

The Crooki's of West TEXAS

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You better bring three items when you hunt desert mule deer in far west Texas: lots of extra shells, an extra pair of boots, and plenty of band-aids. *Odocoileus hemionus crooki*, the desert sub-species, is a challenge no matter how experienced the hunter.

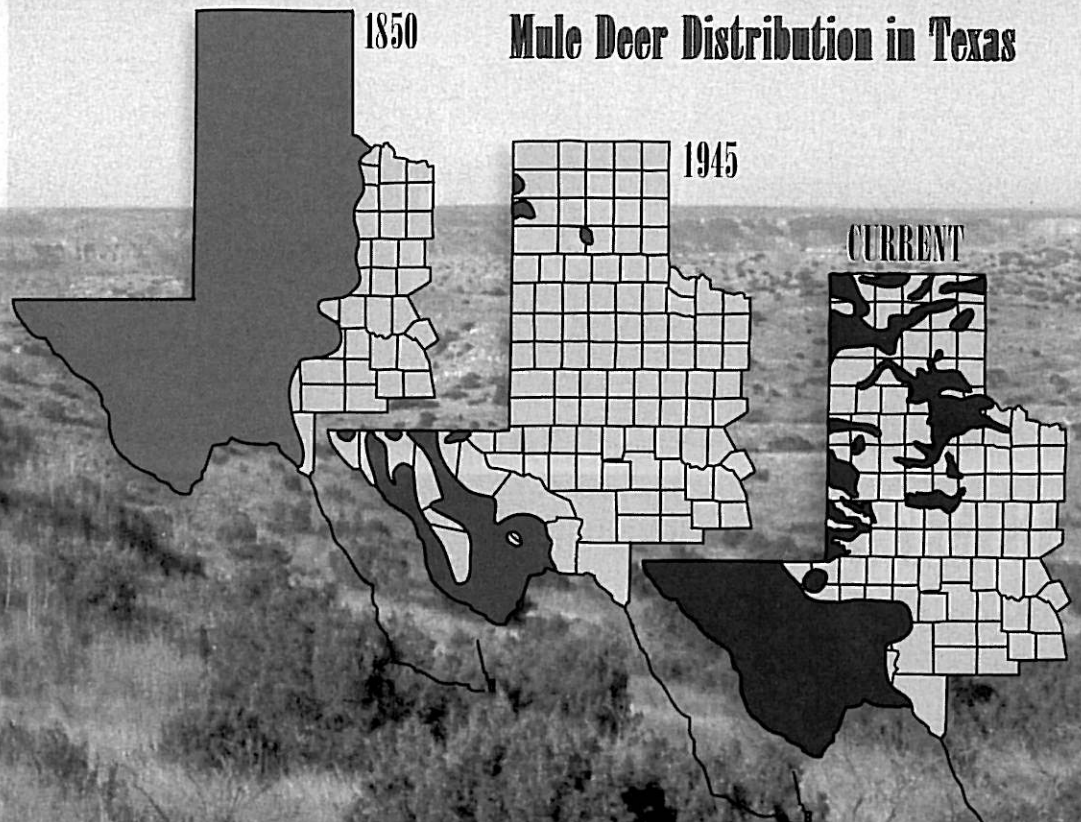
The mountainous regions of what we Texan's call the Trans-Pecos are open expanses of rough terrain. Hence the extra ammo and extra pair of boots. Long-distance shooting is the norm, not the exception. And frequently, these crooki's are on the run, unless you can slip up on some in a draw. Walking on those sharp, loose rocks will not only wear out the soles of your boots, but makes it really tough to sneak up on these deer.

A couple of years ago, I was hunting with some friends in the Delaware Mountains in Culberson County near Van Horn. The day before, I had missed a 25"-26" buck, so my frustration level was pretty high. One of my hunting partners and I decided to ask our other buddy to drop us off at daylight so we could make a "vuelta." In English, we call it a long walk, a hike, a surrey, or a "round." In

Spanish, it's a vuelta and it typically involves climbing a ridge and hunting on foot for about the next 5 hours. Our companion was to meet us later at the mouth of a big, deep canyon.

