

# STORY



**Veteran guide Rafael and outfitter Kirk Kelso studying the buck David Miller eventually took. Rafael spotted the buck at more than two miles - a magnificent feat.**

# A Perfect Day In

# OPERA

By Col. Craig Riddington, USMCR  
Professional Member  
Roone and Crockett Club

A great Coues'  
deer morning  
got even better!

**As Coues' Deer hunts go, this one was quite easy. Once our deer were spotted, it was simply a matter of covering some rough ground to get into position.**

**There is nothing wrong with my buck, I'm happy to have him... but he turned out to be one of the smallest deer taken during 48 hours of exceptional buck movement.**

All serious deer hunters want to hunt the peak of the rut, when the bucks are silly and chasing does all over the hills and fields. It really doesn't matter which North American deer we're talking about, or, for that matter, which antlered animal anywhere in the world. The rut is the time when the wariest, most

hunter-educated, fully mature males are the most vulnerable. Unfortunately, deer don't work on our schedule, so it's very difficult to plan a hunt that hits the rut just right.

The first complication is having the hunting season open when the rut hits. This is a legendary problem with mule deer and blacktail, as many hunting seasons in the best areas are purposely set well before the rut. The same situation occurs with whitetails, except that in some really good areas, such as Kansas, the primary season is

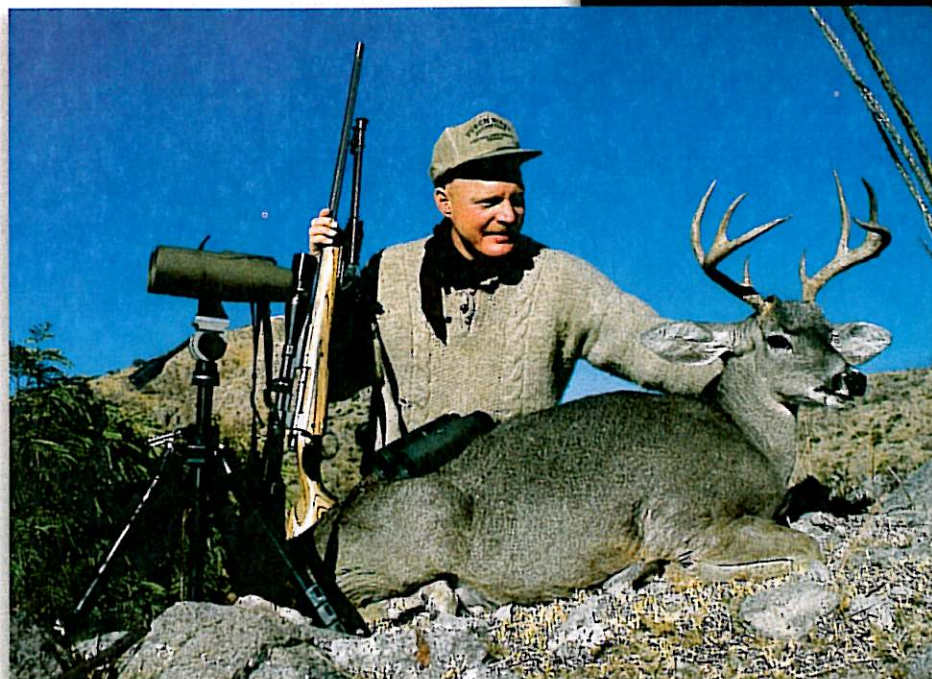
held *after* the rut, one of the most difficult times to hunt. In the world of Coues' deer, Arizona usually offers an easier-to-draw early season that is set well before the rut, and a more difficult-to-draw late season in December that usually catches some good rutting activity. Old Mexico is even better, with a long season and readily available tags. The drawback is that a licensed outfitter is required.

I love to hunt Coues' whitetail, and I love their desert mountains in winter. I am not as much of a Coues' deer fanatic as my

buddy, Tucson gunmaker David Miller. At this writing David Miller has numerous Coues' whitetails listed in the Boone and Crockett Club's all-time records book. Consequently, I often rely on David to organize my Coues' deer hunting. I know that if I'm in camp with David I probably won't get the biggest deer—but I will be in a good place for hunting at a good time of the year!

