

Then & Now

ALBERTA > MULE DEER

By Glenn Brown
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First let me give you a little background on myself as this is the first article I have written on one of my favorite subjects—finding big mule deer. I was born and raised in a little farming community in Saskatchewan. We had lots of whitetails around, especially on my Grandpa's farm. In those days (I was born in 1960) there were no mule deer in that country, and I grew up hunting whitetails while only hearing about the mule deer on draw system in the very southwestern part of the province.

TEN OLDEST MULE DEER ENTRIES FROM ALBERTA Entered in B&C's Records Program

SCORE	LOCATION	HUNTER	OWNER(S)	DATE
230 NT	Buck Lake, AB	William Meyer	Bill Landals	Prior to 1910
355 2/8 NT	Chip Lake, AB	Ed Broder	Don Schaufler	1926
243 6/8 NT	Slave Lake, AB	RWH Eben-Ebeneau	RWH Eben-Ebeneau	1930
254 4/8 NT	Maloy, AB	Otto Schmalzbauer	Otto Schmalzbauer	1930
195 1/8 TP	Red Deer River, AB	Frank G. Foland	Jon K. Taylor	1931
227 7/8 NT	Waterton Park, AB	Walter Foster	D.J. Hollinger & B. Howard	Prior to 1934
235 NT	Garnier Lakes, AB	Arthur Gallagher	Richard C. Nelson	1936
252 NT	Grease Creek, AB	Jack McCallum	J.H. Fry	Prior to 1940
247 5/8 NT	Waterton Park, AB	Eric Westergreen	Eric Westergreen	1941
245 2/8 NT	Lac La Biche, AB	Julius Hagen	Olaf Hagen	1945

Ed Broder harvested this non-typical mule deer on November 26, 1926. This buck has survived as a World's Record for over 80 years.



Non-typical mule deer shot by Mr. Broder on Nov. 26, 1926. Killed 20 miles south of Chip Lake, Alberta. This buck has survived as a World's Record for over 80 years.



**Big Mule Deer
Where, Why,
When, and
How Do I
Find Them?**



Alberta - 190-class 3 point, 2010



Alberta - 190-class buck, 2010



Alberta - 200-class buck, 2010

Then & Now

MULE DEER ENTRIES Throughout the Years

DATES	TYPICAL	NON-TYPICAL	TOTAL
1910 to 2010	57	30	87
2000 to 2010	33	11	44

After college I moved to Alberta where I started hunting the southern mountains in 1981. It was here that I first started to hunt mule deer. After several years of taking buddies into the mountains hunting elk and mule deer, I started Blue Bronna Outfitting. For 25 years now I have taken hundreds of hunters into northern Alberta for bear and moose, to central Alberta for whitetails and big prairie mule deer, and into the southwestern mountains for elk, moose, black bears, and mountain mule deer.

As I write this, I am sitting beside a fire with an awesome view of the Great Divide, within a couple miles of where I took my first elk and mule deer. The key to those first animals was perseverance, a lot of hard hiking, good luck, and much leg work. Over the years, those qualities have served me well to discover tough country; yet, without diminishing the necessity of perseverance and luck, I now know it takes more than that to be continually successful in finding big mule deer.

WHERE & WHY?

The first step in finding quality mule deer is to hunt where they are. That's obvious. But how does one know where they can be found? Why are there big muleys in southern Saskatchewan, British Columbia, parts of Utah, Wyoming, Nevada, Kansas, Montana, Arizona, Mexico, and in a lot of places in Alberta (eastern, central, western, mountains, prairies, and boreal Peace River country)? What makes these places exceptional?

Consistently, I believe big muleys are found where they have good genetics, great food, and time to grow up. The first two can be just about anywhere but the last—time to grow—is only found where predators are not able to consistently keep the numbers down. When I say predators, I am referring to both the two-footed and four-footed

varieties. Thus, big mule deer are found where either the country makes hunting so tough that predators don't get to them, or where they are valued by the biologists of the area enough so that they are put on a limited harvest regimen in a situation where four-footed predators are limited.

