

Destina

Trophy Mule Deer

Boone and Crockett's New Trophy Search Database Sabotages the Author's Long-Held "Honey Hole" and Opens His Eyes to a New, Efficient Research Tool.

By A.E. Walsh

For better or worse, advances in technology assist the modern hunter in bringing to bag a record-book animal. The weapons of today are dramatically more accurate, the bullets are more aerodynamic, and the clothes and accessories make less noise. Nonetheless, a hunter is still a hunter, and whether success finds him or not depends on a much higher power.

Some people call that higher power "luck"; I call it "preparedness." With equal parts preparation, commitment, exertion, and honed hunting skills, consistently successful hunters have placed the greatest emphasis on the luck they create. Undoubtedly the finest, most reliable and most powerful tool in the hunters' pouch is our human capacity for reason and deduction. "If the pan is hot, then do not touch it," is a favorite in my house. Likewise "If mule deer live in the West, don't hunt them in New Jersey," while simplistic, demonstrates the power that keeps us at an evolutionary arm's length from the chimpanzee.

Taking a step from the elementary, when our capacity to reason is paired with research, the result is analysis. Our ability to research is largely driven by the technology at hand, and breakneck advances have brought us more than pocket-sized stereo-systems and video games. This brings me back to my original thesis: Technology is playing a much greater role in the pursuit of game, separating the prepared from the unlucky with great haste.

Since 1887, the Boone and Crockett Club has been a champion for the pursuit of game and steward of the lands they inhabit. Over the years the Club's original missives have remained true, yet increasingly complemented by another important function: the keeping of irreplaceable records and data. These records have captivated generations of hunters and would-be record holders (including me), and at the same time served to place thumbtacks on the hunter's road map of places to hunt.

Until very recently, the printed record books were a cumbersome search tool, but they were the only option for the die-hard researcher. Thanks to Al Gore and his invention of "the internet" (tongue firmly lodged in cheek), the Boone and Crockett Club is again expanding its service with Trophy Search, an on-line database designed to streamline the research process and make these cherished records easier to navigate.

TABLE 1: ENTRIES BY STATE (1996-2006)

RANK	STATE/ PROVINCE	TYPICAL ENTRIES	NON-TYP ENTRIES	TOTAL ENTRIES
1	Colorado	134	37	171
2	Wyoming	57	12	69
3	Idaho	44	16	60
4	Saskatchewan	38	17	55
5	New Mexico	40	9	49
6	Utah	32	8	40
7	Oregon	32	3	35
8	Mexico	27	2	29
9	Nevada	18	7	25
10	British Columbia	16	7	23
11	Arizona	8	12	20
12	Alberta	15	4	19
13	Montana	13	1	14
14	Kansas	4	6	10
15	Washington	8	1	9
16	Unknown	4	3	7
17	North Dakota	5	0	5
17	Texas	3	2	5
19	California	4	0	4
19	South Dakota	4	0	4
19	Nebraska	3	1	4

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The top trophy producing states/provinces since 1996 for mule deer are:

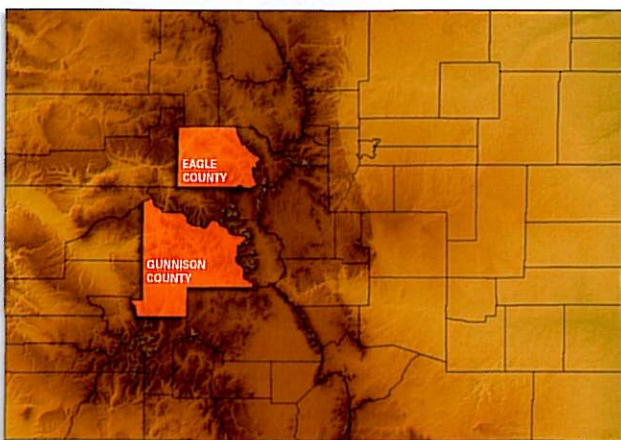
- COLORADO
- WYOMING
- IDAHO
- SASKATCHEWAN*
- NEW MEXICO
- UTAH
- OREGON

*Open to Residents Only

TABLE 2: TOP 5 COUNTIES (1996-2006)

The county with the single highest contribution to the record books is New Mexico's Rio Arriba (45 entries). According to Trophy Search, the Panzy family has done very well in this area, with Larry Panzy scoring on the 28th largest mule deer during this period (200-5/8 in 1998 – pictured below), and followed closely by Ryan Panzy with his 31st ranked 199-7/8-inch buck (2005). It should be noted Rio Arriba houses a world-famous mule deer retreat: the Jicarilla Apache Indian reservation.

