

# COUES' WHITETAIL DEER

This small version of the whitetail is confined to the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. In the United States the largest continuous block of occupied range begins in Arizona south of Bill Williams Mountain and follows the south-

western slope of the Mogollon Rim in a southeast direction to the Black Range in southwestern New Mexico (See map on opposite page). In addition to this continuous range, in Arizona it is found and reaches its highest densities in scattered mountain ranges in the south central and southeastern part of the state. In Mexico the range borders that in the United States and extends southward through the states of Sonora, western Chihuahua into Durango and central Jalisco.

In the United States and in the northern portion of Mexico, Coues' whitetail is geographically isolated from any other subspecies. Only in central and southern Mexico does its range border three other subspecies. This isolation factor must deter the flow of genetically inherited characteristics and traits within the whitetail species and probably contributes to this subspecies' distinctiveness.

Along the Mogollon Rim in Arizona the whitetail range is found between the mule deer that occupy the

pine forests on top of the Rim and those that occur at a lower elevation in the chaparral. In the southern mountain ranges Coues' deer is generally found at higher elevations than mule deer, starting in the oak-grasslands and extending upward into the northern coniferous forest of pine, fir and spruce.



The range of the species has remained about the same as in historical times. Various activities of man had a depressing effect on the numbers of deer but usurping its range for development has not been a major problem because of the type of habitat occupied by this small deer.

Locally, densities and numbers

of Coues' deer fluctuate widely from year to year. This has variously been attributed to predation, past overpopulation, competition with other herbivores, particularly mule deer and cattle, periodic droughts, and hunting pressure. An area that provides good hunting for several years may yield nothing two or three years later. From one canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains a party of four all took nice bucks every year from 1986 through 1990 and in 1989 spotted as many as 20 bucks and 43 does within a week. In 1993 only one buck was taken and only 23 antlerless deer were observed. There was no obvious decrease in favored deer food plants, but there was a noted decrease in deer sign.

Predation has been confirmed as a major cause of mortality, both to mature deer and fawns. Of 485 whitetail carcasses found by Arizona Game and Fish Department biologists on winter deer surveys predator kills accounted for 105 (22%). Of the carcasses examined, lions were definitely identified as the predator that killed 58 of the deer, and probably others were taken by lions but the condition of the carcass when found prohibited positive identification of the cause of death. Studies show that lions, particularly during the winter, take mostly adult deer, and astonishingly they take more bucks than does. Lions are seldom seen by anyone, but they do like the type of country fa-

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COUES' WHITETAIL TAKEN BY  
STEVE GALLIZIOLI IN THE  
MAZATZAL MOUNTAINS.

## A LITTLE HISTORY

*This deer was described and named by Elliott Coues and H.C. Yarrow as a subspecies of the Virginia deer in 1875 based on an adult male taken in Santa Cruz County, Arizona, in September 1874, by J.T. Rockroth. They called it the Dwarf Deer of Arizona. The type had four point antlers and was described in detail based upon its small size and its color in summer pelage. Coues was perhaps the most famous naturalist of the second half of the 19th Century. He published several significant books about birds as well as mammals. It was Wilfred Osgood in our 1932 records book who called this deer a distinct species, *Odocoileus couesi*, and this was followed by Glover Allen in the Club's 1939 book. Starting with the 1952 record book, it has been properly designated as *Odocoileus virginiana couesi*. The deer, whose range doesn't meet or overlap any other larger whitetail subspecies in the U.S., has had its own class within in the B&C Records Program since the 1932 records book. Within the United States this deer is completely isolated from any of the larger subspecies and there is no problem with intergrades as we have with the Columbia blacktail and the mule deer in the northwest.*

- Philip L. Wright, Ph.D., Honorary Life Member, B&C Club

vored by Coues' deer. Four lions have been seen by hunters in my parties over the years, all while hunting Coues' deer.

Coyotes also contribute to losses, but primarily to fawns. Little factual data are available because fawn carcasses are small and the bones disappear rapidly. However, studies on other species of deer in Arizona and Texas have demonstrated that fawn survival within coyote excluded pastures was one and one-half times that found outside the coyote proof fences. Estimates are that 65% of the fawns born in the summer never live to be counted in the winter surveys.

Would reduction of lions and coyotes increase deer numbers? Probably, at least in some areas, but the question is no longer germane because the cost for removing enough predators to make a difference would be prohibitive.

Competition for food by both mule deer and domestic livestock probably have a greater influence on Coues' deer population than predation, particularly in areas where the terrain is excessively rugged. Mule deer and livestock prefer level ground or gentle slopes but during droughts tend to move to higher and steeper country to take advantage of green browse plants that provide the only palatable sustenance. Unfortunately, the most important woody food plants of Coues' deer are also those used extensively by their two competitors.

