

HUNTING JACK O'CONNOR'S DEER

KNOWN FOR HIS SHEEP HUNTING, O'CONNOR PUT THE COUES' DEER ON THE MAP . . .
AND HUNTING THIS DESERT WHITETAIL REMAINS ONE OF NORTH AMERICA'S MOST ENCHANTING HUNTS.

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Nearly three-quarters of a century have passed since a bespectacled English professor from Arizona emerged as the greatest American hunting writer of all time. There were hunting writers before Jack O'Connor, and there will be hunting writers as long as there are hunters, but few could dispute the title O'Connor wore as dean of us all. He "made his bones" in a pre-television era, when the big outdoor magazines were on top of the heap . . . and he lived in a time and place when he could gather field experience that simply cannot be matched today. He was also, in the technical and literary sense, a damned good writer. Remember, he was an English professor first!

My long-time boss at Petersen's *HUNTING*, Ken

Elliott, had the privilege to edit dozens of O'Connor manuscripts. He tells me the raw copy was perfect . . . except that O'Connor, always the perfectionist, would call him and ask him to exchange words here and there to make it more perfect.

This was in the sunset of a long career. By the 1970's O'Connor had hunted the world, and undoubtedly had become best-known as "Mr. Sheep Hunter." He loved to hunt mountain sheep, and he did more of it than any writer before or since, mostly in a time when America's big game was at its nadir and all big game hunting was armchair adventure for most of his readers. O'Connor only saw the beginning of, and probably never envisioned, the explosion of the whitetail opportunity we have today. But his reputation as a

sheep hunter and his international hunting came later, many years after he was already the premier American hunting writer.

Like most of us in the business, he started out writing about things close to home that he knew about. Prominent in his early writings, and always one of his favorites, was the Coues' whitetail. In fact, he hunted—and sold stories about—Coues' whitetails long before he hunted desert sheep. Most of us non-Arizonans who have hunted the Coues' whitetail have done so because of Jack O'Connor. And most of us who have hunted this pretty little desert deer have become enchanted by them.

When O'Connor was a boy the Coues' deer was still considered a different species of deer from the "Virginia deer." This mistake dates