RANK	STATE	COUNTY/AREA	TOTAL
1	NM	Rio Arriba Co.	45
2	MX	Sonora	28
3	WY	Lincoln Co.	23
4	CO	Eagle Co.	21
5	CO	Gunnison Co.	18



As an avid researcher of mule deer trophy trends and hot spots, I eased into the technology with the subtlety of bighorns at rut. Armed with my preconceived notions of top trophy areas, I set out to discover if Trophy Search would alert the rest of the world to my secret mule deer haunts.

The Methodology

The possibility of a newborn fawn mule deer achieving trophy — not to mention record-book — status is governed by forces both seen and unseen. Specifically, the flip of nature's coin determines whether the newborn is male or female assuring you'll start with no better than 50:50 odds. Then genetics, nutrition, climate, and eventually age structure will modify the equation. For those rare specimens that filter through this selective system, every hunter is looking to catch him at last light.

Because there are so many variables that factor into the mule deer's rise to its maximum potential, an analysis of more than 100 years of B&C records is unreliable. Therefore a more contemporary data pool must be employed; I arbitrarily selected a ten-year window, beginning with harvest records from 1996 and including all through the present.

Also, for the sake of classification, I looked at all mule deer making it into Boone and Crockett's *Record of North American Big Game*, be they typical or non-typical qualifiers. Because there are even more variables that go into the development of non-typical antlers, statistical analysis of trends in their harvest are probably less than reliable.

As friends, relatives and casual acquaintances will attest, I am neither particularly bright nor mathematically inclined. The analysis I provide hereafter is in layman's terms, scratched out on a tired yellow pad of paper at the sake of several pencils worn to nubs. My only supplies were the aforementioned tablet and pencils, a road atlas with enough detail to offer county lines and a subscription to the Trophy Search database.

The Big Picture

Over the years I've met hundreds, if not thousands of fellow hunters, many of which share my passion and fascination with trophy-class mule deer, or if nothing else would love to give them a go. I am always forthright with recommendations when asked, and usually I'm singing the praises of Eastern Colorado. I've hunted this agricul-



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Destination: Mule Deer

tural potpourri several times and taken my highest scoring mule deer from the broken terrain preferred by these grey ghosts. In fact, it's the abundance of cover, diverse and rich food sources, and relatively limited hunting pressure that leads me to the conclusion that this is the perfect spot. I've hunted mule deer in every state they call home and based on what I know, I've long maintained that Eastern Colorado offers the best chance to take a trophy-class mule deer.

Compiling the harvest data by state indicates that Colorado is indeed the top producer of B&C bucks over the last 10 years (134 typical entries, 37 non-typical). Colorado distances itself from the next highest state, Wyoming, by more than a 2:1 margin (171 to 69 total entries). Colorado is hot, delivering two monsters over the last three seasons: Robb Risher's 206-1/8 typical, and Linda Gaines' 247-6/8 non-typical.

In fact the top four states or Canadian provinces for trophy-class mule deer (Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, and Saskatchewan) boast more entries than the remaining 17 combined. These four areas recorded 355 book bucks, to 302 by the others together. (See Table 1.) Looking at the big picture, these four top producers could be covered with a fist on the map, and with the notable exception of Montana (number 13 on the list), form a bull's-eye for book bucks.

Refining the Search

One of the most useful features of the Trophy Search database is that it also allows for a more detailed search filtering by species, year of harvest, locality, and even the hunter's name. If that's not specific enough, the researcher has the capability to sort by antler characteristics, including greatest spread, circumference, beam length, and even number of points. This can be extremely helpful in finding genetic hot spots, as long as the search parameters are recent enough to account for population, pressure and climatic changes.

Again looking at the 10-year sampling and armed with my road atlas, I set to identifying the top-producing counties from state to state. Expecting to find high concentrations of bucks being taken in terrain similar to Eastern Colorado, I was surprised to find that across the west, rugged, mountain counties led the charge. The fact that monster mule deer were calling these haunts home wasn't surprising; rather, it was the fact that hunters were catching them in areas with so many options for escape. Bravo, I say, with a tip of the cap to those driving their own luck.