Droughts, particularly in the winter and spring, have been charged with reducing the Coues' deer population. The spring flush of green plants is absent when rains do not materialize, and food at this seasonal cycle is critical to nourish does heavy with fawns and bucks that have used their nutrient reserve during the December breeding season. If nutritious food is not available few fawns survive and even adults die, resulting in a crash of the population.

Hunting pressure has been charged with reducing deer popula-

tions. In Arizona antlerless whitetail hunting was stopped in 1974, and in both Arizona and New Mexico only antlered deer are legal. Under this arrangement legal hunting has little influence on the population levels.

Illegal killing, depending on its level of practice, could have a depressing effect on the population.

Overuse of food plants by Coues' deer is not now a problem, however in the high population levels of the 1950s and 1960s deer browse plants in some whitetail areas were stressed by excessive browsing. To remedy this situation antlerless whitetail hunting was authorized in Arizona in 1955 and continued until 1973. Antlerless deer made up more than 30% of the total whitetail harvest of around 4000 animals several years during this period.

A lot of words have been used to describe Coues' whitetail deer; little, dainty, beautiful, graceful, alert, elusive, crafty; and they all apply. Field dressed weight of mature bucks average about 75 pounds, and that of does

average about 50 pounds. As to measurements, from the tip of the tail to the end of the nose the average length of 241 mature bucks averaged 56 inches, and height at shoulder was 31.5 inches. In relation to its weight, the Coues' deer is a rangy animal. They weigh about half that of whitetails from the southeastern United States, but are eight-tenths as high and as long.

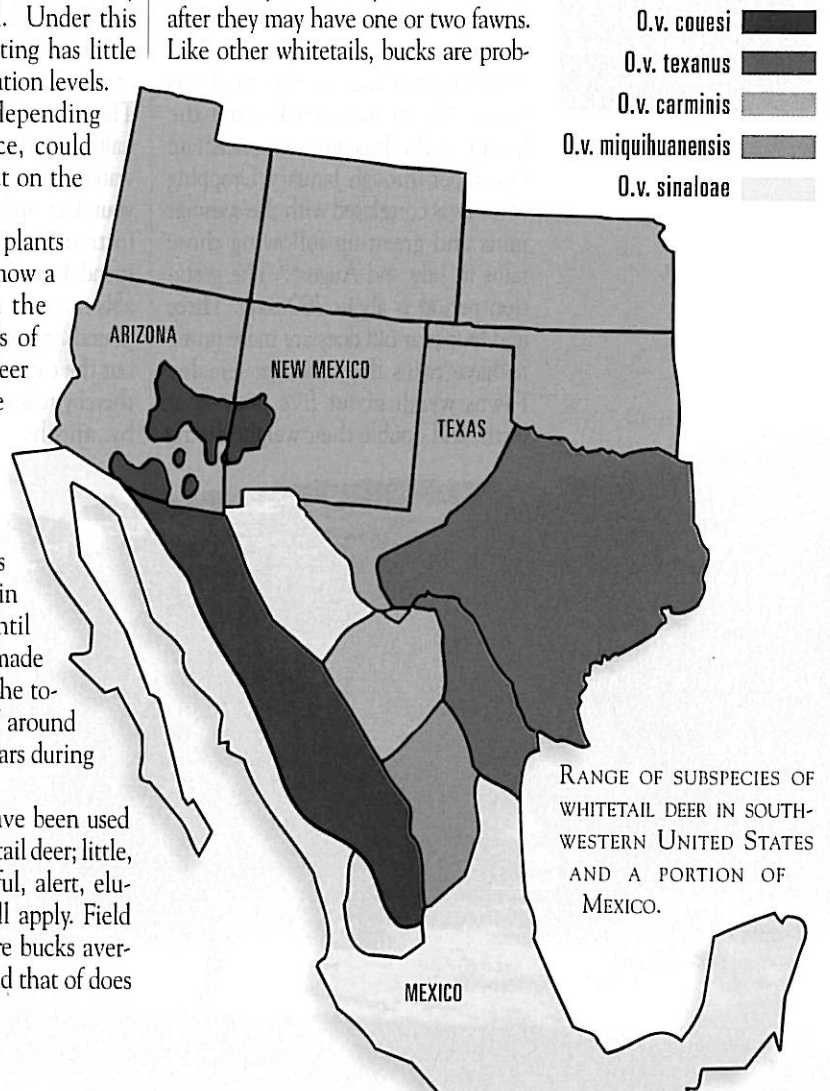
Pelage coloration is similar to that of the other whitetails, reddish brown in the summer and grey in the winter. The tail is slightly longer, and they have the characteristic of raising their tail when alarmed. "Whistling" or "blowing" when alarmed by both bucks and does is common.