We saw a few does, walking as quietly as we could. After our vuelta, we hiked back down the ridge we had been following, to our friend who had been waiting for about an hour at the truck. What we learned was astonishing. We had kicked out 4 bucks and 12 does ahead of us that we never saw! The habitat is so sparse of cover, one would think you could see any deer that gets up. So when I say the rocks are loose and noisy, and the deer are easy to spook, you can see what I mean. These deer must have taken off some 3/4 to 1 mile ahead of us, for us not to see them.

To give you some idea of the habitat these crooki's live in, veg-



THE DISTRIBUTION OF MULE DEER IN WEST TEXAS IS SHOWN IN BLUE.

MAP COURTESY OF RUBEN CANTU AND CALVIN RICHARDSON OF THE TEXAS PARKS & WILDLIFE DEPARTMENT

etation is very sparse except for scattered pockets of juniper. The deer rely on their hearing first, and eyesight second, to put as much distance or terrain as they can between them and you. Sometimes they run and sometimes they just

move over a ridge and freeze until hunters pass by. Then they return to their feeding or bedding site.

The desert mule deer feed on a variety of shrubs and forbs, and antler development is directly related to rainfall which affects the

abundance of high quality plants like winterfat, plantain, and mountain mahogany.

They also are opportunistic as they feed on stalks and blooms of a variety of cacti such as sotol, yucca, and agave. They don't eat much lechuguilla, another kind of cacti. If you know your Spanish, you know that lechuguilla means "small lettuce". But this is really deceiving. These cacti have sharp, dagger-like pads, and are very common in desert mule deer habitat. Lechuguilla is also the reason you bring lots of band-aids! (You need to cover the puncture wounds with something!). The more you watch for deer as you are moving along a ridge, the more band-aids you will use. Because if you're looking for mule deer, you aren't looking for lechuguilla!

With the right forage for these Trans-Pecos desert mule deer to feed on, expect a mature buck to field dress about 150 lbs, although some weighing over 200 lbs have been recorded. Exceptional bucks would have a net Boone & Crockett score in the 170's. Inside spread rarely exceeds 25 inches.

The take home message is that your not apt to take a record book head in the Trans-Pecos, unless our Club decides to put crooki's as a separate classification from Rocky Mountain mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus hemionus*). Table 1 shows the top 3 typical Trans-Pecos desert mule deer entered in the Texas Big Game Awards Program each year from 1991-93, and the county where they were harvested. I should note here that larger deer might be harvested and are not turned in to be measured, for whatever reason.

Now let's talk about the Texas panhandle. Mule deer are slightly larger there than mule deer in the Trans-Pecos. A mature buck will weigh 15 to 20 lbs heavier and will average 5 to 10 points higher in Boone & Crockett score. From a sample size of over 250 deer harvested between 1988 and 1994, field-dressed body weight peaks at around 5-6 years of age. These mature deer have average body weights

PANHANDLE



LEFT: MULE DEER HABITAT IN THE TEXAS PANHANDLE, INTERSPERSED WITH WHEAT FIELDS.

BELOW: DESERT MULE DEER AND HABITAT IN THE TRANS-PECOS REGION OF TEXAS.

TRANS-PECOS



TRANS-PECOS



of 175 lbs. It is not uncommon for a large Panhandle buck to weigh 200 lbs. After talking to Calvin Richardson with Texas Parks and Wildlife, Texas may record its first known record-book mule deer. Calvin scored a deer from Potter County that had a green Boone and Crockett score of 197.

The habitat the Texas panhandle mule deer occupy is much different from the Trans-Pecos. Instead of wide open mountainous terrain, they occupy habitats of rolling to rough breaks with heavy stands of juniper and mixed juniper-mesquite. The habitat is more limited in distribution, resulting in considerably fewer deer than in the Trans-Pecos region.

The Palo Duro Canyon has long been a stronghold of these mule deer, all of which also are crooki's. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department made numerous transplants of Trans-Pecos desert mule deer there in the 1950s. So it's likely that their descendants have spread eastward into the Rolling Plains ecological region. As you can see from the map, mule deer are being sighted almost as far east as Wichita Falls, Texas, and as far north as the Oklahoma panhandle. There may be some movement into Texas from Oklahoma because they too have transplanted mule deer.

