

Destiny



**Top 10 States
Mule Deer Entries
1998 - 2008**

ation:

Trophy Mule Deer

Past, Present, and Future

Trophy {troh-fee}—noun; plural—phies. Anything taken in war, hunting, competition, etc., esp. when preserved as a memento; spoil, prize, or award.

Mule deer—noun. A deer, *Odocoileus hemionus*, of western North America, having large ears and gray coat.

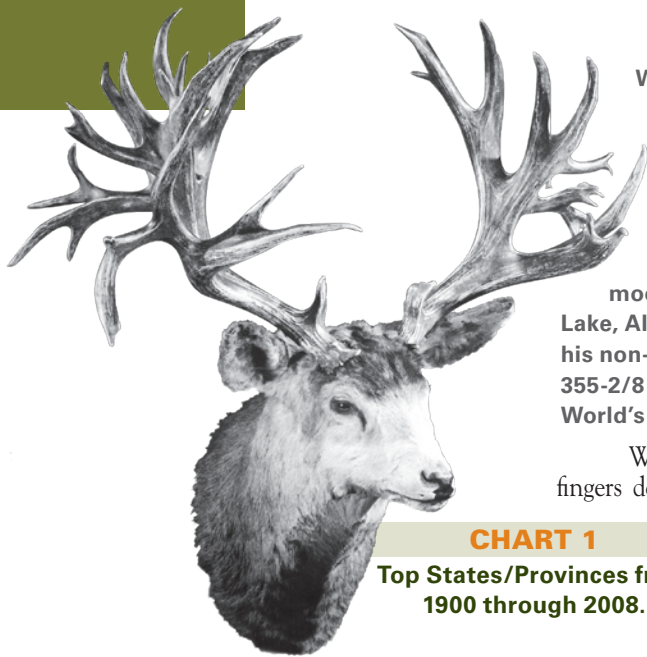
Fanatic {fuh-nat-ik}—noun. A person with an extreme and uncritical enthusiasm or zeal.

I do not know a trophy mule deer fanatic that does not plan, practice, prepare, calculate, spend, and dream about adding their name to the history book of mule deer hunting by taking a Boone and Crockett qualifying buck. If they're successful in taking one that makes the awards book minimum, it's on to one that makes the all-time minimum.

By Keith Balfourd
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B&C Professional Member

The next season they hit “repeat,” and they're back at it again for the best buck they can find. This “book fever” is not exclusive to mule deer. Whitetail deer and elk have similar passionate followings, but mule deer breed a different sort of trophy enthusiast. Why? A records book mule deer is one of the most elusive accomplishments in big game hunting.

Trophy mule deer enthusiasts represent a super-selective sect of sportsmen with a passion for the chase required to get close to truly mature, well-developed mule deer bucks. By targeting this class of alpha fauna, selective trophy mule deer hunters tend to leave behind the most positive conservation footprints in the history of big game hunting. The top-end investment required for hyper-selectivity in hunting—thousands of dollars for tags, permits, logistics, and supplemental resources—is one of the most significant infusions of funding for wildlife in play today. Hunting fuels everything from micro economies to the implementation of life-giving regional and statewide projects benefiting entire wildlife communities. And the low-to-zero-impact of selective hunting is simply a plus-plus event when the dynamics of completely renewable wildlife resources are scientifically reviewed.



While there are only 41 mule deer records book entries from 1900 through 1930, one of North America's most famous mule deer bucks was taken during this time period. Ed Broder was tracking a moose for meat in 1926 near Chip Lake, Alberta, when he harvested his non-typical mule deer. It scores 355-2/8 points and still remains the World's Record.

We're going to do more than run our fingers down a page. We're going to start with a broad review, then narrow our search through Boone and Crockett Club's trophy data using the Club's online database, Trophy Search®, looking for clues on where to take the big one. I should warn you ahead of time, just as there are no shortcuts in the field, there are no shortcuts ferreting out the best destinations today and tomorrow. B&C data is one piece of the puzzle, but data alone will not put GPS coordinates on a map or a hot tag in your pocket. For this you will have to do more digging.

CHART 1

Top States/Provinces from 1900 through 2008.

