
JAVELINA

BIG GAME ON THE EDGES

When is a big game animal not a big game animal?

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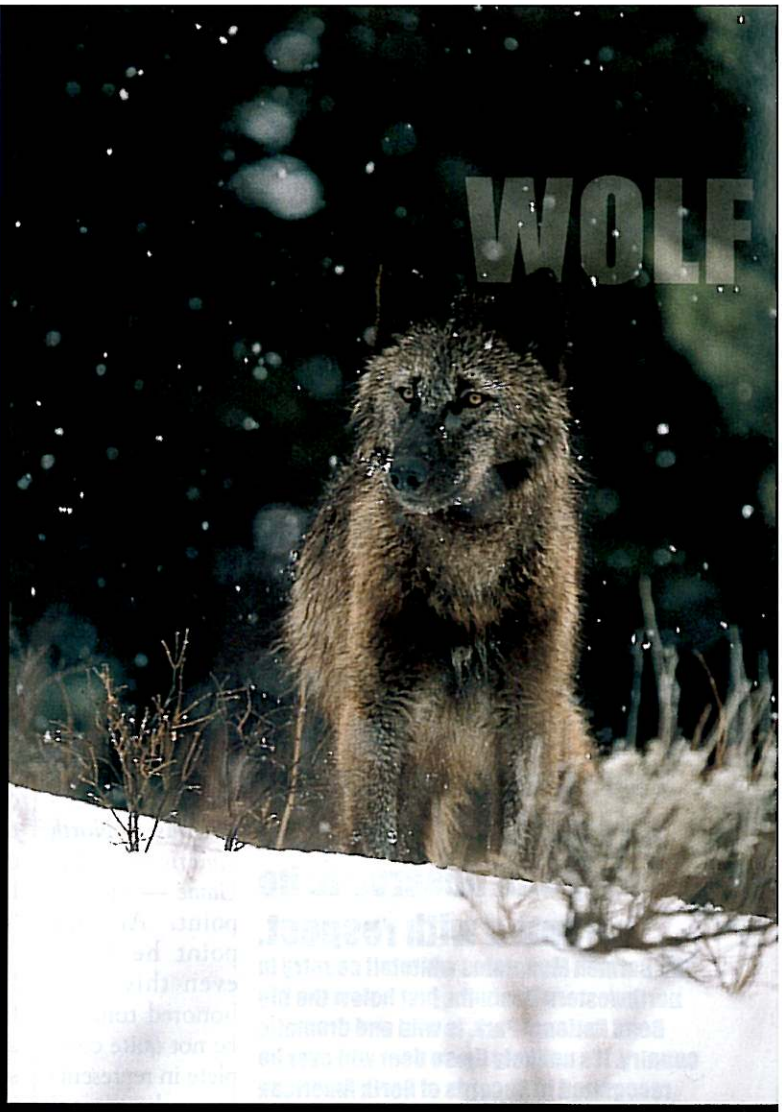
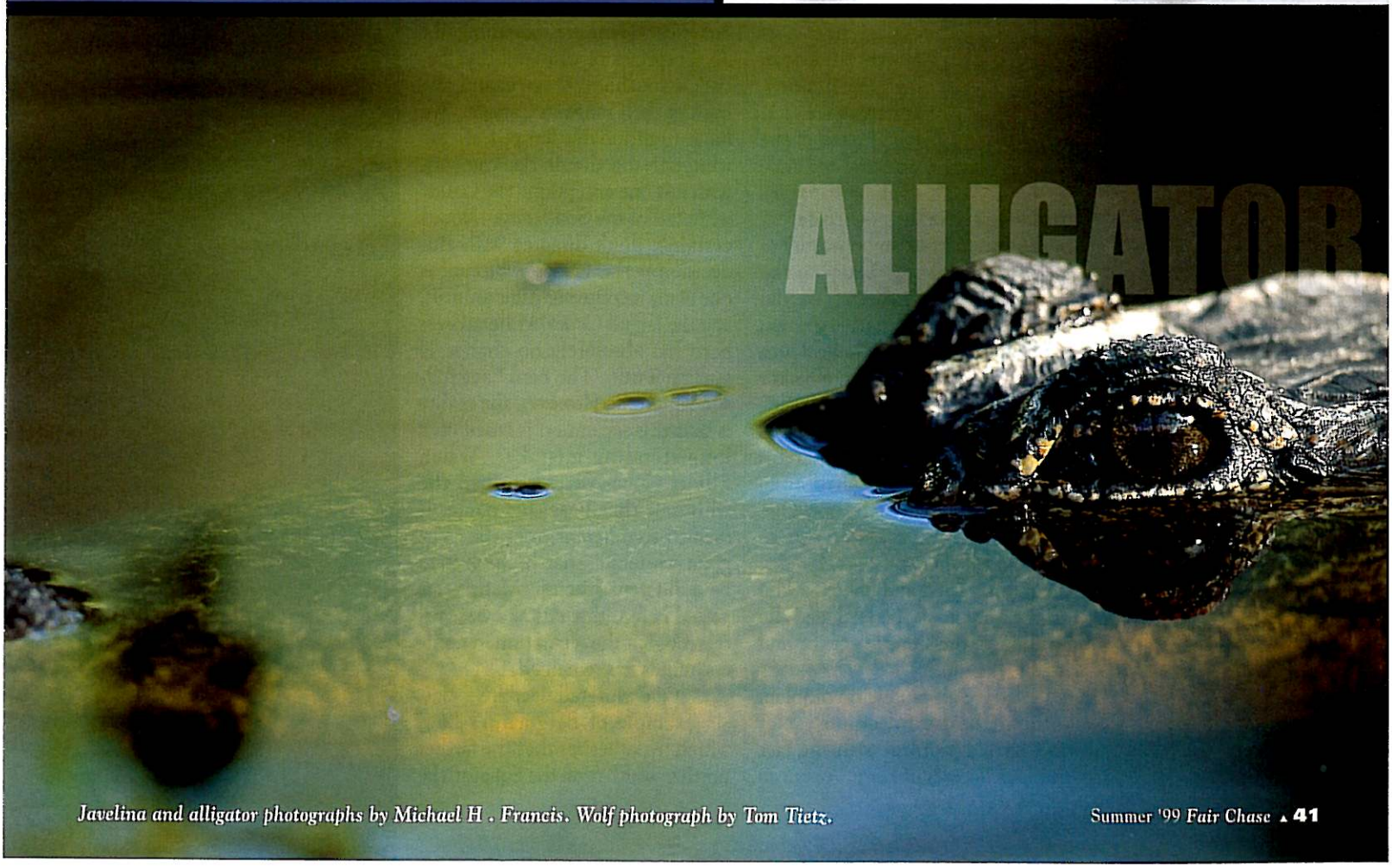
Just the other day a good friend of mine asked me to review some chapters in a book he is writing about hunting North American big game. It will be a good book. This gentleman, to be specific, J.Y. Jones, an eye doctor by trade, has done perhaps the greatest variety of North American big game hunting of any living man. Following in the tradition of Grancel Fitz, he did almost all of it with a single rifle, a Remington Model 700 in .30-06. I have immense respect for J.Y.'s persistence as well as his experience, and I anxiously await the finished product.