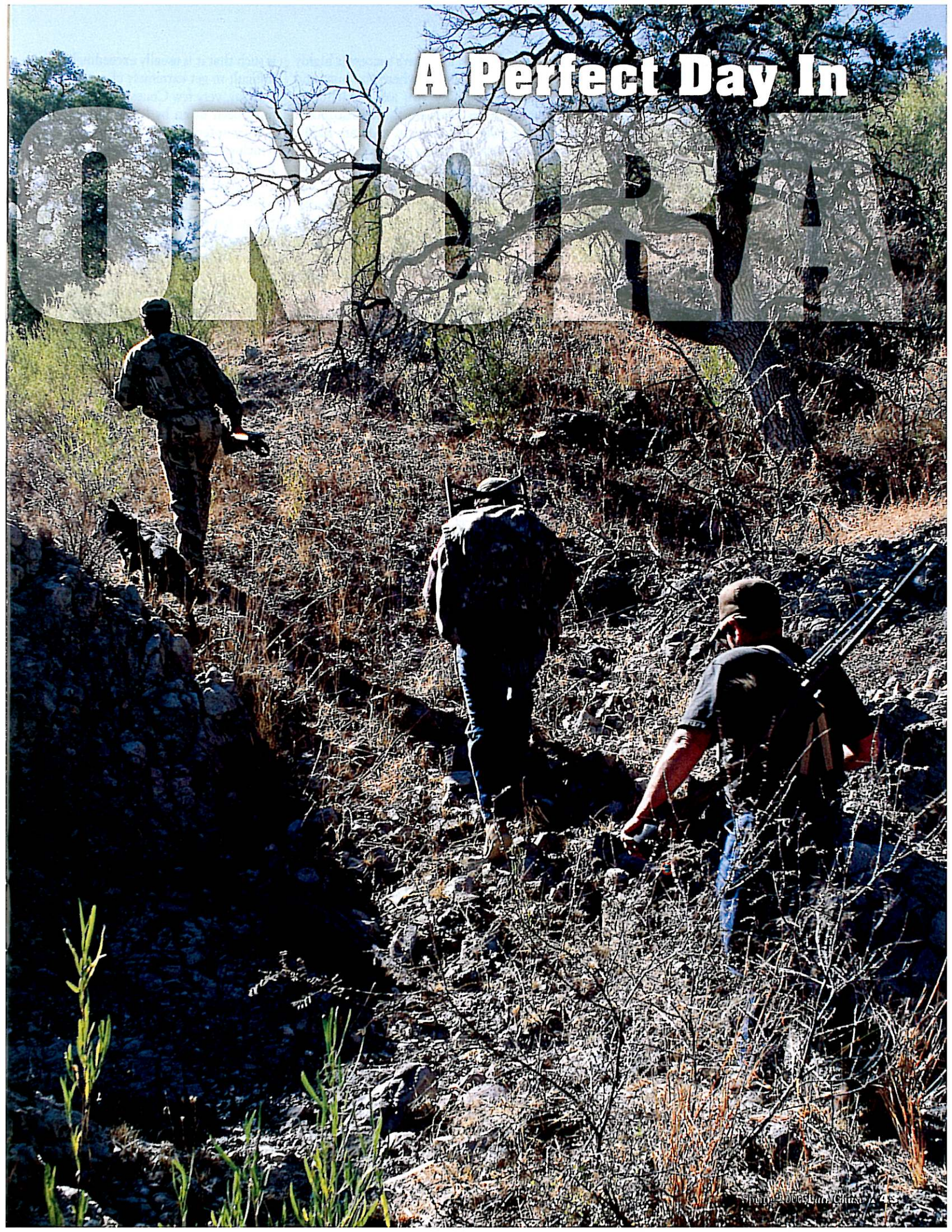
David has spent time in Mexico, both Chihuahua and Sonora, throughout the fall and winter months. As is the case with all our deer, these little suckers can't be trusted to start their rut on schedule. Years of experience have taught us that November is usually a bit early, and although January can be very good, it can also be post-rut and often you see a lot of racks with broken points. Sometime in mid-December is usually a good compromise. Although mid-December is often too early to catch the genuine peak of the rut, there is almost always good pre-rut activity, with the bucks rubbing and making scrapes and, if not actually chasing does, at least fairly visible.