LOCATION	TYP	NON-TYP	TOTAL
1. COLORADO	578	228	806
2. IDAHO	226	168	394
3. UTAH	165	110	275
4. WYOMING	159	70	229
5. NEW MEXICO	134	43	177
6. OREGON	100	62	162
7. ARIZONA	67	82	149
8. SASK.	86	50	136
9. MONTANA	70	48	118
10. B.C.	62	45	107
11. NEVADA	61	29	90
12. ALBERTA	45	26	71
13. MEXICO	49	3	52

A trophy mule deer fanatic is the same person with past Boone and Crockett records books on the shelf, and stacks of *Fair Chase*, *Trophy Hunter*, *Muley Crazy*, *Huntin' Fool*, *MDF*, *Eastman's Journal* and state hunting regulations scattered around the house in strategic reading locations. He's the guy who has become a bonus and preference point "tagologist," or is having someone crack "the code" for him. He's a student of the game of field judging scores, and is well versed in destinations past and present. Common to him are names like Hell's and Snake River canyons, Idaho; the Kaibab and "The Strip" in Arizona; the Paunsaugunt Plateau, Utah; Rio Arriba County, New Mexico; Swift Creek, Wyoming; Book Cliffs, Colorado; the Wallowa and Steens Mountain Ranges in Oregon; and the list goes on. He's also a gear junkie trying, proving, and testing out the latest and best backcountry gear. He's a trendsetter, a searcher not afraid to lace them up, load up a pack, and disappear for a week or so with a water filter, freeze-dried meals, moleskin, salt tablets, and calorie bars.

Since you're reading this article, I'm going to assume you recognize this person when you look in the mirror. I'm also going to assume that you have, at some point, run your fingers down a list of mule deer trophies in a B&C records book looking for something to jump off the page and tell you "hunt here" or "apply here." If all or part of the above is true, I am writing this article just for you.

changed over time, and how these changes are reflected in the data and affect our conclusions.

To begin with, we will use B&C's Trophy Search to look at record-book mule deer data as a whole.

Start at the End

Today, data kept by the Boone and Crockett Club can be interpreted in many ways. Conservation success and failure, quality habitats lost and gained, and trophy hot spots then and now. For the purposes of research, I have arranged this data to reflect trends both upward and downward based on category (typical and non-typical), total entries, by states and provinces.

What is interesting to note is how today's top trophy-producing destinations have grown in reputation over the long-term. And just as revealing is discovering which areas have dropped from sight or are just holding steady. Even more exciting is watching new areas crop up seemingly out of nowhere. To get a view of all these useful nuggets, we'll begin with the big picture.

There is a total of 2,963 B&C qualifying mule deer in our data set—1,920 typicals and 1,043 non-typical. Chart 1 is a trophy mule deer state/provincial breakdown from 1900 to 2008 tracking the total number of typical and non-typical entries, and both categories combined. Prior to 1900 there are only three non-typical entries, so this timeline really begins at the start of the 20th century.

We're not going to spend too much time here, but we will circle back to this information after we have done a little number crunching.

Back to the Beginning

From 1900–1930, there are 8 typical and 33 non-typical mule deer listed in the records book above the minimum scores of 195 and 240, respectively. While this small handful of trophies is of historical significance, it is not very useful in determining where to look for the big ones today.

The oldest mule deer listed in B&C's database is a non-typical buck, scoring 245-3/8 points, from Broadwater, Montana, that was taken in 1870 by Harry Neafus. The oldest typical on record came from Custer County, Idaho, in 1900. It was taken by Sylvester Potaman and scores 195-6/8 points. Were there larger bucks taken for food or sport prior to these two bucks? Of course, but more great bucks than we care to admit were lost forever before the Boone and Crockett Club's vision of an accurate and complete records-keeping program was adopted and grew to acceptance.

Destination: Trophy Mule Deer

Two extraordinary bucks were taken from 1931-1960. The current number two typical, scoring 218-4/8 points, was taken by Lars Svenson somewhere along the South Saskatchewan River, Saskatchewan, in 1950 (near right). The current number 3 All-time non-typical, scoring 330-1/8 points, was taken by Alton Hunsaker in Box Elder County, Utah, in 1943 (far right).