Javelina and alligator photographs by Michael H. Francis. Wolf photograph by Tom Tietz.

Now, having written a book or two myself, I sort of know how to go about it. Or at least how I go about it. I don't think J.Y. or I ever talked about it, but from his first chapter I sort of glean that he went about it much the way I do. He established a concept for the book, basically the entire spectrum of North American big game, hunted with a single rifle. Then he put together a chapter outline, and then he went to work. The interesting part for this discussion is that, in developing the concept, he had to make a conscious decision regarding what constituted a big game animal and what did not.

If all you care about is your name in the records, such fringe animals may not be of interest to you... but they still may offer some very good and very interesting hunting, and they still deserve to be treated with respect.

The Carmen Mountains whitetail country in northwestern Coahuila, just below the Big Bend National Park, is wild and dramatic country. It's unlikely these deer will ever be recognized in Records of North American Big Game – but they're still worth pursuing.

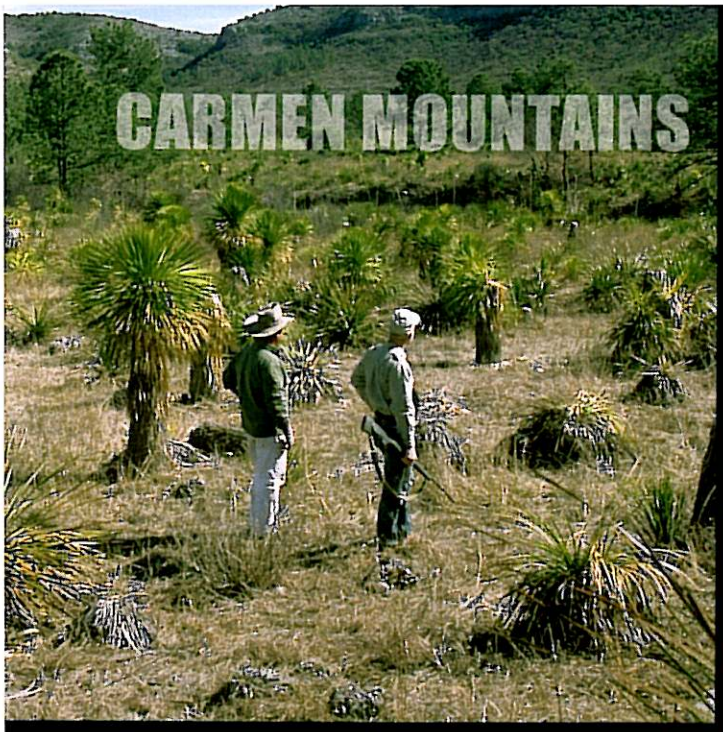
James Domakos and I with a brown brocket he took in Quintana Roo. It is a mystery to me why the brockets aren't accepted as North American deer; although very small, they are deer and they do live in North America.