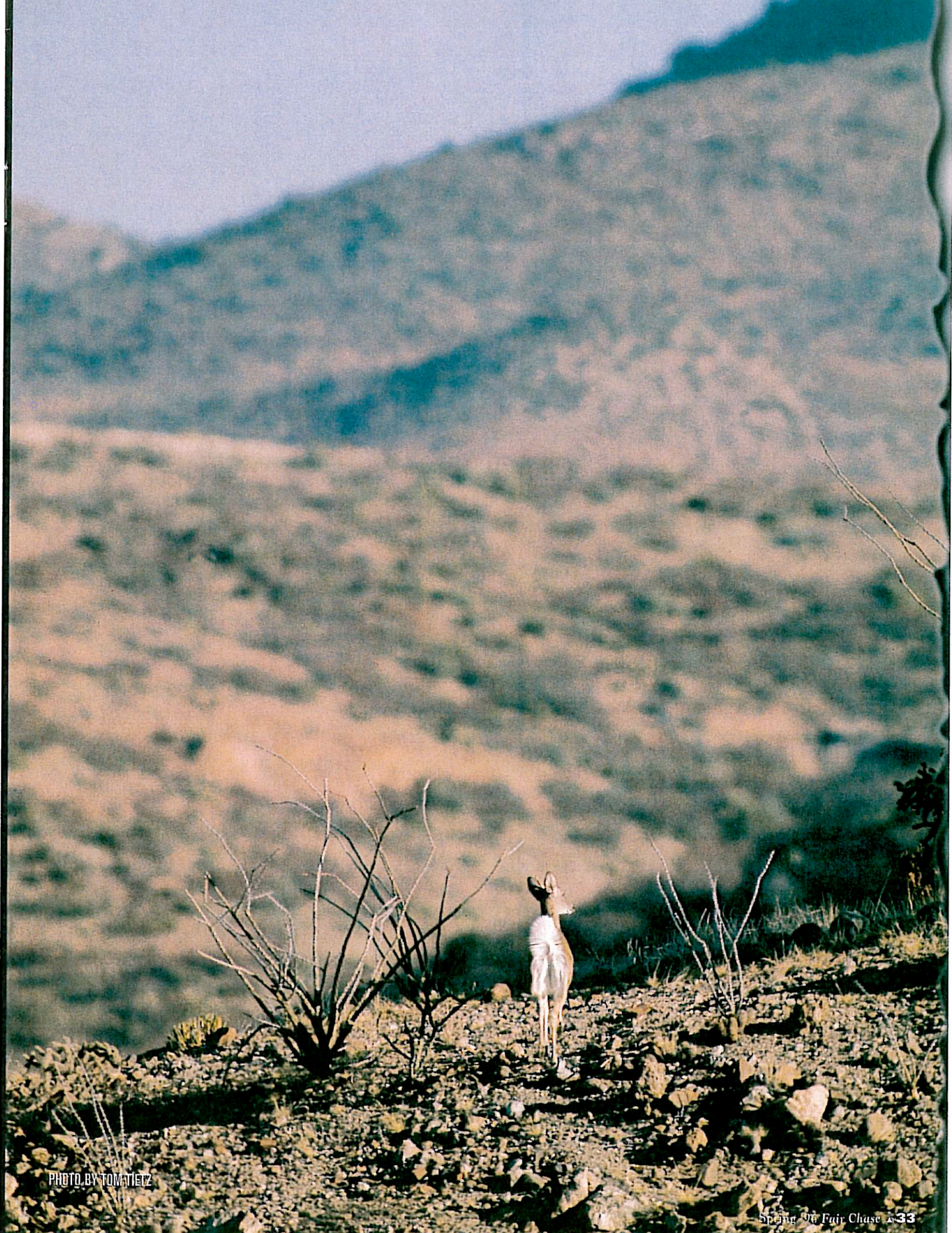


PHOTO BY TOMATIETZ



back to the 1880's, when this desert adaptation of *Odocoileus virginianus* was identified a separate species. This tiny deer was studied and named after U.S. Army Quartermaster Elliott Coues (Yes, it's properly pronounced "cows," as Lt. Coues pronounced his name, although "cooz" has become the most common pronunciation.) Later biologists would downgrade Coues' "species" to a subspecies, but the founders of the Boone and Crockett record system separated it into its own category, and so it remains.

With fully 38 subspecies of whitetail deer ranging from the Amazon basin in South America to Canada's treeline, it seems a gross oversimplification for Elliott Coues' deer to have its own category and all other North American subspecies be lumped together. Simple tradition aside, however, there is good reason to continue this practice. First, the Coues' whitetail is geographically isolated from larger whitetail subspecies, whereas broad intergrade areas exist between most other U.S. and Canadian races. The Coues' deer has no whitetail at all to its west and north. To its east, in western Coahuila and Texas' Big Bend region, lies the Carmen Mountains subspecies—which may be slightly smaller than even the Coues' deer (and may well be one and the same). To the south it eventually intergrades with still-smaller tropical subspecies.

Unlike the differences between, say, the northern (*O.v. borealis*) and the Kansas (*O.v. machrochus*) subspecies, the differences between the Coues' whitetail and the other U.S. and Canadian subspecies are dramatic: smaller body size, iron-gray color, muted throat patch, enlarged ears and tail, distinctive and diminutive antlers. The differences are strik-

ing enough that early biologists can be forgiven for jumping to conclusions about finding a new species of deer.

The small size of the Coues' whitetail is not a valid reason to perpetuate the mistake. After all, the Florida whitetails—also a bonafide subspecies—can't compete with Alberta whitetails any more than Coues' whitetails can, but they don't have their own category. But the fact that Coues'

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deer hunting is strikingly different from hunting the other North American whitetails is a compelling reason for continuing the tradition, especially for those of us who love to hunt them.

My uncle, longtime Boone and Crockett Club Member, Art Popham, had a mounted Coues' deer head in a corner of his den in Kansas City. He attended the University of Arizona in the 1930's, and that whitetail head, two decades old when I first noticed it, was a memento of whitetail hunts with his English instructor, Jack O'Connor, and a Border Patrolman named George Parker.