In mid-December of 1999, I arrived in outfitter Kirk Kelso's camp in Sonora. I joined David Miller, who had been hunting there for a week. David was unusually quiet. Kelso, always full of optimism and enthusiasm, was also subdued. The weather was exceptionally warm and



A Perfect Day In

# CONCORDIA



## One of the good things about Coues' whitetails is they aren't hard to pack out!

**Kirk Kelso with Swarovski's doubler attached to one eyepiece of their 15 x 56 binoculars. This proved an exceptionally valuable tool.**

the hills were bone dry, and the deer weren't moving. They were seeing a few deer early and late, but there had been almost no rutting activity. The bucks they were seeing were mostly little guys.

Some of Kirk's hunters had gone home empty-handed, which is not entirely unusual. Although Coues' deer hunting is very demanding, most hunters who leave Mexico without a Coues' buck after a full week's hunt either missed shots, set standards too high, or were physically unable to get to the kind of buck they wanted. In 1999, however, deer movement was so limited and the rut was so laid back that many people never had a decent chance at harvesting an animal.

Everybody likes to think that his or her favorite game is exceptionally difficult to hunt, but the

truth is, a person's success is highly dependent on where you hunt and how picky you are. Although Coues' deer are thinly distributed over vast country, they are hardly scarce in areas that are well managed and/or receive little hunting pressure (like remote ranges in Arizona or private ranches in Mexico). Where there are good numbers of them, the buck/doe ratio tends to be high, and hunting pressure is usually light enough that the age distribution is pretty good.

Finding and evaluating these little bucks is tricky. There is no hunt in North America, including sheep and pronghorn, which is as optics intensive as hunting Coues' whitetails. With good optics, you can often glass bucks at vast distances. The next step, which is getting in position for a shot, often makes Coues' deer hunting one of the most physically challenging of all North American hunts.

The next test comes when you pull the trigger. The Coues' deer offers a very small target, with a shoulder-to-brisket height of less than 12 inches. Worse, the country

is such that it is usually exceedingly difficult to get extremely close. To this day, very few Coues' whitetails have been taken by bowhunters—and even fewer really good bucks, which speaks to how incredibly difficult it is to get close.

And of course, the Coues' whitetail is still a whitetail. He is not as hunter-educated as his eastern cousins, but he is cautious and wary. When bedded, his camouflage, small size, and the desert vegetation usually render him invisible. When he's up he rarely stands still for very long, and he is not nearly as habitual as his eastern cousins.

David Miller's ability to take long-range shots at these deer has already achieved near-legendary status, and to some degree is responsible for his incredible success. Other hunters, including me, do not have the same long-range skills. Only rarely have I been faced with shots at the "plus 400-yard" ranges that are routine for him, and I don't take them. I also don't seek the quality of buck that David seeks. Either way, I do believe Coues' deer hunting, even under the best of cir-



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## A Perfect Day In

# SONORA

cumstances, offers some of the most consistently difficult shooting in North American big game hunting. On the other hand, in good country, the hunting success is usually so high that I do not consider the Coues' whitetail one of our most difficult species to hunt.

In the end, the difficulty of the hunt and chances for success are highly dependent on where you are, when you are there, and what the deer are doing. This was certainly the case during the remainder of our hunt in Sonora. Several days after David and I had been in camp, we were joined by a new group of hunters. It was getting later in the season by the day, and the difficult hunting of past days was receding in memory. We were full of optimism and confidence, and before dawn we scattered to the four winds with our guides to see what we could find.