In Alberta I need to thank our biologists for the management of our mule deer. If it was not for their efforts in creating limited hunting opportunities for mule deer, we would still have very limited numbers of big bucks in Alberta. In one of the wildlife management units (WMUs) where I now consistently find great mule deer, I have talked to longtime residents who remember when only whitetails were found there. This is consistent with where I grew up in Saskatchewan; now there are very good mule deer where, as a boy, I only saw whitetails.

What has changed? Why are we now finding big muleys where only whitetails were 30 years ago? What about the old wives' tale, the belief that whitetails chase out the mule deer? Dr. Valerius Geist, a B&C Professional member and renowned biologist as well as a mule deer expert also believes that whitetails will eventually "breed out" the mule deer (another subject altogether). However, in Geist's book *Mule Deer Country*, he gives some great information as to why mule deer, are moving into previous whitetail areas. Geist states that "mule deer normally dominate white-tailed deer" (p. 165). He also states, "There is no convincing evidence or observations that white-tailed deer displace mule deer from their ranges through overt aggression" (p. 165).

I believe that mule deer will abound if they are managed in a manner that keeps the age ratio in a balanced proportion. If there are large male mule deer bucks, they will keep whitetail bucks from breeding out the mule deer. Geist also states, "Hunting, which removes large mule deer bucks more



Alberta - 200-class buck, 2010

efficiently than it does the secretive, often nocturnal white-tailed bucks...in turn, leads to large white-tailed bucks displacing minor mule deer bucks."

The areas producing big mule deer either have limited predator and hunting pressure due to tough terrain or the biologists have put the area under restrictions so that there are limited numbers of bucks harvested. I have spent many years guiding

and looking at mule deer, and my personal observations tend to mirror Geist's observations. Mule deer will flourish, but only if managed in a fashion that keeps a supply of big, older bucks available.

In southwestern Alberta's Porcupine Hills, biologists had documented a sufficient supply of mule deer about 10 years ago, although not big bucks. Another outfitter believed there would never be large bucks in the Porcupine Hills. I disagreed. I had witnessed the explosion of large mule deer buck populations in the central and eastern parts of the province when those WMUs were put on draw several years earlier. There was political will to put the mule deer on draw in the southwest; however, wildlife managers did not have a scientific reason to implement a limited draw because the mule deer were plentiful. I showed Geist's research to my local game biologist who took it to a meeting where the matter was discussed among several of the province's biologists. Brent Markham (head biologist of Alberta at that time) decided to put the area on draw. In four years, that area went from a place where outfitters did not use all their allocations to a very high demand for mule deer hunts.

Four-footed predators are the other predators that can deplete larger bucks. I believe that wolves, cougars, and even coyotes are very hard on older bucks. Another outfitter friend of mine, who hunts cougars, spent a day back-tracking a cougar and found four mature bucks killed by the cougar in that one day of tracking. Older bucks tend to stay back from the open country which muley does frequent, and thus, are in the prime area where a cougar would likely be stalking.

I personally watched a large panicked buck come flying by me and two bowhunters around 10:30 a.m. when we were going after elk. Although we did not see a wolf on his heels in the morning, that evening as we were coming back from an unsuccessful elk stalk, we had wolves howling around us.

BEST OF 2011



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The hunting experience is remembered and reflected back upon in many ways. In the old days, just the meat, head skins, hides, horns, antlers, or tusks were salvaged as mementoes of successful hunts. With the advent of the camera, photographs were added to what we could carry with us across time to remember the hunt and honor the animals taken.

