



# WHAT'S IN



# The enigmatic pronunciation of Coues' white-tailed deer.

STORY BY JIM HEFFELFINGER AND ROBERT HEFFELFINGER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE ANDREJKO

# IN A NAME?

The Southwest is home to some of the most interesting versions of North America's big game animals. We host rugged mountain ranges of desert bighorn, flat dry plains of desert pronghorn, and valleys bouncing with desert mule deer. It should come as no surprise then that we also have one of the most unique versions of whitetails. The small Coues' white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus couesi*) is adapted to an arid and

less-productive habitat. This is a well-known ecological rule whereby island animals, and those in desert areas, evolved smaller to survive better.

There is only one species of white-tailed deer on the planet, but it shows great variation throughout its wide range of distribution. Some of this variation is due to genetic changes from being isolated from other populations or simply examples of the local populations adapting to habitat, forage or climatic conditions. Through

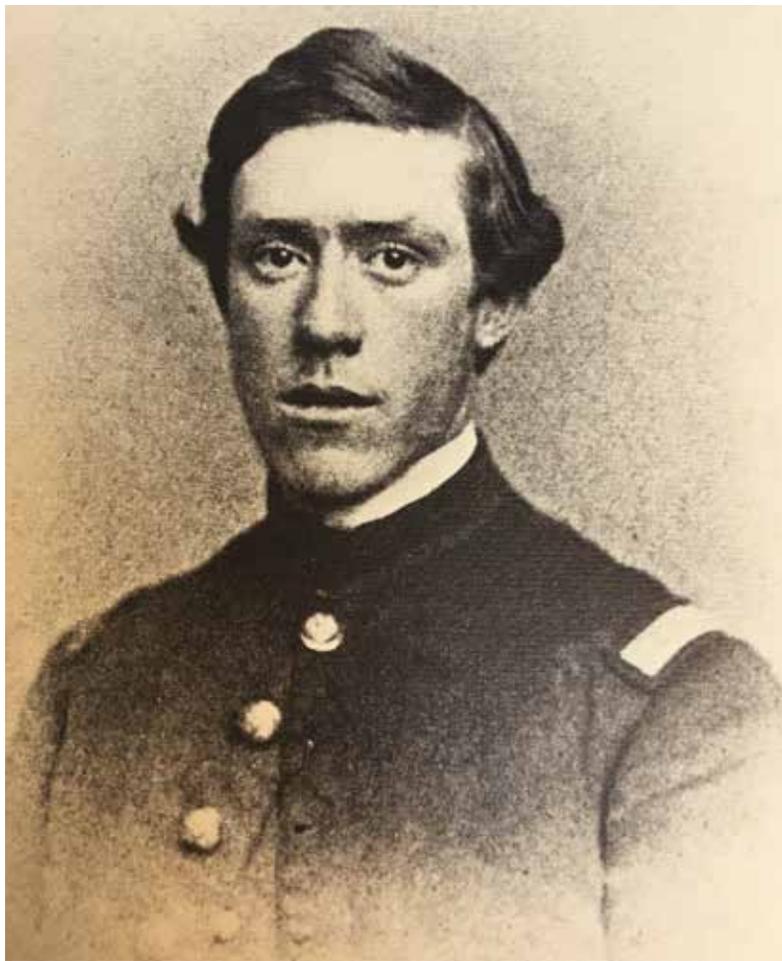
the years, many of these various kinds of whitetails have been described as official subspecies, complete with multicolored range maps showing well-defined distributions.

Currently there are at least 38 subspecies of white-tailed deer that have been described in North and South America. Most of these descriptions were based on only a few individual specimens and have not been evaluated sufficiently to see if they are actually valid. The Coues' white-tailed deer, however, is a good example of a subspecies because it is not only physically smaller, but also genetically and ecologically different. In addition, its geographic range is mostly isolated on three sides, only blending into other small whitetails to the south in Mexico.

Coues' whitetails are distributed throughout central and southeastern Arizona and also found in scattered populations throughout other areas such as southwestern New Mexico and in the Mexican states of Sonora, Chihuahua, Durango and Zacatecas. Throughout their range, these little whitetails live in relatively rough, wooded terrain with steep canyons. Typical Coues' whitetail habitat is mixed oak woodland, but they can be found anywhere from ponderosa pine and mixed conifer at 10,000 feet elevation down to the upper limits of semi-desert grassland.