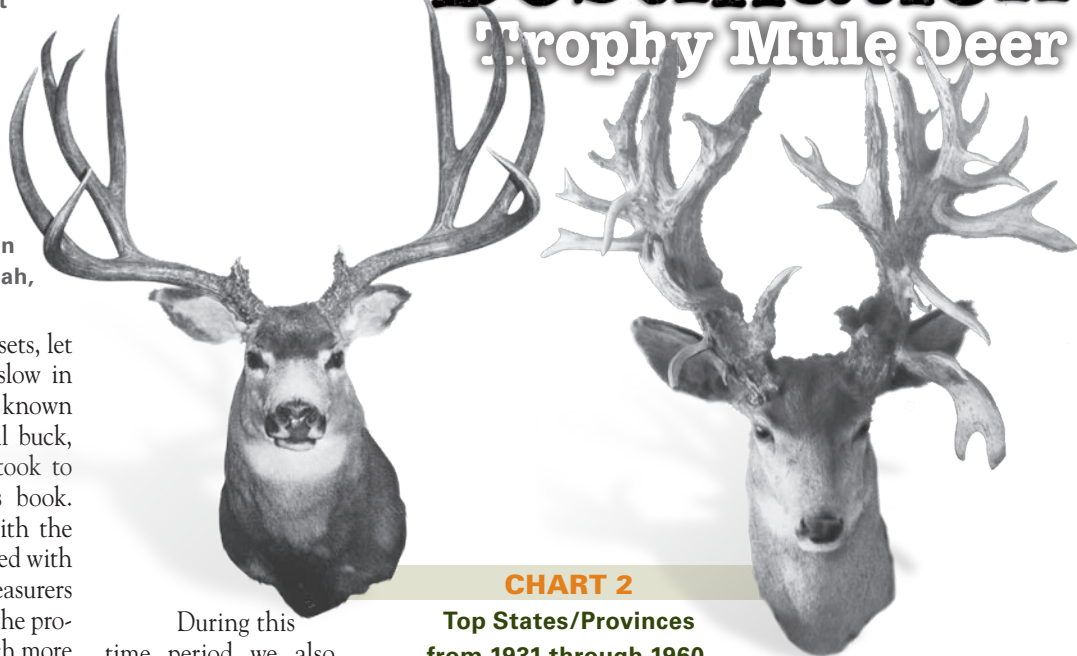


CHART 2

**Top States/Provinces
from 1931 through 1960.**

LOCATION	TYP	NON-TYP	TOTAL
1. COLORADO	70	42	112
2. UTAH	29	43	72
3. IDAHO	17	47	64
4. OREGON	10	30	40
4. ARIZONA	11	29	40
6. MONTANA	10	19	29
7. WYOMING	9	16	25
8. WASHINGTON	4	13	17
9. NEVADA	4	9	13
10. NEW MEXICO	6	5	11

The practice of saving antler sets, let alone having them measured, was slow in coming in the early days. It is not known the path Sylvester Potaman's typical buck, which wasn't accepted until 1997, took to reach the pages of B&C's records book. What we do know is that today, with the popularity of big game records, coupled with a broad distribution of Official Measurers and the information super-highway, the process from field to records book is much more streamlined, encompassing, and expedient.

While there are only 41 mule deer records book entries from 1900 through 1930, two of North America's most famous mule deer bucks were taken during this time period.

Ed Broder was tracking a moose for meat in 1926 near Chip Lake, Alberta, when he came across the biggest set of deer tracks he had ever seen. Hunting in the early part of the 20th century was still all about meat for the winter, so faced with the same choice, 9 out of 10 hunters at that time would have continued following the moose tracks because they needed the meat to feed their families. Broder chose a different path and found a non-typical mule deer standing in those tracks—which scored 355-2/8 B&C points and has withstood all comers for the past 83 years.

1931-1960

Jumping ahead to 1931-1960, it is important to note that the current B&C scoring system of complete antler measurement took effect in 1950. This is the time period from which previously recorded trophies moved into the All-time records books for perpetuity if they were re-measured. Those that were not re-measured fell by the wayside and are not currently listed in either the All-time records books or the Trophy Search database. We do not know the exact number of trophies that were re-measured which did not make the minimum scores for the new scoring system. Similarly, we do not know the exact number of trophies from the first two books that were not re-measured. Therefore, it is possible that a handful of great bucks are not listed in B&C's current books.

During this time period we also see an interesting development that leads to our first assumption. From 1931-1960, there were only 170 typical and 253 non-typical entries registered—not surprising because deer population numbers were low in many areas. What is interesting is the greater number of non-typical bucks than typical bucks (Chart 2).

