunting hot spots, I have always found the Boone and Crockett Club's *Records of North American Big Game* to be an invaluable source of research material. Sure, there are other sources of information, but this book is like the cornerstone of a well-built house. It's where I turn first.

The best way to utilize the Boone and Crockett Club's database is to use the Club's Trophy Search section on the club website, [www.boone-crockett.org](http://www.boone-crockett.org). This is a subscribers-only section, but believe me when I tell you the value for the minimal fee is priceless when it comes to quickly and efficiently searching the records.

Here's what you do. Go to the Trophy Search area of the website and type in Coues' whitetails. My first inquiry is to