The Coues' white-tailed deer is named after Capt. Elliott Ladd Coues, an Army surgeon and naturalist who served a tour of duty in the original sandbox of the American Southwest. After receiving his bachelor's degree (1861), an honorary master's degree (1862) and then earning his M.D. in one year (1863), Dr. Coues arrived at Fort Whipple near Prescott in July 1864 at the age of 21.

The young doctor described himself as "a slender, pale-faced, lantern-jawed, girlish-looking youth, without a hair on lip or chin and hardly dry behind



ELLIOT COUES AT THE AGE OF 21 WHEN HE REPORTED FOR DUTY AT FORT WHIPPLE NEAR PRESCOTT AND BEGAN HIS FAMOUS CAREER. PHOTO COURTESY OF BIRD LORE VOL. IV, JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1902.

In a footnote of one of his many publications, Dr. Elliott Coues tells us in his own words how to pronounce his last name, and thus, the name of Arizona's small Southwestern white-tailed deer.

821. A. m. coués'-i. To Dr. Elliott Coues, U. S. A. The name of this person is Norman-French, and is still not infrequently found in the north of France, pronounced in two syllables, with the grave accent on the last: Cou-ès — Coo-ayz. On the removal of his ancestors to the Isle of Wight, the pronunciation naturally became corrupted into *Cowz*. The original spelling, though sometimes changed to *Cowes*, has been preserved in the family, no grown male members of which are known to be living in the United States excepting the person here in mention and his brother, Dr. S. F. Coues, U. S. N. The meaning of the word is unknown to us.

Not in the orig. ed. Since described, from Alaska. Bull. Nutt. Club, v, 1880, p. 160.



**Coues gained national and international fame as a naturalist, especially because of his work on birds.**

**The Coues' white-tailed deer is as popular as it is mispronounced.**



**The Southwestern version of white-tailed deer is named after Army surgeon and naturalist Dr. Elliott Coues.**





the ears.” His keen interest in wildlife and natural history made this tour exciting and full of new things to be collected, described and cataloged. As did many medical doctors of the time, he collected hundreds of specimens and wrote about many plants and animals in the Southwest for the very first time.

Despite all his successes in the field of natural history, Coues never actually collected his eponymous whitetail in the Southwest. In his manuscript *The Quadrupeds of Arizona*, Coues wrote, “I cannot positively determine the white-tailed deer of Arizona, as I was never able to procure a specimen.” However, Dr. C.B.R. Kennerly shot many along the Mexican border and saved one in 1855, making him the first scientist to collect an example of this small white-tailed deer.

As was common in the early days, Kennerly named it as a new species, not a subspecies (*Cervus mexicanus*). In 1874, another Army surgeon, Dr. Joseph Rothrock, collected and saved two specimens from the Santa Rita Mountains south of Tucson and stated (correctly) that these were not a new species, but merely a smaller version of the common eastern whitetail. Rothrock suggested that these deer be referred to as Coues’ white-tailed deer in honor of that pioneering naturalist. Because it is named after Coues, it should have a possessive apostrophe after the name.

Confusion and debate, as well as cussin’ and discussion, have ensued in modern times about how to pronounce the name of this deer. The “correct” pronunciation is the topic of periodic flare-ups and arguments mostly among the hunting community. Internet forums and social media have proven to be unreliable sources for such information, so we have to turn to the old natural history writings and the genealogical record.

The Coues family has a long history

in the U.S., since Elliott’s grandfather Peter arrived in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1735 from the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel. Elliott has no direct descendants in the U.S. to ask about their name, but in 2000 we located William Coues in Manchester, Massachusetts, to talk to him about his family name. William’s great-grandfather was U.S. Naval doctor Samuel Franklin Coues — Elliott’s stepbrother (they had the same father). William relayed how proud the family was of his famous great-great-uncle Elliott and that there has never been confusion in the family about how to pronounce their name: It is simply “cowz” and always has been. Genealogical records sometimes use an alternate spelling of “Cow,” “Cowe” or “Cowes,” which gives us more than a hint as to how it was pronounced.