There are 1,920 typical and 1,043 non-typical bucks in our data set, which is as one might expect—there should be more typicals than non-typicals. Non-typical antlers are nature's rare oddities. Consequently, one might expect that there would be less of them on record. So, we might ask ourselves, "Why is it that there are so many more non-typical bucks taken and listed during this time period?"

One possible answer is that the criteria for "trophy" in the early days of sport hunting and records keeping was likely tilted toward the odd and unusual. With non-typical bucks being more massive, more were saved from the scrap heap and barn doors than typicals to be recognized later by B&C. Somewhere along the way this ratio of typical to non-typical antlers adjusted to today's ratio of 1.3 to 1.

This period is not without its notable trophies. The current number 3 All-time non-typical, scoring 330-1/8 points, was taken by Alton Hunsaker in Box Elder County, Utah, in 1943. The current number

two typical, scoring 218-4/8 points, was taken by Lars Svenson somewhere along the South Saskatchewan River, Saskatchewan, in 1950.

1961-1982

Next up is the time period from 1961-1982. I took an odd, 22-year jump here on purpose for two rea-

sons. The first was to capture and prove out what many consider to be the real heyday of trophy mule deer hunting in North America—the late-1960s to the mid-1970s. Secondly, two significant changes in B&C records keeping took place within our next block of years (1983-1997), and I wanted to be able to compare apples to apples as best as possible.

During this time period there were 552 typical and 329 non-typical mule deer taken. Most notable for individual records is Doug Burris's 1972 giant typical from Dolores County, Colorado, that scores 226-4/8 points. This buck overtook the Hoback Canyon, Wyoming, buck as the World's Record in this category. For non-typicals, Mariposa County, California, produced the number eight All-time non-typical in 1972, scoring 319-4/8 points. It was taken by Harold R. Laird.

Besides the overall spike in the number of entries, and a sorting out of the ratio between typical and non-typical entries (1.7 to 1), the real story from this time period is where trophies came from. (Chart 3.)

Try the
“old school”

approach that has put many of these great deer in the records book—well-researched and scouted inaccessible areas with over-the-counter tags, public land backcountry hunts where bucks grow high, wide, and heavy.

The good news is that we still live in a time where this is possible for those willing to lace'em up.



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Most notable for individual records from 1961-1982 is Doug Burris's 1972 typical from Dolores County, Colorado, that scores 226-4/8 points (far left). This buck is the current World's Record. For non-typicals, Mariposa County, California, produced the number 8 All-time non-typical scoring 319-4/8 points. It was taken by Harold R. Laird (near left).

CHART 3

Top States/Provinces from 1961 through 1982.

LOCATION	TYP	NON-TYP	TOTAL
1. COLORADO	229	87	316
2. IDAHO	90	73	163
3. UTAH	48	39	87
4. NEW MEXICO	44	20	64
5. WYOMING	40	24	64
6. OREGON	24	15	39
7. MONTANA	19	19	38
8. ARIZONA	15	19	34
9. B.C.	10	9	19

Compared with the previous period, Idaho and Utah have switched positions, Arizona dropped from fifth to eighth place, New Mexico jumped from tenth to fourth place, Nevada dropped out of the top-10, and British Columbia entered the top-10 list for the first time.

1983-1997

As we get closer to more current data, those using B&C's Trophy Search to determine the current trophy hot spots will appreciate a final look at just the past 11 years. To present this, I separated the remaining 26 years into 15 (1983-1997) and 11-year (1998-2008) increments. I also did this to encapsulate two significant changes that I hinted at earlier that had a dramatic affect on mule deer entries at that time.

In 1983, the close of the 18th Awards Program, a new era of two records books began with the addition of the Awards book series. Awards books are now published every three years—the year following the close of a Triennial Awards Program, and the All-time records books are published every six years. Lower minimum entry scores for most categories were established for these Awards books at the time they were introduced. To qualify for the Awards books, the new mule deer minimums became 185 and 225 for typical and non-typical mule deer, respectively, while the minimum entry scores for the All-time records book remained at 195 and 240 for typical and non-typical mule deer, respectively. As you would expect with lower minimums, this change would have a dramatic affect on the total number of entries accepted, but it took time for this change to become widely known and accepted.

blacktail deer entries being accepted. An analysis of the data at that time revealed that the number of mule deer entries was significantly lower than the number of Columbia blacktails being entered, in spite of the fact that the latter subspecies occupies a relatively narrow stretch of habitat along the west coast of Canada and the United States compared to mule deer that occupy significantly more habitat in both countries.