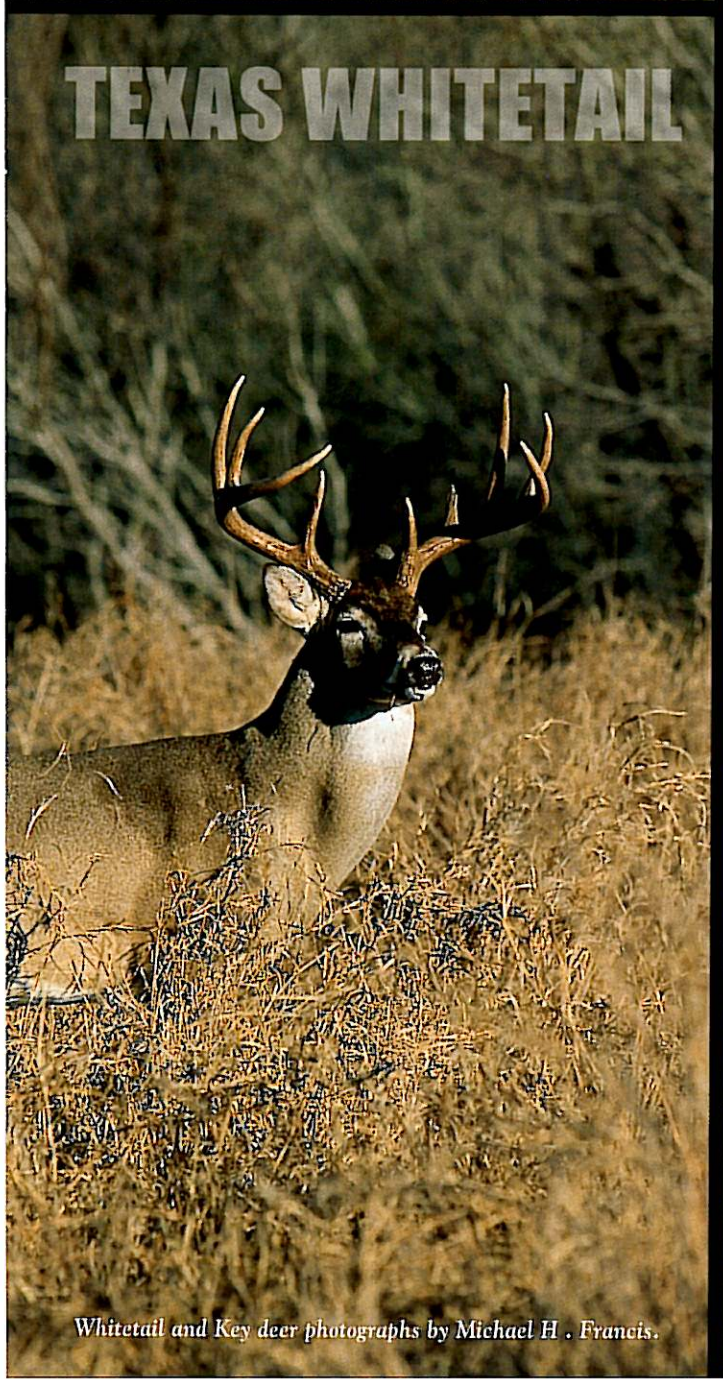
Of course he followed "The Bible," our Club's *Records of North American Big Game* — up to a point. At some point he found even this time-honored tome to be not quite complete in representing the total experience of North American big game hunting. For instance, J.Y. found some of the whitetail and mule deer subspecies that do not have their own category in the record book to be worthy of separate treatment. Likewise the California bighorn sheep. He did not include any non-native species, but he took a somewhat radical turn and included a chapter on alligator hunting. Like I said, J.Y.'s experience—and his book—is very complete. But he had to establish in his own mind what constituted a big game animal and what did not. One of his criteria was based on size, so he included the wolf but excluded the coyote, lynx, and bobcat. And on the same basis, he excluded the javelina, white-lipped peccary, and the brocket deer.

I have absolutely no problem with any of these decisions. Nor do I have a problem with the fact that our *Records of North American Big Game* singles out some subspecies for special treatment . . . but not all. And I certainly have no problem with the record book not recognizing animals such as wolves, javelinas, and alligators. It is not possible, or at least not practical, to be all things to all people. However, it should be recognized that all such decisions about categorizing game animals, whether made by individuals such as J.Y. or myself; by state and provincial game departments; or by record book committees, are man-made decisions. The animals themselves could care less what we call them or how we categorize them. And however we do it, we will leave some game animals on the fringes. If all you care about is your name in the records, such fringe animals may not be of interest to you . . . but they still may offer some very good and very interesting hunting, and they still deserve to be treated with respect. Let's take a look at some of these "fringe" big-game animals.