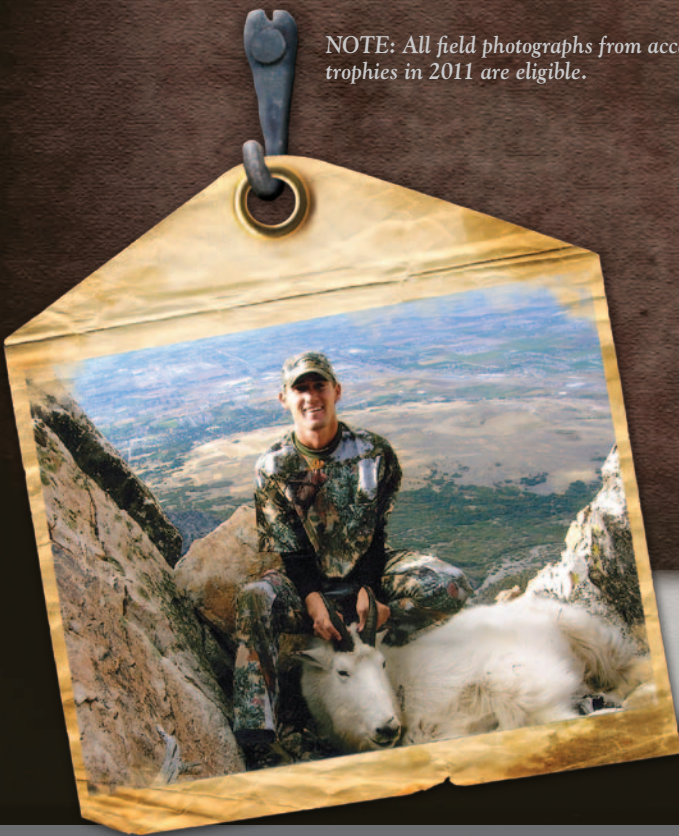
The Boone and Crockett Club has a tradition of honoring trophies and the fair chase hunts that produce them, including photographs from the field. In keeping with this tradition, the Club, and our friends at Swarovski, thought it would be a good idea to take this one step further and celebrate some of the best examples of field photography, and share them with you in each issue of *Fair Chase*.

For the third year, our editors will be sifting through hundreds of field photos looking for exemplary trophy field photography. The most outstanding examples will be featured in the Spring 2012 issue with the top three being awarded prizes provided by Swarovski Optik.

NOTE: All field photographs from accepted trophies in 2011 are eligible.



Eric Moore
black bear - 20-13/16
Wallaston Lake, Saskatchewan
September 2010



Jack D. Manning
Rocky Mountain goat
51-6/8
Weber Co., Utah
September 2007

Rene R. Barrientos
typical whitetail deer - 172-2/8
La Salle Co., Texas
October 2010



WINNERS RECEIVE SECOND PRIZE - EL 10x42 WB

The EL 42 which has won multiple awards as the world's best binocular particularly because of its outstanding, diamond-bright optic which is perfectly suited for all kinds of viewing. Its legendary wrap-around grip, the large focusing wheel and its thumb rests, ensures the EL 42 offers the most perfect ergonomics of its class.




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FIRST PRIZE - STM 65 HD

THIRD PRIZE - Z3 3-9x36



Alberta - 190-class buck, 2010

When we got to the spot the buck had torn through, a wolf came out in front of us and loped off down the exact path the buck had taken. I believe the wolves got sidetracked with our bugling, and when they figured out we were human, they went right back to the chase they had originally been on 10 hours prior.

The other quality I would like to touch on is the issue of high quality feed. Geist states on page 73 of *Mule Deer Country* that “antlers are universally highly sensitive to forage surpluses.” Obviously in good agricultural areas there is an abundance of good feed. But what about the big bucks coming out of the desert areas? A couple hunters who regularly hunt for mule deer with me in Alberta also hunt Old Mexico. What they have observed is that when Old Mexico has an abundant amount of moisture, out pop the big bucks. In Alberta, we observed the same thing in 2010 when we had a very wet summer. The top six bucks taken by 16 mule deer hunters (including a three-point which went 190-plus) averaged a gross green score of 200 inches. That is a better season than I have had in a long time and the summer was a very wet one. Why does moisture produce better bucks—or does it?

The head biologist for fish and wildlife in Alberta asked me why I thought 2010 was such a good year for antler growth. My hypothesis? From my observations, older bucks do not want to move a whole lot during the summer. They like to find a spot that has everything they need and stay there until they, seemingly randomly, move to their next position. The next spot may have a different type of feed but won't be far away, and still near water and shelter. Year after year, older bucks tend to be found in the same protected spots. I believe the quality of browse diminishes when it is dry because deer are hard on the plants which they—and other animals—need. When a wet year comes along, these

plants produce more browse than normal, and the bucks produce better antlers.