The Club's Records Committee determined that the All-time minimum for typical mule deer was too high and conversely, too low for Columbia blacktail deer. As a result, the Committee lowered the typical mule deer All-time minimum from 195 to 190 in 1993. Three years later, the Records Committee lowered the All-time minimum for non-typical mule deer from 240 to 230. Thus, the combination of creating the Awards Program recognition of trophies with lower minimums and the lowering of the All-time minimum entry scores for mule deer are clearly reflected in the mule deer data beginning in 1985.

There were 477 typical and 196 non-typical trophies taken during this period. Adjustments aside, this is an impressive jump in entries over the previous period considering

we are looking at half the number of years. The top typical during these years is a buck scoring 216-2/8 points that was picked up in Coconino County, Arizona. It currently ranks number four all-time. The highest ranking non-typical, scoring 305-6/8 points, came from Shasta County, California, in 1987. It was taken by Artie McGram and currently ranks number 15.

Noteworthy from the previous period is that British Columbia climbed from ninth to sixth place, Montana dropped from seventh to tenth place, and Arizona climbed from ninth to fifth place. (Chart 4.)

1998-2008

In terms of where we are today, this last 11-year time period tells a lot. Naturally, this is the most current data and is worth paying attention to with regard to what we should probably expect to see for the next few years.

The largest typical mule deer taken during this eleven-year span was a buck,



CHART 4

Top States/Provinces from 1983 through 1997.

LOCATION	TYP	NON-TYP	TOTAL
1. COLORADO	94	38	132
2. IDAHO	71	33	104
3. UTAH	51	16	67
4. WYOMING	40	14	54
5. ARIZONA	24	23	47
6. B.C.	27	14	41
7. OREGON	33	7	40
8. NEW MEXICO	32	7	39
9. NEVADA	25	2	27
10. MONTANA	20	6	26

The top typical from 1983-1997 is a buck scoring 216-2/8 points that was picked up in Coconino County, Arizona. It currently ranks number four all-time.

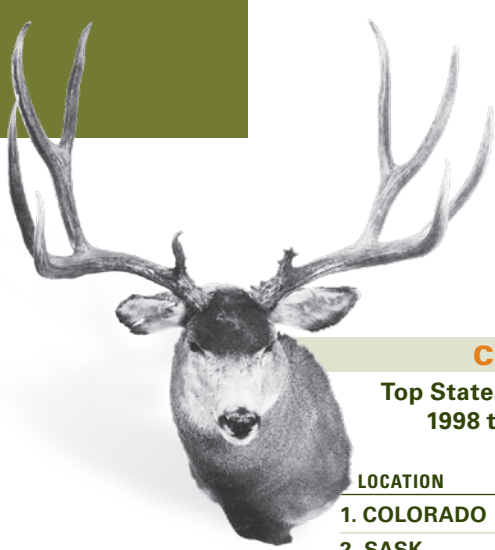


CHART 5

Top States/Provinces from 1998 through 2008.

LOCATION	TYP	NON-TYP	TOTAL
1. COLORADO	192	52	244
2. SASK.	66	25	91
3. WYOMING	70	14	84
4. NEW MEXICO	52	11	63
5. IDAHO	48	14	62
6. UTAH	40	10	50
7. MEXICO	40	0	40
8. ALBERTA	26	9	35
9. NEVADA	26	9	34
9. OREGON	31	3	34

The largest typical mule deer taken during this eleven-year span was a buck, scoring 212-6/8 points, taken by J. Larry Barr in Bonneville County, Idaho, in 1996.

scoring 212-6/8 points, taken by J. Larry Barr in Bonneville County, Idaho, in 1996. The largest non-typical, scoring 306-3/8, was taken in 2007 by Kyle Lopez in Douglas County, Colorado.

A total of 881 B&C mule deer (696 typical and 185 non-typical) were taken during this last time period. Colorado continued to be the top-ranking state. Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Mexico entered the top-10 for the first time while Arizona, British Columbia, and Montana dropped out of the top-10. Wyoming continued its steady rise from seventh place during 1931-1960 to the number three slot while Oregon dropped from fourth place during 1931-1960 to tenth place.

