

# THE BEST DEER HUNT



# DO COUES DEER EVER?

By Bob Robb

**I have been hunting Coues whitetails for 25 years and have never, ever seen a ranch with so many deer — and so many good bucks.**

Big things come in small packages. We've all heard that folksy saying many times throughout our lives, and it's often true. Nowhere is it more appropriate, however, than when discussing hunting *Odocoileus virginianus couesi* — the Coues whitetail.

Why, after all these years, I still get as excited about Coues deer hunting as any hunting adventure I have taken around the world still somewhat surprises me. After all, the Coues deer is one of the smallest of North America's 35 white-tail subspecies, with most large bucks field-dressing at a tick under 100 pounds — about the same as the hind leg of the big bull elk I packed off a mountain a few months earlier. Unless you are a Coues deer nut, their typical whitetail rack won't send your heart into grab-the-nitro palpitations; heck, the minimum score for entry into the all-time Boone and Crockett Club record book is just 110 inches for a typical buck, and 120 inches for a non-typical. The world-record typical scores just 144 $\frac{1}{8}$  — and that buck was killed back in 1953. If you are a bowhunter, the Pope and Young Club minimum scores for typical and non-typical bucks are just 70 and 80 inches, respectively, with the world-





The ranch was loaded with predators. Robb saw lots of coyotes as well as two different mountain lions, one of which left its tracks near the water where Robb killed his buck.

record typical scoring 130 $\frac{1}{8}$  and the world-record non-typical scoring 127 $\frac{7}{8}$ .

But what the “desert elf,” as the late Jack O’Connor once called it, lacks in antler size it makes up for in off-the-charts challenge. These deer are found only in central and southern Arizona and the southwestern corner of New Mexico, as well as most all of Sonora, the western half of Chihuahua, and the entire state of Durango, Mexico. And while taking an average, everyday Coues buck isn’t that difficult if you are just trying to check one off the list — you hire an outfitter who knows his stuff and shoot the first decent buck you see at medium- to long range, or hunt them out of a high rack truck in Mexico — seriously getting after top-end bucks takes it to another level. Glassing up big Coues whitetails is one of the most difficult Western hunting challenges I have ever undertaken. These secretive little deer are extremely shy and quick to react to hunting pressure, making trophy-class bucks doubly difficult to locate in the heavily-hunted states of Arizona and New Mexico. Making this ever tougher is the fact that both states’ rifle seasons end before the rut, which usually isn’t going strong until the second week of January.

That is why I love traveling to Old Mexico. A lack of extreme hunting pressure and the ability to hunt Coues deer with either rifle or bow during late December and the entire month of January, when the rut is rocking, is why many serious Coues deer hunters have been heading south of the border to Sonora, Chihuahua, and, to a much lesser extent, Durango, for years. Another reason is that

The hunt was a mixture of glassing and sitting over water.



there is no tag draw, with permits issued to Mexican landowners who can sell them as they wish. Many people also hunt Coues deer in conjunction with a mule deer hunt in Sonora and take their bucks almost as an afterthought. Add this all together and you can see why a Mexican Coues deer hunt is so attractive.

That's one reason why, on day five as my guide Alejandro and I sat overlooking a small water hole this beautiful day, my spirits remained high even though I not yet come close to taking the safety off. Instead, I waited patiently and had time to reflect. To this point the hunt had been so far off-the-charts incredible it was difficult for me to believe I had seen what I had seen. I have seriously hunted Coues deer in Arizona for a long time, and can tell you that in a week's hunt looking at 30 deer is pretty special most years. In other places in Mexico I have seen twice that number. But here? It was January 2, 2013, and up to now I had counted 225 Coues deer, 25 mule deer, 12 coyotes and two mountain lions. Seeing 225 Coues deer in a week is like asking the homecoming queen to the prom and having her agree. Many of those deer had been bucks ranging in age from yearlings to 3½-year-olds, with those on the top end scoring an estimated 90-100 gross B&C points. I'd seen at least one of those daily.

On this day alone the sun was shining and the deer were thirsty. Between 8 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. we had an amazing 70 Coues deer and six muleys come to drink on this small tank. It then slowed way down, but as the sun set I whispered to Alejandro, "Be ready, this is when he comes out!"

I was right. A full 30 minutes before dark he came alone, a giant of a Coues deer. I saw him through the trees and my first thought was, "130, at least." It was the buck I have been looking for all my life. It was pin-drop quiet, so I am not sure who made the noise. Maybe it was me shifting the rifle ever so slightly on the BOG-POD. Perhaps it was Alejandro scooching in his chair. But that old buck heard something. The deer was only 50 yards away, and with big Coues deer, that's all it takes. Something. He was out of there so fast we never knew what hit us.

Just like that, my dream had

become something else entirely.