I don't know if it was that pretty, petite mount; my uncle's stories of hunting with O'Connor and Parker; or O'Connor's wonderful writing about his favorite little deer—but I always wanted to hunt Coues' deer. Oddly, it was the year after O'Connor's death before I finally did. And like everyone who has hunted them, I became enthralled by these pretty little deer and the desert mountains they call home—and after nearly 20 years, I still am.

The arid mountains the Coues' whitetails call home are always beautiful, but in the summer heat they're hardly inviting. The opposite is true in the winter, when cold mornings and evenings and

BACKGROUND: COUES' DEER COUNTRY IN CHIHUAHUA. THERE'S WONDERFUL COUNTRY IN MEXICO'S INTERIOR; THAT'S THE EL NIDO RANGE IN THE BACKGROUND, LAST KNOWN STRONGHOLD OF THE MEXICAN GRIZZLY BEAR.

TOP LEFT: ERNESTO BEALL AND ME WITH MY LAST-DAY CHIHUAHUA COUES' DEER, TAKEN IN A BLINDING SNOWSTORM. THE RIFLE IS A DAVID MILLER MARKSMAN, HIS SPECIAL LONG-RANGE RIFLE, CHAMBERED TO .300 WEATHERBY MAGNUM.

BOTTOM LEFT: THE CAMPILLO'S COUES' DEER HEADQUARTERS IN SONORA. REMOTE RANCHOS LIKE THIS ONE OFFER SUPERB COUES' DEER HUNTING IN BOTH SONORA AND CHIHUAHUA.



sunny, cloudless days are the norm. December and January, the prime time for Coues' deer, is a glorious time to be in the Southwest's mountains . . . and not a bad time to be far away from much of the Virginia whitetail's territory!

The deer, too, are strikingly beautiful. If you need sheer antler mass to be impressed, the Coues' whitetail probably isn't for you. However, the charm of the Coues' whitetail is its very petiteness, its attractive color, and the wonderful way it fits into those desert mountains. It is also tremendously challenging and interesting to hunt. Coues' deer, like all white-tails, are somewhat habitual—but they're thinly distributed over vast country, so "habitual" is a relative term. You can't exactly sit in a treestand on an established trail and expect to see the same buck again and again . . . but you could expect to see the same buck in the same canyon, or on the same mountain.

Over the years I have had the good fortune to know some of the truly great Coues' deer hunters. I wish I'd had the chance to talk to O'Connor about them, but I didn't. I did, however, spend a good deal of time with the late George Parker, one of America's greatest hunters—who should be better known than he is.

Parker was the real McCoy—a decorated hero of World War II, rancher, Border Patrolman, prolific hunter. He put more Coues' deer in all the record books than any other hunter, but he also hunted the world. He was one of very few to take a giant sable in Angola. He collected the Big Five in East Africa, and he hunted extensively in Southeast Asia. His lifelong friend, Colonel Charles Askins, referred to him as "the tough one." Tough, yes, but always the perfect gentleman. And always on the lookout for big Coues' deer bucks.

In Jack O'Connor and George Parker's era Coues' deer hunting was pretty simple. George told me they didn't even use binoculars much until well after World War II. Mostly they'd just ride saddle horses through good country, and when they jumped a buck that looked good they'd "bail and blaze." There wasn't much hunting pressure then, and there were lots of deer—especially on the Mexican side of the border where most of O'Connor's hunting was done and where most of Parker's big bucks came from. Those were different times, too. O'Connor himself wrote that they interpreted Sonora's game laws as allowing two or three deer *per trip*.

O'Connor eventually moved up to Idaho, and as far as I know that ended his Coues' deer hunting. Parker continued to hunt them until he died. Bill Quimby, Editor of *Safari* magazine, hunted with him several times down in Arizona's Canelo Hills. In later years Parker traded his horse for an open Jeep, but the methodology remained much the same—cruise the open, grassy hills characteristic of that area until deer were spotted or jumped.

It doesn't sound real serious com-

pared to the way dedicated trophy hunters pursue them today, but Parker knew where to look for the good ones and also knew what a big Coues' deer looked like. His record in *Records of North American Big Game* speaks for itself!