While some hold to the belief that the heyday of trophy mule deer hunting was in the past, the numbers taken during this time period clearly indicate that “These are the good old days” for mule deer hunters. Granted, the minimums to enter a B&C buck have been reduced, but minimums are still high, and anyone who has hunted for a book mule deer will tell you that a records book buck is still the most elusive accomplishment in big game hunting. An important note: the lower minimums are retroactive, and anyone holding a trophy that meets today’s lower minimums can now enter them.

So, why is it that entries are at all-time highs? The possible answers are many, beginning with the most obvious—wildlife management is working and the bucks are out there. We could add to this that there is a strong culture among trophy mule deer enthusiasts taking the pursuit more seriously

than ever before—see “trophy mule deer fanatic” definition at the beginning of this article. We could also point to the fact that more hunters today are realizing that B&C records do more than honor the animal and their personal, fair-chase effort. There is a growing awareness that by entering their trophy into “The Book” they are indeed taking the final step and doing their part to build a conservation record that will guide future opportunities.

Conclusions

If you are the trophy fanatic described at the beginning of this article, you are no stranger to sorting the data out for yourself. I have compiled the data, but it is up to you to determine

what it means for you. Here’s a hint. Take a look at each time period and compare state rankings and the number of typical and non-typical entries. You’ll notice how they shift over time. There is some real telling information to be gleaned. B&C’s Trophy Search on B&C’s web site is an indispensable tool for the trophy mule deer “fanatic.”

No one has all the answers as to why a particular area was hot and has faded, or vice versa. Predator control, winter range loss due to human encroachment, game management philosophies, backcountry accessibility, and hunting pressure all have a hand in affecting mule deer population dynamics in general, and ultimately, trophy production. For example, I do know of counties that once ranked high in trophy production that are now managed for quantity versus quality. And some areas that B&C data indicates has the genetics are now being groomed for trophies. I also know of areas where predators, like cougars, used to get the squeeze that are overrun with cats today. And, at the time of this writing, the jury is still out on the affects wolf re-introduction will have on trophy mule deer. However, not to leave you totally hanging, I will make a few “safe” predictions.

Predictions can be dangerous business, especially when written down and published, but here goes: It really can’t be classified as a prediction to say that Colorado is still the place to look for trophy-class mule deer. You can see this for yourself. Colorado has the land, population, and genetics, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife has it nailed when it comes to balancing harvest,

opportunity, and trophy production.

Saskatchewan is a newcomer in the top-10 trophy producing areas. The real problem is getting at them if you’re a non-resident. The best mule deer producing habitat where the largest bucks are taken is the southern Sand Hills, which is off limits to non-resident aliens with the exception of tribal lands. Mexico would be my next “go-to destination” for mule deer after Colorado. Of the 52 entries on record (49 typical; 3 non-typical) 40 have been taken in the last 10 years, but be mindful that not all ranches in Sonora are created equal. Some are becoming high-fenced, which would obviously exclude them from entry in B&C.

Utah will likely continue to be a destination in demand if the habitat and management programs focused on Utah wildlife continues to pay dividends. This is one Western state that has mastered how to maximize trophy potential. In New Mexico, it’s simple; all roads lead to Rio Arriba County. I had to dig deep to come up with three other counties in New Mexico, as the lion’s share of book deer from this state have always resided in Rio Arriba County. Don’t count out Idaho, but the Gem State is not what it once was with total entries by time period running 64, 163, 104, and 62.

It should also come as no surprise that today it is more about “the tag” than anything else. Units where you need maximum points to draw take maximum points for a reason. Note them and start building points. If you haven’t done so already, consider becoming skilled with a bow or muzzleloader. There are some great opportunities out there in top areas with better odds of drawing an archery or muzzleloader tag than drawing a rifle tag in the same unit for the same caliber bucks. And, in most cases, you’ll get first crack if you are successful in drawing a tag.

Then, there is the “old school” approach that has put many of these great deer in the records book—well-researched and scouted inaccessible areas with over-the-counter tags, public land backcountry hunts where bucks grow high, wide, and heavy. The good news is that we still live in a time where this is possible for those willing to lace’em up. ■

EDITOR’S NOTE: Check out Boone and Crockett Club’s newest book, *Records of North American Mule Deer, First Edition*, for the complete text about trophy mule deer hunting—including detailed county/location information. Available on our web site: www.boone-crockett.org.