Coues' does mature more slowly than other whitetails, apparently few of them producing fawns before they are three years old. Thereafter they may have one or two fawns. Like other whitetails, bucks are prob-

## B&C RECORDS PROGRAM

### OFFICIAL BOUNDARY

THE ORIGINAL BOUNDARY INCLUDED ALL OF ARIZONA, THREE SOUTHWESTERN COUNTIES IN NEW MEXICO, CATRON, HIDALGO, AND GRANT, AS WELL AS SONORA AND CHIHUAHUA IN MEXICO. IN 1988 THE RECORDS COMMITTEE EXPANDED THE AREA IN NEW MEXICO FROM WHICH TROPHIES MAY BE TAKEN TO INCLUDE ALL OF THE AREA SOUTH OF INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 40 AND WEST OF THE RIO GRANDE RIVER.



## TOP THREE

### COUES' TYPICAL

AWARDS - 100 ALL-TIME - 110

143

ED STOCKWELL

Pima County, Arizona  
1953

134-3/8

VICTOR GIACOLETTI, JR.  
Grant County, New Mexico  
1981

133

MICHAEL E. DUPERRÉ  
Pima County, Arizona  
1990

## TOP THREE

### COUES' NON-TYPICAL

AWARDS - 105 ALL-TIME - 120

158-4/8

PICKED UP BY W.H. POLLOCK  
Loaned to B&C National Collection  
Santa Cruz County, Arizona  
1988

155

CHARLES E. ERICKSON, JR.  
Gila County, Arizona  
1988

151-4/8

DON SCHAUFLE  
Cochise County, Arizona  
1929

ably capable of breeding when two years old, but seldom get the opportunity.

Antler development may also be slower in Coues' deer. An analysis of antler development of 302 aged bucks from Arizona from 1972 to 1974 confirmed this. Using the greatest number of points on one side, bucks were usually two years old before they had developed branching antlers, but about half were still spikes. Sixty-five percent of the three year olds had three points, 20% two points, and only 12% four points. Seventy-two percent of the four year olds had three points, 18% four points, and the remainder evenly divided between two and five points. Seventy percent of the five and six year old bucks had three points, and the remainder in this age class had four or five points. Most Coues' bucks have the same number of points on each side. Of slightly over 3000 forked antlered bucks examined 74% had the same number on each antler. There was no direct relationship between the weight of the deer and the size of its antlers.

The breeding season of Coues' deer is onset by the bucks attacking bushes and trees to remove the velvet from their antlers. By mid to late November swelling of the necks is noticeable in most bucks, and the height of the breeding season is late December through January. Dropping of fawns is correlated with the summer rains and green-up following those rains in July and August. The gestation period is about 200 days. Three and four year old does are more prone to have twins than younger females. Fawns weigh about five pounds at birth, and double their weight during

the next two weeks. At three months males weigh about 40 pounds, and females two or three pounds less. Males do not reach full size until they are six years old, and their weight is relatively constant thereafter. Longevity of males in the wild is about ten years, but few reach that age. Of 299 bucks taken by hunters over a three year period 69% were three years or younger, 11% were six and older, and only 3% reached the ripe old age of eight and older.

Hunting Coues' deer is not for the irresolute and infirm. Occasionally one is seen moving through scattered oak trees in gently rolling hills, but if you are really serious you should concentrate your efforts on the steepest, rockiest, and thickest terrain available. Let your eyes do the walking, that is spend a lot of time glassing north facing slopes and woody hillsides and canyon bottoms. Once you find a buck that you want to take concentrate on that area, because Coues' deer have a relatively small home range. Every morning go prepared to stay the day, and to carry out the deer if you are successful. I hunt with a pack frame, and plan to bring out the front half and the head of the deer the day I kill it. The whole load, including half of the deer, a canteen of water, gear needed to process your deer, and creature comforts in case you have to spend the night out will probably not weigh more than 50 pounds. Some hunters bone out the carcass of their deer, thereby reducing the weight by another ten pounds.

Eliminating another trip over that terrain is worth it.

Where do you go if you want to get a good Coues' buck? In the 10th Edition of *Records of North American Big Game*, 81 of the first 100 heads listed came from Arizona, mostly from the mountains scattered south and east of Tucson. Mexico, primarily Sonora, accounted for 17, and two came from New Mexico.

The value of pre-season scouting cannot be overemphasized. Know where you are going when you leave home, and set up a good all-weather camp. Whitetail habitat in Arizona is usually above 3500 feet, and my experience has been that even in the sunny Southwest about two out of every three years some time during a ten day season the snow is going to fly. I hesitate to increase my competition, but if you have not tried hunting Coues' deer you should. Hunt the country where no civilized person should be, but don't be surprised to find other hunters there. I'm convinced that Coues' hunters will go anywhere. Have a good hunt!



OAK-GRASSLAND IS ONE EXAMPLE OF TYPICAL LOWER RANGE COUES' WHITETAIL DEER HABITAT.

INSET: CHARLIE ASH ARRIVING AT HUNTING CAMP, BRINGING HIS DEER.