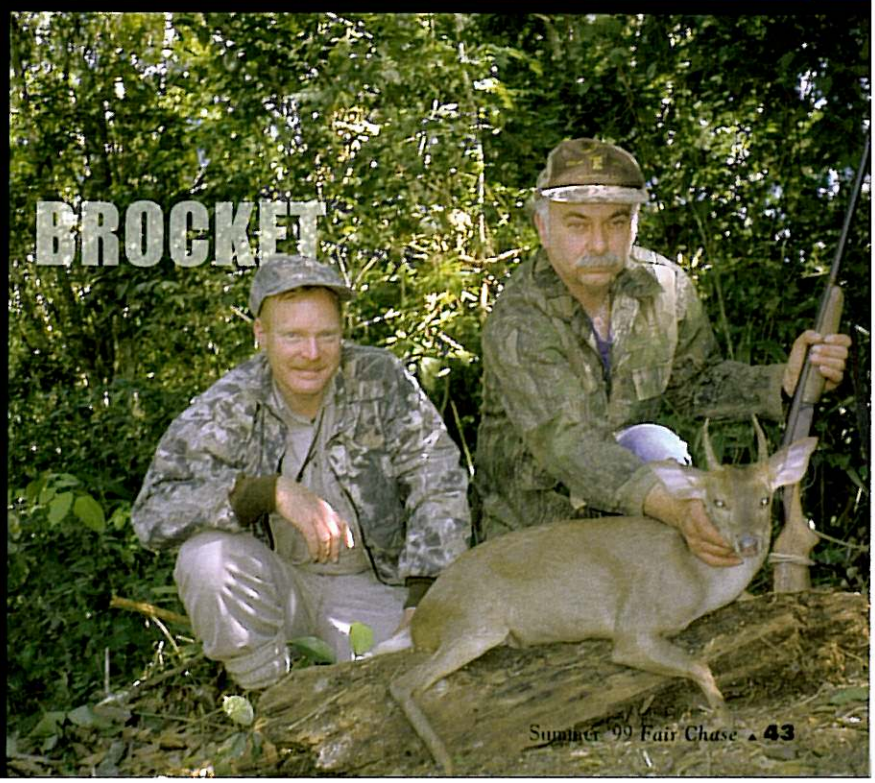
The categorization of our North American deer has always been a knotty problem. The Boone and Crockett Club has always considered Mexico's southern border as the southern limit of North America. There are something like 30 subspecies of whitetail deer between southern Mexico and the limit of their range in Canada. We have traditionally lumped all the whitetails together in one category, with just one exception: the Coues' whitetail of the Southwest. Now, I certainly don't disagree with this decision. The Coues' whitetail is one of my favorite big-game animals, and the largest Coues' whitetail ever born has absolutely no chance of making it into "The Book" as a full-size whitetail. However, the reality is that this separation is based on a long-standing mistake. When Elliott Coues first described the whitetail that bears his name, it seemed so different from the "Virginia whitetail" that he took it to be a different species. Many years passed before this mistake was corrected—but the separation in hunters' minds has remained.

Our whitetail deer are a classic example of Bergmann's Law, which hypothesizes that the farther north or south from the Equator, the





BIG GAME ON THE EDGES



Whitetail and Key deer photographs by Michael H . Francis.