In regards to my pet project Colorado, I was expecting to find nothing less than solid

numbers in the CRP-heavy counties I have hunted so many times: Kit Carson, Lincoln, and Cheyenne. While they do show up (and I also know there are a few qualifiers that haven't been entered yet), they certainly take their place down on the list. My assessment couldn't have been more wrong: The top counties in Colorado are all in the western part of the state, and save a couple of mixed terrain areas, almost exclusively in the mountain region: Eagle (21 entries), Gunnison (18), Mesa (12) and Montezuma (10). The highest ranking county east of I-25, which nearly divides the state in half, is Las Animas (4 entries) just outside the southern city of Trinidad. It's on the list at number 14.

Patterns of the Map

When looking at counties from state-to-state, it's easy to lose a regional perspective. To overcome this I plotted the top counties on a regional map. I was a bit surprised that my focus on Colorado's primarily agricultural areas (with transitioning terrain) was a bit shortsighted. But was that the case in other states?

As I progressed through the Western states, the map began to show the highest concentrations of big bucks coming out of the timbered, mountainous areas within these states as well. As my preconceived notion of big-buck habitat began to get more and more heavily timbered, I noticed some exceptions: the kissing cousins Coconino in Arizona and Kane County in Utah create one contiguous honey hole in spite of state lines and desert-like conditions. (This region is no secret to enthusiasts, but probably better known as Utah's Paunsaugunt and The Arizona Strip.) Other noted exceptions are Malheur County in Oregon, a high-desert, limited-entry oasis for big bucks; and the transitional tri-county area of Elmore, Gooding, and Owyhee Counties in Idaho.

While not necessarily heavily timbered, I realized these "exceptions" are actually a perfect fit with the age-old model: the more rugged, the more remote, the more difficult to reach, either due to land access, physical limitations and/or availability of permits, the more likely you are to find trophy-class representatives.

Of course this is news to no one, myself included. However, it probably is news that the difference between the haves



THE ODDBALLS

If, like me, the non-typical mule deer is your desire, good luck. There are hotly debated circumstances that go into creating these deer of unmatched character that are difficult—if not impossible—to predict. However, the numbers don't lie, and there are a few areas that show a better-than-average chance of your record-book buck sporting horrendous headgear.

For whatever reason, the book deer taken out of Canada over the last 10 years have favored the non-typical. Saskatchewan (31% of qualifying mule

deer are entered in the non-typical category), British Columbia (30%) and Alberta (20%), boast high non-typical numbers. But they are not nearly as high as Arizona and Kansas.

At 60%, Arizona and Kansas share the lead for non-typical destinations. Of the 20 Arizona mule deer entered during the period, 12 were oddballs. During the same time, 6 of Kansas' 10 deer were scored non-typical.

AREAS TO AVOID IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A NON-TYPICAL: Oregon, Mexico, and Montana offered less than one-in-ten ratios on non-typicals. North Dakota, California, and South Dakota had zero entries in the category.

This 247-6/8 non-typical mule deer fell to Linda Gaines in Delta County, Colorado. Although this monster was shot in an area with high-protein feed, the rugged surrounding counties of Eagle, Gunnison, and Mesa combined for more than 50 record-book bucks.

and have-nots is so vast. Look again at the Colorado example: The top 13 counties for producing record-book mule deer over the last 10 years are in the rugged, difficult to access western part of the state.

Conclusions

The good news is that it doesn't take a rocket scientist to come to the same conclusion that I did. In fact, my initial rationale for pointing to eastern Colorado as a trophy destination was spot-on: plentiful cover, limited accessibility and nutrient-rich food stores. I think most hunters would have a similar list of criteria at the ready if asked.

What I was able to realize, however, is that not all criteria are met in the same way, or to the same level; and that those unseen forces that create the monsters of lore are hard at work in areas I wouldn't necessarily suspect.

I'll continue to hunt the plains of Colorado and Kansas with the same fervor, because I love the open country and challenges inherent in that style of stalk. However, with a little — no, a lot! — more education under my belt, and even more information at my beck-and-call, I'll dump my preconceived notions for fact and analysis. ■