There was nothing left to do except go back to the house, eat some dinner, have a glass of wine with Erasmo and Alejandro, and get ready for the last day. Yet as my head hit the pillow, I was not despondent. Many times the last day of a hunt has proven to be the best day. And on this ranch, with all the deer we were seeing, only a knucklehead would think that it could not happen at any second. I had seen the pictures and heard stories from others about the giants they had seen here, and Alejandro, who has guided on this ranch for more than a decade, was visibly disappointed we had not seen them. It was obvious to me the older bucks were in the typical white-tail pre-rut lockdown mode, conserving their strength for what was to come. We'd need some luck.

Alejandro chose to do what we had done the past week — reach a good glassing spot before daylight, glass hard for an hour or so, and then, if nothing promising appeared, head to the water. We would hunt the very large catch basin we had hunted the first few days and where we had seen more than 100 deer so far — and one puma that escaped by the hair of his chinny-chin. In years past Alejandro has helped clients take several big bucks from this spot, so we got settled in about 8 a.m. It didn't take long.

At 9, after seeing a handful of deer, I could make out the shape of a dark-bodied deer slipping through the brush. When he emerged to come to drink Alejandro whispered, "He's nice, I bet he goes 110 at least!" And so, last morning, a buck on the edge of the

## What To Take: Equipment Choices

I used a Weatherby Sub MOA rifle in .257 Wby. Mag. topped with a Nikon Monarch 4-16X scope and handloads featuring the 115-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip bullet, but any flat-shooting caliber from .243 through the .300 magnums will work well. I always bring a spotting scope, and this time had a Nikon 16-48X scope. A laser rangefinder can be helpful on spot-and-stalk days when shots could conceivably be "way out there." Tripod shooting sticks like those from BOG-POD are a big plus. Layered clothing, including light long underwear and at least one outer layer that incorporates a wind-blocking membrane like Windstopper for temperatures that can range from at or a tad below freezing to 70-something degrees F, is the ticket. I wore Sitka Gear in Opitfade camouflage and lightly insulated boots from Crispi. Other than that, a daypack, warm hat and gloves, ball cap, and personal gear — I was glad I brought disposable hand warmers and sun block — are all you need.

Bringing firearms and ammunition in and out of Mexico is easy, but you'll need a gun permit, which is easily obtained through the outfitter. You also need a valid passport. Most hunters fly into Hermosillo, where they are

picked up and

driven to the

ranch.

More information is available from Wade Derby of Crosshair Consulting (925-679-9232; [www.crosshairconsulting.com](http://www.crosshairconsulting.com)).



Tripod shooting sticks are a big help on a hunt like this. The author used a set from BOG-POD.



Robb has been hunting Coues deer for 25 years, and his 2013 buck was one of his best ever, scoring 114 SCI points.

B&C minimum at 100 yards, what do you do? Roll the dice the rest of the day in the hope that a giant would appear, or cash in your chips?

I turned on the tripod-mounted video camera, got him centered in the viewfinder, placed the .257 Weatherby on the sticks, and shot him.

He was exactly as Alejandro had called it, a heavy-antlered 8-pointer with long eye guards that we taped — twice — and got 114 B&C points. He's the best Coues buck I have ever taken, and I could not have been happier.

And yet, as I write this in spring 2013, I find myself already daydreaming of what could have been, yet what still can be. My buddy Wade Derby of Crosshair Consulting (925-679-9232; [www.crosshairconsulting.com](http://www.crosshairconsulting.com)) who handles Erasmo's U.S. bookings, and I have already made plans to return. This particular ranch is vast, encompassing about 44,000 acres, and we only hunted a small fraction of it. It has two other important things going for it — Erasmo does not overhunt it, and it also holds some really good mule deer bucks. The equipment is first-rate, accommodations excellent, the shower works, the food is plentiful and tasty, the guides experienced and skilled. If you fill your deer tags you can call coyotes, of which there is no shortage.

It is also what I called the "anti-Coues deer hunt" in that instead of hiking up and down steep rocky mountains and trying to glass up a dandy, here, while we did some run-and-gun hunting from the high rack

with our binoculars, the vast majority of my time was spent sitting in a comfortable camp chair overlooking a water hole. It was about as physical as lawn bowling, a lot more like tree stand whitetail hunting or sitting in a blind in Africa than traditional spot-and-stalk Coues deer hunting. There is a lot of water on this ranch, with several piped "drinkers" for both cattle and wildlife that run all year, plus several more catch basins for rainwater. Add to that the huge tracts of cholla and other cactus the deer love to eat, plus lots of buffelgrass and other high-value browse, and it's no wonder the deer numbers are so high.

I cannot wait for next season, when I hope to arrange another meeting with the one that got away — but this time, with a much different outcome. ♪

## Video: Watch The Hunt!

Log on to [www.whitetailjournal.com](http://www.whitetailjournal.com) right now to watch video footage of Bob Robb's amazing Coues deer hunt!