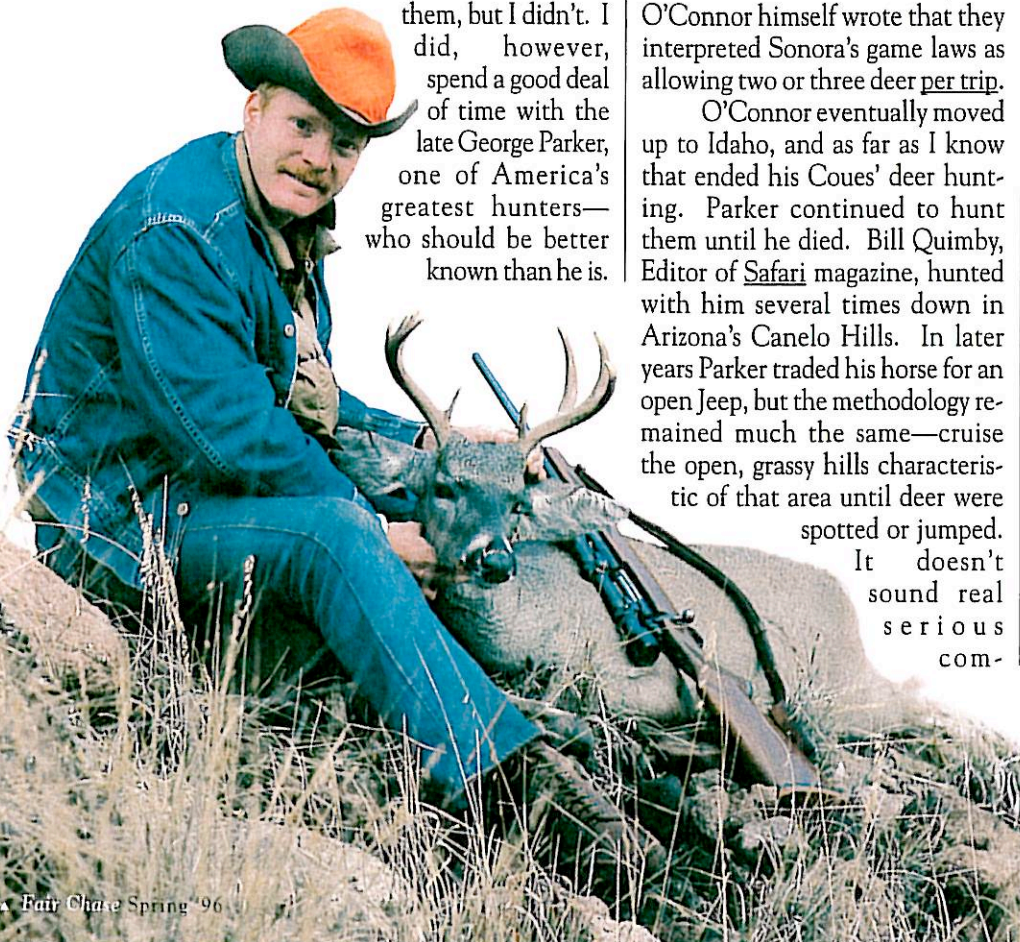
O'Connor/Parker-style Coues' deer hunting can still be done. These little desert deer are thinly distributed over vast country. As O'Connor said, "Even where there are lots of 'em there aren't very many of 'em." However, hunting pressure is also well-distributed and quite light, especially compared to most eastern whitetail range. Buck/doe ratios are fairly high, and although Coues' deer are never easy to find, once located they're actually fairly unsophisticated—again, compared to other "hunter-educated" white-tails. If you cover enough ground, chances are you'll see some bucks.