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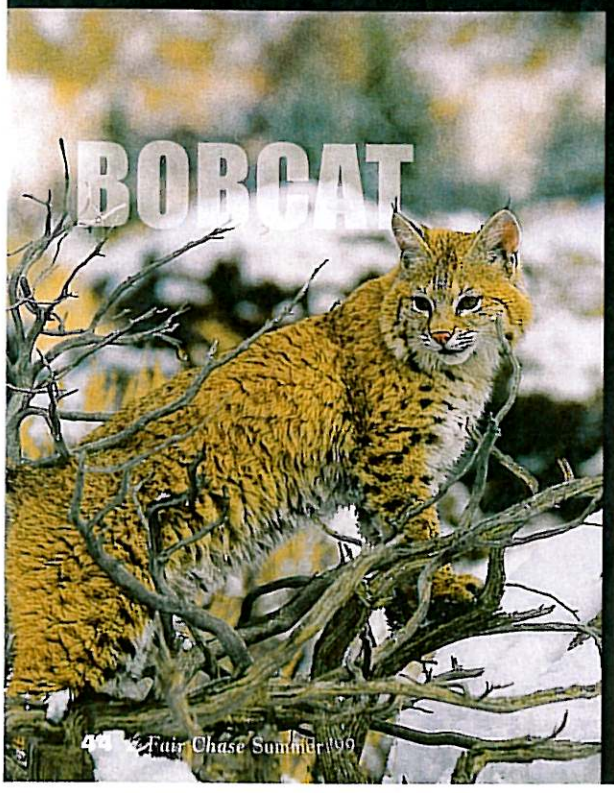
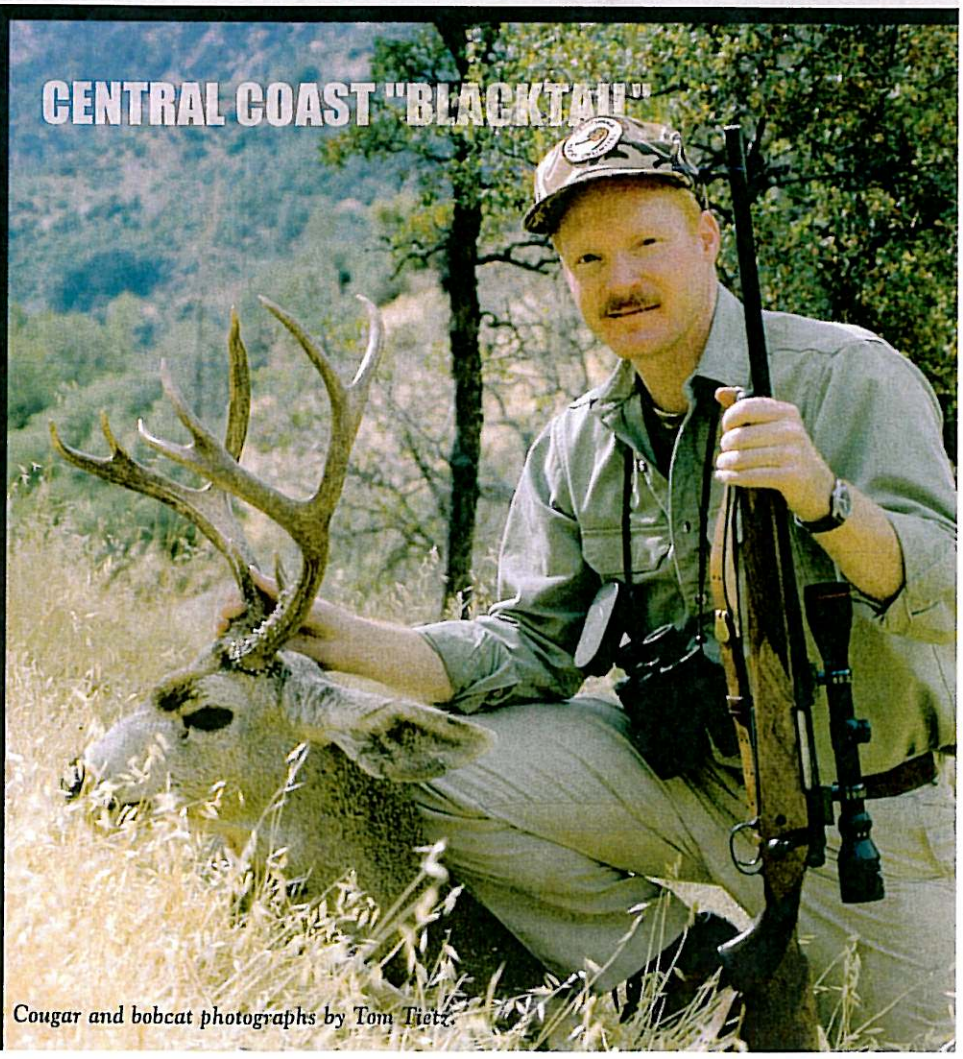




Cougar and bobcat photographs by Tom Tietz.

larger animals within a given species will grow. The larger body size aids heat retention in colder climates. You will see this in most of our big game species that have a large south-to-north range, but it is very noticeable in whitetail deer. Most of the varieties within the United States are large-bodied enough (and have enough food and antler-producing nutrients) to have a chance of reaching record-book proportions as "whitetail deer." However, this is not universal.

The Florida subspecies, especially the tiny Key whitetail, cannot compete. Neither can the Carmen Mountains whitetail of West Texas' Big Bend country. I have hunted the Carmen Mountains whitetails on both sides of the border, and have found them to offer a wonderful hunting experience in fascinating country—even though our Book doesn't recognize them. I'm sure the Florida whitetail hunters feel the same way about their deer. But our Mexican friends are the ones who really get the short end of the stick. There are a great number of recognized whitetail deer subspecies in Mexico, but of them all, only the Texas whitetails that spill over into northern Coahuila and Tamaulipas, and the Coues' deer from Sonora and Chihuahua, have even a remote chance of growing to record book proportions. This, by the way, is not a recommendation that we try to create more whitetail categories—but don't try to tell a southern Florida or central Mexico whitetail hunter that his deer are less worthy than yours!

We have progressed much farther with our mule deer categories. It's a little easier in that there are far fewer subspecies to deal with, and the geographic delineation between the races has been a little simpler to deal with. Traditionally, we have had mule deer and blacktail deer. More recently, and properly, we have separated Columbia blacktails from the larger-bodied (but smaller-antlered) Sitka blacktails to the north. Research is being done with an eye toward the potential for separating out the desert mule deer of southern Arizona, New Mexico, southwest Texas, and northwestern Mexico. This is probably appropriate, and although a bit difficult, a sensible line can probably be drawn.

However, with good management and the right nutrients, desert mule deer are fully capable of producing antlers that keep pace with the larger-bodied (and differently-colored) Rocky Mountain mule deer. Other mule deer subspecies are left on the fringes.