Biologists also tell us that the main item which correlates with big antlers, whether mule deer or other antlered deer, is the type of winter weather during the buck's mother's pregnancy. If the doe has an easy winter and comes into the spring in good shape, the buck she gives birth to has a very high chance of producing a superior set of antlers. There are many other factors that influence the type of antlers a buck will grow, but this one is most consistent.

When trying to determine an area with big bucks, check out the winter from four to six years prior, and see if it was abnormally tough or easy. This may give you a clue as to what the older bucks have to back up their racks.

WHEN & HOW DO I FIND THEM?

I am constantly asked, “What is the best week to come?” from hunters wanting to find a big mule deer in Alberta. I generally answer with “the week your guide is the luckiest” or “the week we find the big deer,” etc. I am not particularly stuck on any one week, especially as I look back over our history and find that we have taken big deer in the mountains from September 24th through the first week of November (we generally only hunt the mountains for mule deer until the end of October). In November we get busy with our prairie hunts, which are only open for rifle during the month of November.

Our biggest deer generally come when we least expect it. The reason is in the “how” to find them. The key to getting a chance at a mature mule deer is by knowing the country and where you can see them. Mule deer bucks tend to move from doe location to doe location and can show up at any time of the day. Therefore, one finds them by spending time watching spots where they will show up.

In October 2010, we had a hunter who wanted to get a big deer in the worst way. He wanted to get out and hike the ridges till he found that deer. His guide was trying to get him to stay put and glass, but it was really frustrating for the hunter. I told his guide to get him on a ridge and spend a couple days walking. They saw a good number of deer but no shooters. After several days, I took him out and persuaded him to watch one part of a mountain while I watched another. I found an awesome buck we went after, but it was too late and we lost him. The next morning, I went back up on the mountain and tried to find the buck but found another

two instead. He eventually got a gross 197-inch deer that day. Glassing areas where you can see is highly superior to walking.

We find the big deer by constantly using good glass and spending a lot of time looking into areas where we know there are deer. This glassing is mainly done from a distance of a half mile or more. This is crucial. Most people have no idea as to the alert hearing ability of a mature mule deer. A few years ago I had a hunter set up in a great location at 425 yards from a big buck checking does. He did not feel confident to make the shot at that distance, so we decided to try and get closer as we had a good line of cover. We were as quiet as I believe we could have been, but when we were still over 300 yards away behind a line of trees, I saw the buck peeking around some trees at us. He disappeared, and we never saw him again. When we last saw him prior to him looking at us he was totally distracted with does.

Another time I was bow hunting and had a 195-inch buck at 100 yards and could not get closer. I decided to see what he could hear. I scratched the leg of my pants and instantly his head came up and he glued right to where I was hidden. In another instance, a hunter was wearing a stiff denim material and his guide told him it was too loud. They spotted a huge muley and blew the stalk at 500 yards because of the swish of his jeans. This same hunter turned down a 204-inch muley the next year as he did not believe it was near as big as the one he had blown the year prior.

The last hunter I had in 2010 wanted a 200-inch muley. We turned down over 70 bucks in the first five days of his hunt. We saw several in the 190s and a dozen over 180; however, I could not say any were 200-plus. Finally we found one which I thought was a shooter and while discussing it, the buck, which was chasing a doe amongst five or six others, heard the movement the hunter made as he brushed a twig to get his shot. That buck instantly went into motion pushing his doe and evading us at the same time. The does never had a clue we were there and we never did get that buck.

What I am saying is mule deer have not just good—but great—hearing and it will beat you many more times than you will ever know. If you know where they are from your glassing, you have a much better chance of getting the drop on them, and even then it is tough to get a great chance at a big deer. Secondly, try not to get wrapped up in numbers and measurements but enjoy the whole experience while in mule deer country. Good Luck hunting, great luck spotting and in spite of it all, learn and enjoy your time in the outdoors. ■