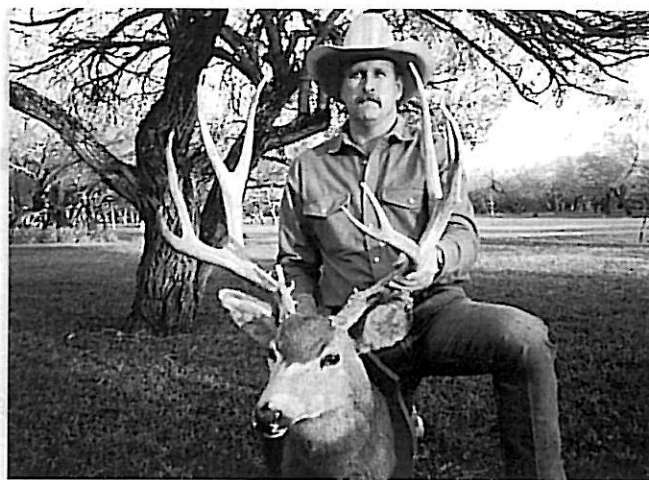
Habitats there are weaker than the Trans-Pecos in terms of natural foods, but the transplanted

It is not unusual to see herds of mule deer feeding on the fields if they are within a couple of miles of the juniper- and mesquite-dominated habitats. Texas Tech University researchers found that they will leave a traditional summer range and move at least 3-5 miles to feed on these winter wheat fields.

And that shouldn't surprise us. These researchers also found that wheat fields boosted the winter protein levels of mule deer diets by almost 30% (8% to 11% dietary crude protein) over native habitats without wheat or rye.

The last place we'll visit is the Canadian River habitat west of Amarillo. Mule deer are pretty much restricted to the habitat corridor along the river breaks and its tributaries. It has about the same kind of plant life only the juniper is not as thick and mesquite has thicketed the bottoms and tableland uplands.

These deer feed primarily on native plants like half-shrub sundrop, trailing ratany, and skunkbush sumac. They have more limited access to wheat or rye to boost their nutrition because it's more ranching than the intermixed ranch land/farmlands found east of Amarillo. So herein lies an interesting phenomenon. Mule deer bucks of the same age without access to agricultural crops in the Canadian River habitats west of Amarillo seem to be slightly



The green Boone & Crockett score was 180-3/8, with a net of 167-1/8. The inside spread was 23 inches. The deer field dressed 185 lbs (on a cattle scale), two days after it was taken. This deer likely had no access to winter wheat or other crops.

This begs the question "Why would they be larger if nutrition is the same?" Only two possibilities exist. Either, lower deer densities in the western Canadian River drainage means less competition for scarce forage, or there are some genetic differences.

If we trace the Canadian to its headwaters, we see that it begins in Colorado just west of Raton, New Mexico, home to Rocky Mountain mule deer not desert mule deer. Could it be that these western Canadian River deer have some genes from Rocky Mountain mule deer? DNA researchers at Texas Tech University are now looking into this.

If your appetite is whetted to hunt mule deer in Texas, remember that it is 98% private land and access, if you can get it, is granted by paying a trespass fee. This might vary from \$600 to \$3,500 per hunter depending upon the quality of the habitat, the quality of the mule deer and whether or not the ranch is managed for older age-class bucks. Public hunts are drawn by hunters on state land at Elephant Mountain in the Trans-Pecos and near Matador in the Panhandle.

Just bring extra shells, extra boots, and if your hunting the Trans-Pecos, extra band-aids!

THE AUTHOR, FRED BRYANT, WITH A WEST TEXAS MULE DEER TAKEN IN OLDHAM COUNTY. IT SCORED 167-1/8 POINTS.

Table 1. Boone and Crockett net scores of desert mule deer harvested in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, 1991-1993

| RANK | 1991 | COUNTY | 1992 | COUNTY | 1993 | COUNTY |
|------|---------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|------------|
| 1 | 173-3/8 | Culberson | 182 | Loving | 170-3/8 | Pecos |
| 2 | 171-4/8 | Culberson | 179-5/8 | Culberson | 170-1/8 | Culberson |
| 3 | 170-2/8 | Presidio | 179-2/8 | Culberson | 168-2/8 | Jeff Davis |

desert mule deer have adapted nicely to agricultural crops like wheat, rye, sorghum, alfalfa, and corn. In fact, this is the primary reason mule deer are larger in body and antler size than their Trans-Pecos counterparts.

heavier and have slightly larger antler development than mule deer in similar habitats 50 miles to the east. The deer you see in the photo along side the author was harvested in Oldham County about 30 miles west of Amarillo.