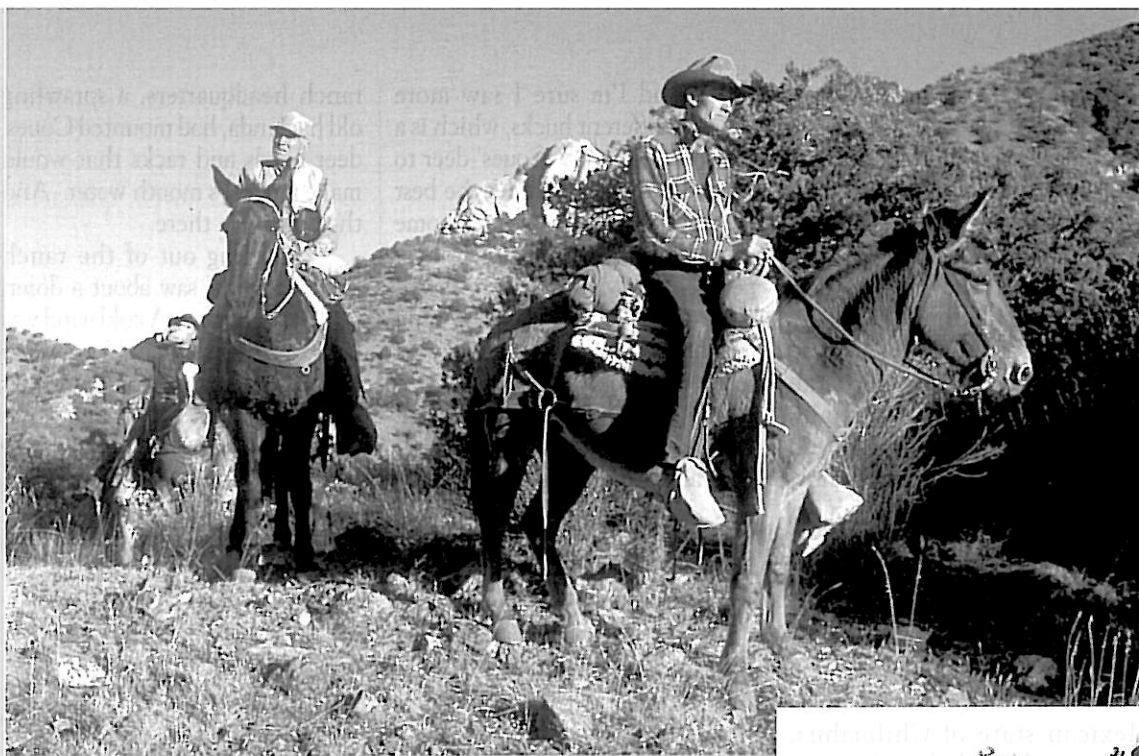
My own introduction to Coues' deer hunting was with Warner Glenn and his dad, the late Marvin Glenn, of Douglas, Arizona. Warner hunts pretty much the same way he did back then, with riding mules. It isn't pure O'Connor-style jump-shooting, but a mixture of glassing, covering country, and even some mounted drives. To this day the Glenns' guided hunts are pretty much 100 percent successful, so I don't conclude that Coues' deer have gotten more difficult over the past 20 years. Possibly they've gotten more plentiful now that we're several deer generations into 100-percent limited permit situations in Arizona.

In old Mexico, too, most Coues' deer hunting is done the old-fashioned way—casual glassing and covering ground. In Mexico you need to get on well-managed private ground to find any deer at all, but on good Mexican ranches the Coues' deer hunting is truly outstanding. A comparison I often make is that, during the many years I've hunted in Arizona, I've never seen a living Coues' deer from any road. In Mexico I've seen several very nice bucks from ranch roads!

Regardless of where you

NEARLY 20 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE I TOOK MY FIRST COUES' DEER BUCK -- AND I'M STILL ENTHRALLED BY THESE PRETTY DEER.





LEFT: WARNER GLENN IN THE LEAD AND THE LATE MARVIN GLENN ON THEIR FAMOUS RIDING MULES. THE GLENN'S HAVE OUTFITTED FOR COUES' DEER FOR DECADES AND STILL ACHIEVE A NEAR PERFECT SUCCESS RATIO.

BELOW: GARY WALKER, LEFT, AND "LAFFY" CAMPILLO WITH AN AVERAGE SONORAN COUES' DEER.

hunt them—Arizona, old Mexico, southwestern New Mexico—I am convinced that pure, serious, concentrated glassing is the best way to get a big Coues' deer today. O'Connor and Parker never hunted this way, but this is the method used by the modern-day Coues' deer gurus. I always thought I knew how to glass, but not like this.