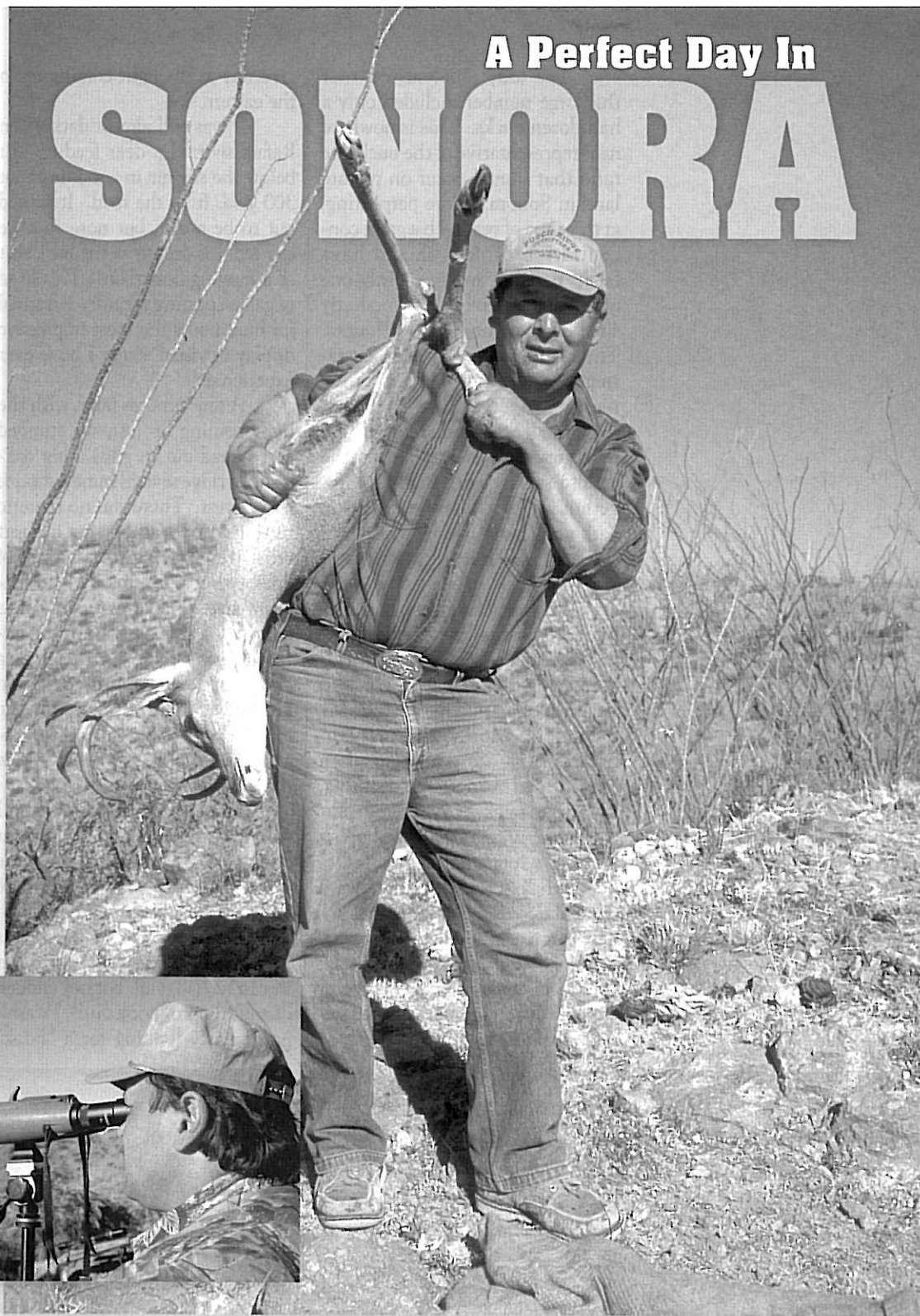
On that day, I could have been convinced that Coues' deer hunting was one of the most difficult pursuits on earth. I hunted with burly Rafael, a longtime employee of the Mexican game department with extensive experience not only with deer hunting, but also with desert sheep. Rafael is blessed with the most uncanny ability to spot game I have ever known. Part of this is experience, in knowing exactly what to look for and knowing exactly where to look, and part of it is God-given talent. Mind you, I have a fair amount of experience and usually don't have to take a back seat in the game-spotting department—but I've never seen anything like this guy. I would love to have his vision tested!

With Rafael, I was in extremely good hands. I doubt that we overlooked any deer that were up and moving. We started by glassing from a high spot along a ranch road that offered a vista of ridges and canyons on both sides. It was ideal for Coues' deer, with numerous grassy benches and little saddles, a potpourri of perfect places for these whitetails to move, feed, and rut. I

put the new Swarovski 15x56's on a tripod (part of my job was to try out these new binoculars), and alternated between them and my 10x40's. I almost held my own with Rafael, at least in finding the easy ones. Rafael found the difficult ones. Between us we saw deer—quite a lot of deer.

After an hour or so we made up our packs and hiked into another canyon system, spending the

day moving from one vantage point to another. We jumped a few deer while moving, but most of the deer we saw were glassed at various distances from fairly close to ridiculously far away. By day's end my count was 49 different deer, which is a vast number of Coues' whitetails to see in one day. This was quite possibly the highest number of Coues' deer I have ever seen in one day.