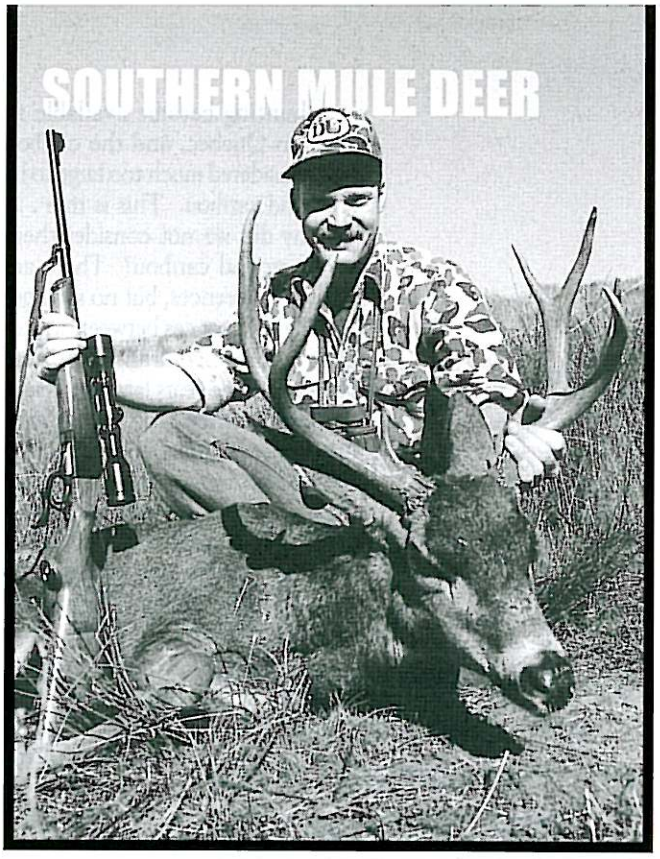
Our California mule deer, smaller-bodied and more pale, occasionally grow pretty fair antlers—but they can't compete. That doesn't mean they don't offer good hunting, but you have to hunt them for what they are. Likewise the southern deer, ranging from Orange County, California down through the northern half of Baja. And likewise the peninsular mule deer in the southern half of Baja.

In my home territory, California's Central Coast region, the situation is even more hopeless. Our deer are an admixture of California mule deer and Columbia blacktail deer. Although we often call our deer "blacktails," the truth is that you need go more than 100 miles farther north before you're really into pure blacktails. In theory, with the California mule deer influence, we should get deer that are too big to be blacktails. I wish! Once in a great while, in the local "big buck" contests, a deer turns up that would be a true monster by blacktail standards. But most of our deer, living in the harsh, dry coastal chaparral and subjected to generations of poor management, have very modest antlers at full maturity.

I love to hunt them during our August season, but I have to hunt them for what they are. A buck with antlers big enough to qualify as a blacktail ranks as a lifetime achievement, even if they really were blacktails (which they are not). A buck that would qualify as a record-class mule deer is far beyond impossible. So we don't hunt them with the record books in mind. We hunt them because they are our deer, and they are challenging and interesting to hunt.

Finishing up with the deer, one thing I really don't understand is why the brocket deer of southern Mexico receive no recognition. There are several varieties or potential varieties in Central and South America, but the brown brocket and the red brocket (two altogether different species, not subspecies) both range well into Mexico, have established seasons and licenses, and are certainly plentiful enough for a viable hunting program. The brockets weigh about 40 pounds tops, so perhaps our record book established size criteria much like my friend J.Y. Jones. But whether they are big game or not, in their jungle habitat they are perhaps the most challenging antlered game on the North American continent.

With most of the rest of our North American big game we have gone much farther in separating out the races and subspecies into separate categories. It is quite possible we have even gone overboard in some cases. For many years, for instance, we considered that there were woodland caribou, mountain caribou, and barren ground caribou. Then



The animals themselves could care less what we call them or how we categorize them. And however we do it, we will leave some game animals on the fringes.

This is a southern mule deer, Odocoileus hemionus fugilantus. Found from Orange County through the northern Baja, this is one of the least known mule deer subspecies. Blocky of body and dark of color, they are interesting... but in size they cannot compete with Rocky Mountain deer. This is probably a good one, but who knows?

This is a very, very big Central Coast buck. We often call these deer "blacktails," and the tails are correct for Columbia blacktail deer. But the ears are too big, as is body size. This is my largest coastal buck in more than 20 years of hunting them.

sport hunting became available in northern Quebec, and the caribou were considered much too large to be woodland caribou. This is true . . . but why did we not consider them barren ground caribou? There are regional differences, but no stronger than the differences between whitetail deer from Alberta and those from Georgia! Some years later we went a step farther when Northwest Territories opened her barren lands to caribou hunting. I actually had one of the very first nonresident licenses when this occurred, but at that time they were just "barren ground caribou." Within a short time we created the Central Canada barren ground caribou category, and so it remains. This is just fine with me . . . but I have never been, and never will be, convinced that the biological rationale is totally sound.

Hunt the game you want to hunt whenever you can, and don t worry about who categorizes it as what!

My glacier bear was a very old boar. He might have shown much more color in earlier years, but when taken his coat had an underlayer of white hairs. He appeared very dark in shadows but in sunlight turned a ghostly midnight blue A great trophy – but still just a color phase that does not deserve its own record book category.