The first time I saw "post-graduate glassing" was with Duwane Adams, a highly successful Coues' deer outfitter out of San Manuel, Arizona. This was a long time ago; Duwane wasn't an outfitter back then, just a Coues' deer nut who knew how to find them. He had 15x60 Zeiss binoculars, an almost unknown product 15 years ago, and he set them up on a sturdy camera tripod and dismantled the hillsides piece by piece. Using this technique, Duwane glassed up the biggest Coues' deer buck I've ever taken—but he'd made me a believer long before we ever found that deer.

I don't know who came up with the idea of putting ultra-powerful binoculars on a tripod, but Duwane Adams should get a lot of the credit for popularizing the technique. It's ideal for Coues' whitetails, where you're looking for small deer in big country—but it works equally well for virtually any

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game in big country. Jay Gates, of Kingman, Arizona, probably America's top "all-around deer hunter," uses this technique exclusively today—and he's taken several real bomber Coues' deer. And this is also the same hunting method used by custom rifle maker David Miller, unquestionably the top modern Coues' deer hunter.

Miller has lived in Tucson, Arizona, most of his life, and he's been a Coues' deer nut for years. Surprisingly, though, virtually all of his really large bucks have been taken in the past few seasons. In fact, he's entered five Coues' deer into the Boone and Crockett records in the last seven or eight years, an amazing record. He reckons good optics enabled him to find the big bucks—and accurate long-range rifles have allowed him to collect them.

Mind you, David Miller pursues Coues' deer with a passion I've rarely encountered. He uses his own David Miller Marksman rifle in .300 Weatherby, topped with a 6.5-20X Leupold. The scope has



a custom reticle with stadia lines set up to exactly subtend a Coues' whitetail for rangefinding! It's always fun to visit with David, 'cause he always has the latest in ultra-powerful optics. The 15x60 Zeiss glasses, for instance, once thought to be the ultimate glassing machines, have been superseded by 20X binoculars. And the fixtures for attaching binoculars to tripod have become downright exotic over the years.

The other thing David does, dedicated Coues' deer freak that he is, is investigate new places that just might harbor monster bucks. Like all other game animals, producing trophy Coues' bucks takes good genetics, good food and minerals, and the chance to reach full maturity. Some areas are going to produce bigger bucks than other areas . . . but if hunting pressure is even slightly severe, bucks won't

live to realize their potential. Over the years Miller has found some very fine bucks in Arizona, and he's unquestionably had the best luck in Sonora (as did George Parker). This past fall, though, he asked me to take a look at some country in Chihuahua with him.

There are just four places, at least in terms of political boundaries, to hunt Coues' whitetails: southern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, Sonora, and Chihuahua. Coues' deer are discontinuous within this vast area, but they're found in most mountain ranges and hills generally between about 4,000 and 8,000 feet in elevation. Far and away the least hunted and least known of these areas is the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Miller reckoned that, because there are very few outfitters and thus has been very little trophy hunting, we might find some great bucks if we could find the right area. Besides that, it's always interesting to find "new" country.

We went down as a foursome: Myself, David Miller, American outfitter Wayne Curtis (out of Thatcher, Arizona; Wayne was along to check out the area with an eye toward collaborating on some hunts with our Chihuahuan outfitter), and John Morrison from Tucson. John is an architect by trade, but also a serious hunter. He's been making the "General Staff" hiking/shooting staffs for several years. To be accurate, this was not Miller's or Curtis' first trip into Chihuahua; they made several scouting trips trying to find the right people and the right places, and Miller made a disastrous hunt a couple of seasons previously.

This time the research and scouting paid off. We hit the jackpot. No, we didn't get any monsters. Didn't see any, either. No matter how much planning you do, you can't control the weather. We got four days of high winds followed by a genuine blizzard. The bigger bucks we all felt were there had sense enough to stay out of sight.