The only problem was that this large number included only a half-dozen bucks. This is nowhere near representative of the buck/doe ratio that should occur on private land in Sonora. More perplexing, at this time of year such a great concentration of does should have bucks hanging around. Only one of the half dozen bucks, a modestly sized eight-pointer, was with does. Three other bucks, sized "extra-small, small, and medium" were running together, and the other two, "small and medium," were also together. This is very late in the year to see bachelor herds still together. Obviously the situation Kirk and David had lamented was still ongoing. Rutting activity was almost nil.

Back in camp, most of the hunters had similar reports. Some had seen more deer and more bucks, clearly indicating a huge and healthy population in the area. My buddy Jim Morey, president of Swarovski's North American branch, had seen almost nothing. In fact, no one had seen significant rutting activity. This was shaping up to be a tough hunt!

Ah, but what a difference a day makes. Although still unseasonably warm, the following morning, December 16th, was clear and cold. David Miller and Kirk Kelso accompanied Rafael and me, and we sallied forth just as the stars began to

give way to the light coming up in the eastern sky.

It was still almost dark when Rafael spotted a deer feeding just below the skyline in a saddle about 300 yards from the road. It turned out to be a doe, but note that he spotted this deer from the back seat of a moving Suburban! This kind of game-spotting wizardry is normal for him, but is the most impressive display of visual acuity I have ever experienced.

A few minutes later, with the light coming up fast, we stopped and spread out to glass a big oak-studded ridge several hundred yards to the west. There was no frenetic rutting activity visible, but in short order we glassed several groups of does either accompanied by medium-sized bucks or with bucks nearby. Seeing nothing exceptional, we moved up the road a quarter-mile or so. Where the sun was hitting some tall yuccas on the crest of a ridge we immediately—and almost simultaneously—saw three bucks and one doe.

It was a tough choice, and I will never know if I made the right one or not. The best of the three was a very nice buck, a bit more than ear-wide, with fair mass, good points, good eye guards, and beams that came around well. In other words, he had it all, but not enough of anything to "book out." I wasn't particularly looking for a "book"

buck, but it was awfully early in the hunt. Against that, we knew the buck activity wasn't what it should be. So far this was a good morning, but we might or might not see a lot more deer. So I weighed the odds, and decided this buck was too nice to pass.

At this point the buck was about 650 yards away. About half-way between the buck and us was a little rocky ridge that would offer a shot. We dropped down into the valley, instantly gained cover, and moved quickly. This was one of very few times when a stalk has gone exactly according to plan, and it was certainly the easiest stalk I have ever made on a Coues' whitetail. We got to the top of the intervening ridge, and I threw down my backpack for a rest. The other deer had moved on, but the largest buck was still there, now about 300 yards away. He was facing away from us with a big ocotillo covering his body. Just his back end and head were visible. He was looking back over his shoulder and right at us. The easy shot was the Texas heart shot. Since I was shooting David Miller's .300 Weatherby, I knew I had enough gun to pull it off, but everything in me balks at using that type of shot on an unwounded animal. So I waited, knowing the deer would move in a few seconds.

He did, but he didn't take the few steps forward that I expected.



Fortunately, he didn't exactly bolt, but trotted forward in a rush. He had seen enough, and he was headed out. I already knew where he would clear the ocotillo, and as he moved my rifle swung with him and the trigger broke. No, my shot placement wasn't perfect, but it was a snazzy shot that dropped him, and we were all very pleased. So, barely an hour after daylight, we were all sitting on the crest of the ridge, waiting for the light to get just a bit more perfect for photos.

Well, that's what Kirk, David, and I were doing. Rafael never stopped looking for animals. While we waited for perfect light he found another half dozen bucks. One of them was *the* buck, the one David had been looking for. Okay, not specifically this buck, but several seasons had passed since David had gotten his sights on a really big Coues' buck, and this one looked the part.

The buck was two miles away, which seemed like an impossible distance. He was near a steep cliff of dirt and gravel above which lay a grassy meadow studded with scattered oaks that dropped gently away. We were quite a bit higher than the cliff, and could see a fair amount of the meadow. The buck was slowly working his way among the trees toward the edge of the cliff.