The tule elk is very distinctive, small in the body and with antlers that consistently grow additional "crown points" at the tips of the main beams. They clearly deserve their own record-keeping category, and now do.

So far we have resisted a separate category for the Peary caribou of Canada's offshore islands, certainly the smallest and perhaps the most distinctive of all the caribou. This is probably a sound decision due to influence from mainland caribou on many of the islands, and the small size and vulnerability of the few absolutely pure herds. But that is the lone exception. Otherwise, we went very far in creating separate categories for very similar races of caribou.

On moose we have kept the traditional categories for Alaska-Yukon, Canada, and Shiras races. Again, this is just fine with me . . . but the moose of the northeastern United States have long been recognized as a separate subspecies (*Alces alces americanus*) from the moose of western Canada. It probably doesn't matter, since our New England moose have clearly demonstrated their ability to grow record-class antlers to compete with Canada moose from the West—but we sure haven't been consistent, have we?

Sometimes our delineations are based along common-sense lines. For instance, we now know that all of our dish-faced, long-clawed, hump-backed bears are *Ursus arctos*. But coastal-dwelling, fish-feeding bears grow much larger than the interior bears. Few hunters argue with the separation between Alaskan brown and grizzly bears. The line itself is very sensible, but it has always been and always will be somewhat arbitrary. The bears don't care, and they can cross that line at will, being brown bears one day and grizzly the next!

Fortunately black bears cause no such problem. There is one black bear, *Ursus americanus*, from coast to coast and from Mexico to the Arctic. There are, of course, many color phases. At one time the blue color phase, the glacier bear of southeast Alaska, was thought to be a different bear. Sorry, just a color phase. This does not mean he is not a prized trophy. I have a glacier bear. I had him mounted life-size, and he is perhaps my most prized North American trophy . . . but I cannot and will not argue that he should be in a separate category. His mother or his father — and maybe both — may have been coal black all their lives!

The Rocky Mountain goat offers no problems, but our sheep are a bit more difficult. The Stone's sheep and the Dall's sheep are actually races of the same species, but it's pretty easy to separate dark sheep from white sheep. How about the ones in the middle? Many early biologists considered these transitional sheep, the so-called Fannin's sheep, to be a separate variety. Some sheep fanatics have hunted them to complete a collection, but for many years the outfitters in this transitional range had the devil of a time selling their sheep hunts. They weren't quite dark and they weren't all white, and although they went into "The Book" as Stone's sheep, most sheep hunters preferred the classic darker Stone's sheep of northern B.C. Times change. Limited quotas in British Columbia made prices for Stone's sheep skyrocket. Add to that more resident hunting pressure than ever before, and suddenly, in terms of both potential size and availability, the Fannin's sheep of the Yukon looked pretty darned good . . . and no sheep hunters today have any problems accepting them as full-fledged Stone's sheep!

The bighorns are also a bit tricky. Traditionally, we made an easy separation between the larger-bodied (but only slightly larger-horned) Rocky Mountain bighorns of the north and the desert bighorns of the Southwest. There are, of course, several races of desert bighorns. The most plentiful, Nelson's bighorn, is probably the smallest and competes poorly with the bighorned sheep of Baja—but permits are scarce enough for all desert sheep that no one complains too much. In the north, with Audubon's bighorn long extinct, there are just two subspecies to deal with—the Rocky Mountain bighorn and the smaller, thinner-horned California bighorn. The latter simply cannot compete with the former in horn mass, so I wouldn't be terribly surprised to see them separated someday. But, again, all bighorn permits are scarce enough that what most hunters care about is a bighorn permit—wherever you can get it!

Elk have progressed very far in just a short time. Hardly more than a decade ago there was just one category for all North American elk. Then the larger-bodied, shorter-beamed Roosevelt's elk were separated out. This is proper. The antlers are distinctively different, and the best Roosevelt's elk have never had a fair chance to compete against the best American elk. Now, with hunting reopened and numbers of permits increasing nicely, the records committee has separated California's small-bodied, multi-tined tule elk. This, too, is proper. They are much smaller in the body, and the antlers are distinctive. This is probably as far as we will ever go; I seriously doubt we will ever try to separate the Manitoba race of elk (biologically viable, but very similar to Rocky Mountain elk). At least I hope we don't—three elk categories is plenty!

We have waffled back and forth on barren ground and Greenland muskox, and on Atlantic and Pacific walrus, and on plains and woods bison. These are good things. As hunting conditions change and long-forgotten varieties of game recover to huntable numbers, these and other discussions and "turf battles" must be

waged by the keepers of our hunting records.

But what about game that is really on the fringes? Is the javelina small big game, or big small game? Is the alligator a hunting trophy or a fishing trophy? Why does it matter? I have never gone alligator hunting or fishing. Maybe someday I will, but it has never been something I had a great interest in. I think it's wonderful that they have recovered to huntable numbers, and if you want one that's great . . . but it certainly doesn't bother me that alligators aren't represented in a hunters' record book.