For many southwestern deer lovers, there also is no confusion about how to pronounce the name of this little whitetail. It is called a “cooz deer” by most, and they tend to be a bit combative when this subject comes up. In 2014, the online forum CouesWhitetail.com conducted a survey where 111 avid Coues’ whitetail fanatics revealed that 87.4 percent pronounced it “cooz”. Personally, I think the percentage is higher than this. This pronunciation is nearly ubiquitous on social media, podcasts and among most of the people who love these little southwestern deer.

Unfortunately for all the “cooz” fans, an obscure footnote in *The Coues Check List of North American Birds* settles the argument once and for all (and did so back in 1882). There, on page 101, he lists the Aleutian or Rock Sandpiper (*Arquetella couesi*, later changed to *Calidris ptilocnemis couesi*) that Robert Ridgway also named after Coues. In the footnote for that bird subspecies, Coues himself explains exactly how his name is pronounced:

“The name of this person is Norman-French, and is still not infre-





quently found in the north of France, pronounced in two syllables, with the grave accent on the last: Cou-ès — Coo-ayz. On the removal of his ancestors to the Isle of Wight, the pronunciation naturally became corrupted into Cowz. The original spelling, though sometimes changed to Cowes, has been preserved in the family, no grown male members of which are known to be living in the United States excepting the person here in mention and his brother, Dr. S.F. Coues, U.S.N.” (Dr. S.F. Coues is the great-grandfather of William Coues in Massachusetts.)

Coues confirms this pronunciation in relating a funny anecdote in early military history. Shortly after the loss of Gen. Custer and his soldiers at Little Bighorn (some of whom Coues knew) and another attack on the Hayden Expedition, Coues was directed by Hayden to organize another natural history party to explore the Rocky Mountains.

Knowing this was potentially dangerous, there was some anxiety about heading out into the wilderness amid so much tension. Coues joked in a letter to a friend that, “Some graceless wag has taken atrocious liberty with my name, and the joke is current

here. He said that Hayden wisely takes Coues along this year to pacify Sitting Bull!” This bit of humorous word play only works because Elliott’s last name is pronounced “cows.”

There is a third pronunciation that is sometimes mentioned. Southwestern historian and writer Neil Carmony once asked someone familiar with the French language how a name like Coues would be pronounced and they opined that it would probably rhyme with “house.” Carmony wrote about that version of the pronunciation and it has been repeated by others, but Elliott himself tells us that is not correct.

When Rothrock named the deer in honor of Coues, he could never have imagined that it would be mispronounced for eternity. From at least the mid-1700s to the present time, Elliott, his ancestors and his descendants have called themselves the Cowz — not Cooz — Family. Those who refuse to say the name correctly, should at least acknowledge they’re knowingly pronouncing it wrong.

This whole situation reminds me of when my son was learning the alphabet and I asked him about some unrecognizable symbol he just wrote on the paper. He said, “It’s an R.” I informed him that it was, in fact, not an R. To which he replied, “Well, it’s the way I make my R’s.” We can’t make up our own letters to replace the correct ones, and we can’t decide to pronounce someone’s name incorrectly and explain it away as “the way I say it.”

We have heard some say that anyone pronouncing it correctly “ain’t from around here.” Is there any other animal name where those using the correct name are so scorned? It causes people to struggle awkwardly between what they know is correct and what has been burned onto their “hard drive” since youth. There is an understandable concern about camo-clad hunters sitting in a local café loudly discussing all the “cowz” they’ve shot! Still, that is not

a good enough reason to butcher the namesake of our amazing whitetail.

Dr. Elliott Coues was a really big deal — one of the most famous pioneers in early natural history study. We owe it to Elliott to honor his name and legacy correctly, no matter how much we want to pronounce it “cooz.” 🦌

■ Jim Heffelfinger spent most of his 30-year career with the department overseeing the management of Coues’ white-tailed deer in the Tucson region. He now serves as the department’s wildlife science coordinator and holds an adjunct appointment at the University of Arizona as full research scientist.



The Coues’ white-tailed deer is perhaps Arizona’s finest game animal. Wary and expert at using cover, whitetails rarely offer the hunter a standing shot once jumped. Whitetails comprised fewer than 15 percent of Arizona’s deer harvest in 1961, but today they comprise more than 40 percent of total deer harvested.