What I don't understand is how Rafael saw the deer in that meadow! With hand-held 10x binoculars, the buck was barely a dot. When we made the stalk on my deer we had left most of our optics behind. We still had the 15x56 Swarovski's and a tripod—and I had a "doubler" in my day pack. With the 15x binoculars on the tripod we could clearly tell this was a fine buck. With the doubler replacing one eyepiece, we could tell he was wonderful—high, wide, and heavy. We could not count points, but we really didn't need to. This was a keeper.

We took turns watching the buck for quite a while as he ambled along the cliff edge. Then, as we expected, he found a steep trail down and disappeared into the thick cover at the base of the cliff. With the minimal deer movement we were seeing, he would probably be bedded until late in the afternoon. We had time. In fact we had all day,

so we took the pictures we wanted of my buck, packed up our gear and the deer, and made our way back to the truck.

A ranch road took us within about three steep ridges of where we thought "Miller's buck" was bedded, not bad as Coues' deer hunting goes. We followed a sandy creek bed for a ways, ate lunch in a cool shady spot, and then started into the system of ridges, glassing our way as we got closer. Of course things looked a lot different closer than they had from two miles away. Fortunately, the dirt cliff was extremely distinctive, and we felt certain the buck was bedded somewhere among the thick mesquites at its base. We took a good look for him at about 1,000 yards and could find nothing. At about 700 yards, we stopped to look for the buck again, but there was another intervening ridge that we hadn't seen before that blocked part of our view.

As it turned out, our position was perfect as we were able to see the entire base of the cliff. If we found the buck, we could probably shoot without further movement, except for one minor detail. Two bucks and a doe were feeding right on top of the ridge. So we had to wait until they grazed down to the right, hoping they'd keep going that way if we spooked them.

We never saw those deer again, and made it to the top of this last little ridge without incident. Kirk, David, and Rafael crawled forward through the brush so they could see to glass. I figured there were plenty of eyes and plenty of movement, so I found a shady spot under a mesquite and got comfortable. I figured nothing would happen for a couple of more hours, when the buck got up so we could see him.

Wrong! I had just dozed off when Kirk hissed, "I've got him!"

I rolled over and crawled forward, while David started to set up his pack for a rest. Down and to the right there was a small finger ridge that led up to the base of the dirt cliff. Brush was thick on both sides, but the top was bare until it joined the cliff, and at the juncture there was a stout mesquite. Heck, I could see the buck with my eyes—we just hadn't yet looked quite that far to the right! He was bedded in the shade of the mesquite, on the bare

dirt of that finger ridge, his high, bleached white antlers distinctive and spectacular. He looked even better at 400 yards than he had from two miles!

David Miller had waited and worked hard for this moment for a long time. He set up his rifle on the pack, took a few deep breaths, and said, "Okay, boys, it's show time."

Except it almost wasn't. The big .300 roared, and my heart did a flip-flop when I saw dirt kick just above the buck. What my heart did is probably

nothing compared to what David's heart did, but he handled it like the professional he is, instantly working the bolt. The buck stayed motionless for a second after the shot. Then he jumped up from his bed and stood in the sunlight. That's when the rifle roared a second time, and we all saw hair fly right on the center of his shoulder. He made two jumps before folding. There was a lot of whooping and hollering on our ridge! The white antlers had fooled us just a bit, though. He was not quite as large as we thought, but still a wonderful buck with the bonus of a small drop tine. Both David and I agreed that it had been a great day in Sonora.

Then something remarkable happened. The morning I took my buck began a 48-hour period when bucks were running all over the place. By the following afternoon every hunter in camp had filled out. That 48-hour period was the window, and then it shut down again. In days and weeks that followed, more hunters took more nice bucks, but only through very hard hunting and lots of glassing. The frenetic month-long rut we all had hoped for never happened in Sonora last year. I've seen this often with both whitetail and mule deer—the "quiet rut" you hear about—but never before with Coues' whitetails. I am reminded again that deer hunting is deer hunting, and regardless of which deer you're hunting you can't predict what they will do. And that's really part of the fun! ▲▲▲

**Kirk Kelso, David Miller, and Rafael with Miller's 1999 Coues' whitetail. A fine buck with the bonus of a drop tine, which is very unusual in Coues' deer.**

**The rifle is a David Miller Marksman in .300 Weatherby Magnum.**