In spite of this we all got nice

deer—and I'm sure I saw more than 30 different bucks, which is a massive amount of Coues' deer to see in a week even under the best of conditions. And we saw some great country and met some super people. Our Mexican outfitter was Alejandro Ortiz, who not only handled the paperwork and formalities perfectly, but also turned out to be a darned good hunter. His partner, Ernesto Beall, owns several good ranches in Chihua-

ranch headquarters, a sprawling old hacienda, had mounted Coues' deer heads and racks that would make anyone's mouth water. And the deer were there.

Hunting out of the ranch headquarters, I saw about a dozen bucks the first day. A cold wind was blowing at more than 30 miles per hour. This was the first of four days of such wind, but I didn't know that then. Had I known it, I might have shot the best of these. He was a

RIGHT: DUWANE ADAMS SPOTS WHILE I GET READY TO SHOOT AN ARIZONAN COUES' BUCK. THESE SPOOKY LITTLE DEER LIVE IN GREAT BIG COUNTRY, AND OFFER SOME OF THE MOST DIFFICULT SHOOTING IN ALL NORTH AMERICAN HUNTING. **INSET:** GUNMAKER, DAVID MILLER, IS ONE OF THE BEST OF THE MODERN COUES' DEER HUNTERS. THIS IS A FABULOUS BUCK HE TOOK IN SONORA WITH THE CAMPILLO BROTHERS.



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hua, and is himself a serious hunter with extensive experience throughout North America. Ernesto is one of those wonderfully bilingual people who can switch from Spanish to perfect English without a thought. His great-grandfather came to Mexico more than a century ago, and in the 1890's guided Charles Sheldon for Mexican grizzly.

The ranch we hunted, Ojo Caliente ("Hot Springs," so named for a wonderful hot spring that keeps an Olympic-sized swimming pool filled with steaming water year-'round), sat a couple of hours southeast of Casas Grandes, just a bit west of the El Nido mountain range, last stronghold of the Mexican grizzly. The



perfect typical eight-pointer, ear-wide, heavy, with long beams and reasonable points. I know he scored 106, maybe a bit more. In other words, he was a Coues' deer you just don't pass. But it was just the first day, and surely the weather would get better

Early in the hunt Wayne saw a very similar buck and did the sensible thing. John succumbed to temptation about midway through the hunt, taking a very nice eight-pointer. Miller and I, well, we kept shopping. Ernesto had a tent camp on the far side of the ranch, and we hunted out of there for several days. This was drier country, hard hit by drought. The deer were much less plentiful, but in spite of the continuing winds we kept seeing enough decent bucks to believe that a monster must pop up sooner or later. And then the clouds dropped down and the snow started. Lots of snow—and suddenly it was the last day.

Ernesto took us into some new country a bit farther south, and when we separated and headed up ridges in the dark the stars were out. But not for long. Shortly after dawn a fresh system came in and visibility was obscured by thick, wet flakes. My guide, Anselmo, and I worked along the edge of a rimrocked butte, glassing down into timbered pockets far below. That's where the deer were, and with the weather getting worse all the time I shot a very nice eight-pointer—not as good as I'd seen, and not as good as the area surely has, but a very pretty buck.

Miller got down to business, too—but his buck wasn't a last-day buck. It wasn't huge, but it had a dramatic double-beam on its right antler, a wonderful buck and a great addition to Miller's growing collection of superb Coues' deer.

I'm looking forward to hunting Jack O'Connor's deer in Chihuahua again—but the won-

derful thing about them is there really aren't any bad places to hunt them. The traditional ranges in Arizona produce well, as does Sonora. New Mexico's herd seems to be growing and expanding, and Chihuahua has vast potential that is virtually untouched. Usually, too, you can hunt them in glorious weather—the blizzard we experienced was an anomaly.

I can't say that Coues' deer hunting is my favorite; I'm very much a generalist and I enjoy—almost equally—a wide variety of hunting. But I can certainly understand why folks like George Parker and David Miller get so hooked on Coues' whitetails. They are a uniquely beautiful little deer, and their desert mountains are a wonderful place to be in the fall and winter. It might have been a mistake to classify Coues' whitetails separately from all the other "Virginia deer"—but I hope it's a mistake we never correct!