On the other hand, I like to hunt javelinas. In Texas they're sort of incidental to deer hunting, but in Arizona javelina hunting requires a permit draw and a separate spring season. It's a big deal there, also a whole lot of fun and a great time to be in the desert mountains. I haven't participated in that season for several years, but for a long time it was an annual event. I have a mounted javelina head, a wonderfully fearsome-looking little prize, and I have a bleached skull as well, truly a unique trophy. It doesn't bother me in the least that the king of all javelinas will never receive recognition in *Records of North American Big Game*.

There is no real message here, except that we need to keep things in proper perspective. No record book can be all-encompassing, nor should it be. There must be compromises along the way, and some very good hunting opportunities will be left out in the cold. Someday, as in the case of our new categories for tule elk, Sitka blacktail, and our "new" caribou, some of these opportunities may be recognized. But does it really matter? A Sitka blacktail hunt, Roosevelt's elk hunt, or Northwest Territories caribou hunt was just as much fun before the animals were "legitimized" as it was afterwards. A hunt in west Texas for Carmen Mountains whitetail, a Florida 'gator hunt,' or an Arizona javelina hunt are all wonderful experiences, even though an eventual entry in "B&C" is exceptionally unlikely. Hunt the game you like to hunt whenever you can, and don't worry about who categorizes it as what! ▲▲▲

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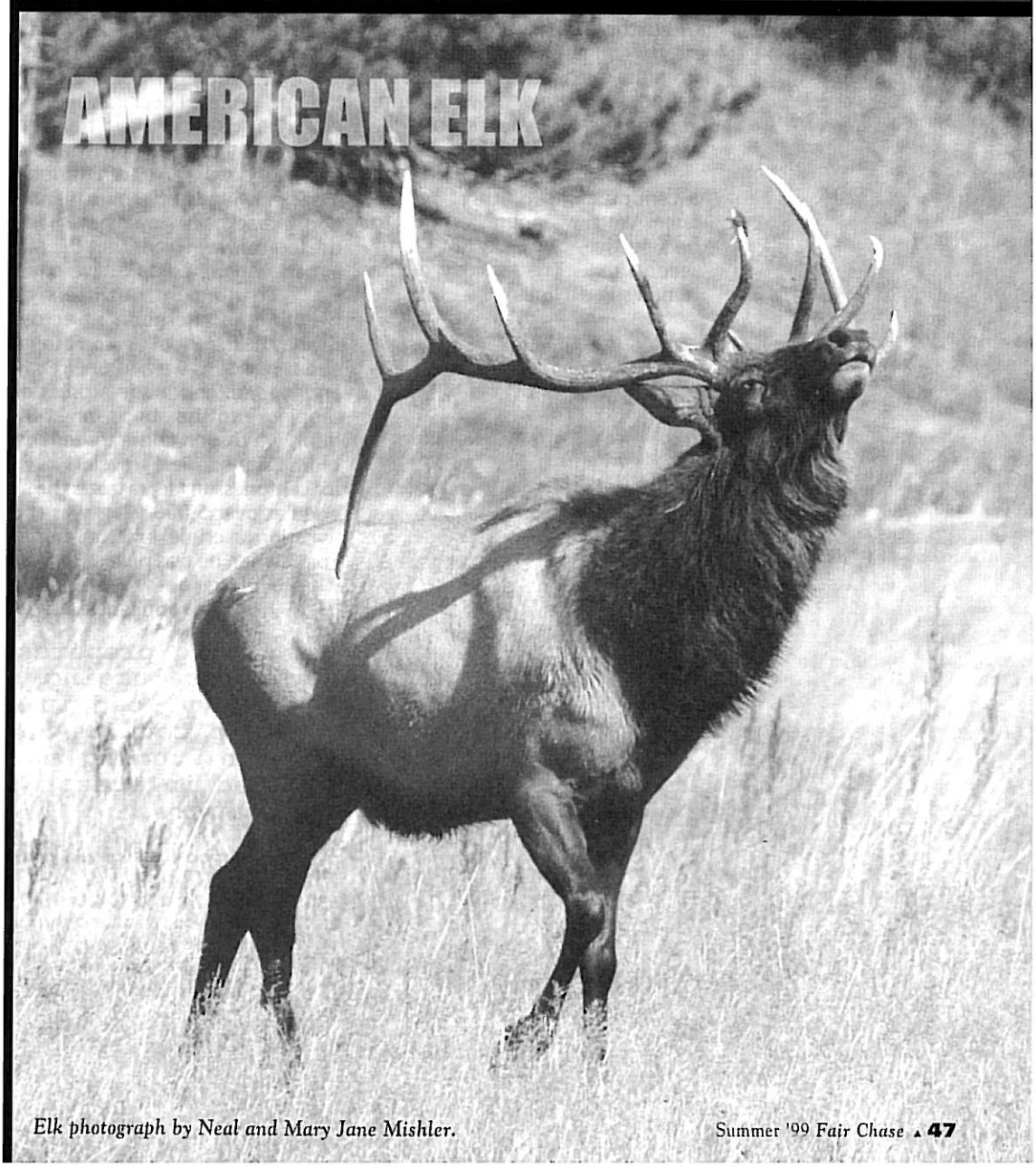

Elk photograph by Neal and Mary Jane Mishler.